

# Mastering Recovery

*Rooted in the Steps. Growing Through Connection*

With Barry Lehman



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## #5.01- Connection: The Beginning of Long-Term Recovery

July 2, 2025

### What I'm Thinking

Long-term recovery doesn't always get easier.  
But it can become more natural — and deeper.

That depth begins in connection.

Not in control. Not in knowing all the answers.  
But in learning how to show up, stay present, and  
not do it alone.



This month, I'm sharing a five-part series on what I call the **Arc of Mastery**:

Connection. Foundation.

Flow. Freedom.

Purpose.

We'll explore how recovery becomes *lived wisdom*, not just survival.  
And we'll start where it always begins: in connection.

## Where Connection Begins

Two months ago at the beginning of May, I went back to where it all began in eastern Wisconsin. I was invited to participate in a 12-Step retreat at the center where in 1988 I discovered that I was an alcoholic in need of recovery. I was told that one of my old sponsors who still quoted me and whom I quoted in my book was going to be there.

*Connection.*

My old friend and sponsor is now a sponsor of a person I helped introduce to recovery over 30 years ago and who I sponsored. The person who invited me to be at the retreat.

*Connection.*

There was another friend who I initially connected with in my first year and have remained friends with ever since. We even attended the 2000 International AA Convention together.

*Connection.*

Some of these were there while I was still struggling with those first two years of uncertainty and building. They were there when around my second year in recovery, something shifted. As the intensity of early sobriety settled,

These were among the people who taught me how to make the most meaningful progress moving forward. It didn't come from "working harder," but from these people around me — from learning to *stay connected* even when things felt unclear.

Those first two years taught me *how* to make connections.  
What came after taught me *why it matters so much*.

## After the Pink Cloud

Recovery changes over time.

In the first two years so much is happening. So many first things, so many confusing experiences, so many feelings. It's like being lost in a forest that is magical and joyful one day and dark and frightening the next. In it all we are looking for those safe places to relax, ways to bring a new sense of hope and purpose. The process of growing and changing, building and moving forward, can get lost. But they are there. Waiting for us to be ready.

After two years, when things were actually feeling less steady than they had been, I looked around me at the people I now had in my life. It became clear- it was with these people that I was learning to find the path in recovery. I had been too preoccupied before that to see how the things we will talk about here later this month could bring me to a new life. A life that does not live through white-knuckling sobriety, but rather one that taught me to live *in* recovery.

Since, as i know now, the opposite of addiction is connection, that meant that as recovery changes over time, so, too, do connections change over time.

- The person who started out as a sponsor or friend who nods politely at your rambling becomes someone who listens, really listens.
- What began as a group or meeting where you went to escape the pressures of trying to figure out sobriety, turns into a special space and a time to share new things with others.
- What felt like a way to overcome feelings of shame or fear or the stigma that can accompany admitting one's disease, becomes the reminder that *you are living now in a time of acceptance and grace.*

The truth is, we don't grow in isolation.

We grow in relationship — with others, in truth, over time, with grace.

## Where This Goes Next 🙌

I have been building a shift in the *Mastering Recovery* program. The [website](#) has been upgraded. New resources are being built. I am working on the second book on *Mastering Recovery*. All this is being built on what I call the *Arc of Mastery*.

Each week in July, I will explore the five elements that deepen long-term recovery and make it our own. This week was a brief intro to connections. The rest of the month will be the other four.

- **July 9** – *Foundation*: how the Steps still hold up when life gets more layered
- **July 16** – *Flow*: letting go of control, not connection
- **July 23** – *Freedom*: what we do with freedom matters more than how we earn it
- **July 30** – *Purpose*: not a role or job title — but a thread that pulls us forward

These aren't just ideas — they're invitations. Each week includes practical insights, questions to reflect on, and a gentle link back to your own sense of recovery, creativity, and connection.

## 📌 Connect This Week

**Name** the two or three most important connections you have in your life today.

**How** do each of these help you in your life in recovery?

**Schedule** regular times of connections with these a regular part of your weeks

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### ✅ Taking a Step Beyond

**Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else.**

**Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals that can go it alone.**

-Margaret J. Wheatley

### **A Closing Reflection**

On July 7, 2021 [I emailed the first Mastering Recovery newsletter](#). I quoted from my book to give the understanding I had of recovery and mastery. Here is a condensed version of it:

- **Recovery** is not a destination- it is a process of change. It is about staying motivated for the journey,
- **Recovery** is the all-encompassing environment in which the person with a Substance Use Disorder continues the improvement of their health and wellness.
- **Recovery** is the lifestyle that allows a person to live a self-directed life.
- **Recovery** is the mindset that allows the person to move into a life of meaning and purpose.
- **Recovery** is maintaining a self-care program that supports abstinence.
- **Recovery** is the way we utilize the brain's plasticity to create the new balance that rewires the brain.
- **Mastery** is what allows us to build new skills, a new lifestyle, and habits that become intrinsic parts of who we are. It is the process of getting better at something that is important to us.

Thanks for being on the road with me. There's a lot more to come.



Do you like the newsletter? Forward it!

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## Explore More

Want a gentle tool to reflect on  
your own supports?

 [Download the Connection Checklist](#) — a simple one-page guide to help you stay connected and grounded.

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Wherever you are in the journey,  
you're not alone.

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