

# Cutting back, not cutting out: Insights into non-abstinent recovery among individuals with prior alcohol use disorder

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**Research questions:** What does non-abstinent recovery look like? Why do some people choose this instead of abstinence?

**Methods:** We conducted semi-structured interviews with 65 adults with prior AUD who had never used specialty treatment and who were participating in a larger national study of alcohol recovery. We analyzed transcripts using inductive and deductive coding in Atlas.ti, identifying themes and elaborating their meanings. The analysis involved multiple rounds of reading, coding, memo-ing, and discussion by study authors.

**Results:** The interview participants were mostly men (59%) and white (57%), and large majorities met criteria for severe lifetime AUD (85%) and were in long-term recovery (82%); 40% had attended mutual-help groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous). Abstinence as a recovery goal was endorsed by a small majority (57%). Individuals who chose non-abstinent recovery conveyed a strong sense that they could control their drinking and that their alcohol use would not result in craving or an escalation of drinking. Individuals were highly cognizant of self-imposed limits on the frequency, quantity, or context of their drinking (e.g., as reward, in specific settings). Nearly all indicated that their drinking was very infrequent and light; virtually none reported drinking more than two drinks on an occasion. Aging emerged as a key factor facilitating a sense of control. Additionally, individuals opting for controlled drinking alluded to better quality of life as a result, and that abstinence was unrealistic for them.

**Conclusions:** Study results confirm that non-abstinent recovery is achievable among some people with prior AUD who had never received specialty treatment. As suggested by the qualitative data, improved quality of life can both motivate and reinforce non-abstinent recovery. Longitudinal research could confirm such processes. Future research is also needed to distinguish individuals who might successfully achieve non-abstinent recovery, such as through analyses of genetic, psychological, social, and environmental determinants of AUD.

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## What does non-abstinent recovery look like? Why do people choose it?

### Controlling Drinking

"If I were to go out to dinner with somebody I would probably order a glass of wine. And I might even drink it. But that doesn't mean that I'm gonna, like I fell off the wagon and I'm gonna be doing this binging, drinking habit. That's not gonna happen ever. It doesn't matter if I have a sip right now, or if I have a sip in a year, it's not gonna ever like take off like it did."

Female, age 55-64

### Fitting In

"I can fit in, I can be part of the crowd, I can have the enjoyment, but I can also stick by my rules and only have one and not put myself into that position of becoming that person again."

Male, age 35-44

### Celebrating Special Occasions

"About once a year, I have a cocktail and that's on New Year's night. I usually have a rum and cola, a small rum and cola, or just something to celebrate. [Champagne brand], I liked that. So, I do drink once a year but not to the excess."

Female, age 75+

### Enjoying Drinking

"I bought a four pack of something special. You can't just buy one. And it's just sitting there. It's just sitting there waiting for a special event...I'm going to visit my family in Tennessee and I may have a beer with them, but they drink the usual American beer, so I won't drink that unless it's got something that I haven't had before. I mean, like, I quit drinking, but that doesn't mean I can't sample new beer 'cause I do enjoy it."

Female, age 65-74

### Making a Realistic Decision

"I just decided to cut back as much as I was able to. I had to declare that I was never going to drink again, [it] didn't seem like a reasonable thing to expect of myself. I knew there would be occasions, different stuff at dinners [...] I would be offered wine and I would probably drink it. But I really did my best to control the frequency and the amounts."

Male, age 65-74

### Self-Awareness

"It's just like, 'All right, uh, you can drink, you know, as long as you don't get drunk.' And that's always been my limit. I mean, being drunk and drinking - it's a very fine line. So, my goal is always like, drink, have fun, but don't get drunk."

Female, age 25-34

### Maturing

"I just feel like I've gotten more mature [...] I don't want to drink to just get drunk. If I'm at a restaurant or with a couple friends, just have a couple drinks and chill and don't push it. And in doing so [...] it's not like I actually get drunk [...] more of like, I'll have a glass of wine, or like a drink to celebrate something, nothing too serious, entirely manageable."

Male, age 18-24

