The journey of recovery: How the USM community handles healing

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‘Recovery’ is a word with meanings and interpretations as diverse as those who use it. Regardless of these differences, it is a word which, according to members of the Recovery Oriented Campus Center (ROCC), holds similarities to “hope,” “healing” and “improving.”
The ROCC, located on the USM Portland campus, focuses on recovery of all types and provides a much-needed center of community and support for those in recovery. An important part of their recovery is connection.

“It’s a natural human desire to connect with people,” said Ash Havlin, a senior psychology and sociology major. “But when you suffer from a traumatic childhood or PTSD, your relationships with other people and your relationship with yourself [fracture]. I think because of that PTSD, you hide from relationships. You hide from the thing that hurt you. For me, my recovery is about reconnecting.”

Andrew Kiezulas, a senior chemistry major, is in long-term recovery. The need for community and connection is something that has played a large part in Kiezulas’ recovery.

“For me,” Kiezulas said, “recovery means my mother has her son back.”

“Sobriety and recovery are not synonymous,” he continued. “My recovery started long before I found abstinence and sobriety. It’s keeping people engaged and finding ways to increase the sustainability of recovery and community.”

Often when discussing recovery, people will use words such as “addict” or “drug abuser.” According to members of ROCC, these terms take away from the humanity of the individual in recovery and are stigmatizing. Terms to use instead are: substance use disorder (SUDs), drug use or misuse and “a person in recovery.”

Micaela Manganello, a senior nursing student, said that treating people in recovery as people first is important.

“Just treat them like a person,” Manganello said, “they’re not what they’re going through.”

For Katie Tomer, a junior health science major, it’s important to value each person’s humanity.

“Everybody struggles,” Tomer said, “and everybody has a hard time. It shows up in different ways for people but at the end of the day, everyone is human.”

There is a line from a Johann Hari book which members of the ROCC often quote:

“The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.”

While members of the ROCC dislike the term “addiction,” this quote holds meaning for them.

“Being in recovery,” Havlin said, “means more than just abstinence to me. It means that I reach out instead of isolate. It means that I can feel things instead of avoiding things and I listen to myself instead of ignoring myself.”
Trauma and mental health disorders come with pain. Without the support and help necessary for recovery, it can result in things like SUDs and other unhealthy coping skills. These can become tools to mask that pain.

“I want anyone who feels that kind of pain,” Havlin said, “to know that other people have felt that too, and that you can be in recovery. You don’t have to do it alone. And you can’t do it alone, and what a gift it is that we can’t do it alone. We need connection.”

Recovery is a process and a journey. And sometimes along the way there are slips or reoccurrences. But that doesn’t negate all of the work that has gone into someone’s recovery. It simply means they’re human.

“For me,” Havlin said, “it’s really important to continue to identify in recovery through slips and reoccurrences because that’s been part of my process, [and] it’s a part of many people’s process. If you continue to identify as in recovery through a recurrence, there’s more likelihood of obtaining abstinence. And that’s been important for me throughout this process.”

Being in recovery is about moving forward, and Kiezulas focuses on the positives of being in recovery in order to continue forward.

“[In recovery] you’re a survivor,” Kiezulas said. “You did it, you made it, it’s a story of hope and that’s what [the ROCC] is trying to promote now. This is something to be celebrated.”

Recovery is connection, hope, opportunity and healing. It isn’t something to be done alone. Recovery is something that both requires and builds strength. And sometimes that strength comes from a group of people sharing encouragement, support and connection.