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# For those fighting addiction, city is 'recovery community'

By Eric Beidel  
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**Winchester** — Recovering addicts in the community like to say that they have no excuse for missing a meeting.

They can step outside, walk seemingly in any direction, and find one.

On average, an Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous group meets in Winchester at least once every two hours during a seven-day week.

Linda W. attends at least one of the more than 80 meetings offered each week. She came to recovery late in life, after more than 40 years of drinking.

Others in her family abused alcohol, giving credence to studies that show increased rates of alcoholism among immediate relatives of alcoholics.

"But we didn't say the word 'alcoholic,'" said Linda — who, like other recovering addicts contacted for this report, asked that her last name not be used. "It was a lifestyle. It was just 'Grandpa drinks.'"

## **Mom and dad did, too.**

Linda started drinking at the legal age of 21. By her mid-30s, she drank daily.

She did it alone. She binged. She drank to get drunk, to forget about her problems and numb the pain — "to not feel anything," she said.

She stopped eating and lost 55 pounds in one year. She got sick daily.

## **"Alcohol was my food," she said.**

But almost three years ago, at age 62, Linda finally grew tired of the vomiting.

Hunched over the sink in her bathroom, she looked in the mirror.

“Is this me?” she asked her sister, who stood behind her.

“Yes dear, it’s you,” her sister replied.

Linda finally went for help. She followed the routine — detox to treatment.

Now 65, Linda has relapsed a few times during the two years since she started treatment. Her last slip-up occurred in March.

“I was my own worst enemy,” she said recently while sitting on the porch of her Kent Street home. “You’ve got to be down there to know what it feels like.”

She refers to hitting a bottom, the moment when an addict realizes that he or she wants to lose no more.

### **This epiphany is different for everyone.**

Some lucky addicts have a “high bottom” and seek help before they lose a job, a home, or a spouse.

Others find the bottom on death’s doorstep.

And still others have the bottom drop out.

### **“Dying from it”**

Addiction kills people in many ways.

Alcohol and drugs destroy a person’s health, but they also have a hand in other fatal situations.

Studies link alcohol and drug use to suicide, murder, car wrecks, HIV infection, pneumonia, and more.

Statistics on the number of alcohol- and drug-related deaths in this country are difficult to pin down, but most compiling agencies list numbers between 50,000 and 70,000 each year.

These are deaths strictly related to a specific instance of drug or alcohol use. The numbers don’t account for murders or fatal car accidents that involved alcohol.

In Virginia last year, 378 people died in alcohol-related traffic accidents, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Alcohol played a part in another 7,130 traffic injuries.

Recovering addicts who avoided becoming a fatality still say they died on the inside.

"People need to realize that it's an illness present from birth and they're dying from it," said Char French, a substance abuse therapist at Northwestern Community Services' Winchester clinic.

French sees more than 300 patients each year. The state agency often hears more cries for help than its staff can answer.

Just the other day, she had to tell three callers they would have to check back later.

"Winchester is a town full of recovery," said French, who is from California. "I've never seen anything like it."

Addicts must fully understand the disease to beat it, she said. They must understand that addiction "is a genetic disease of denial."

### **And they must manage that illness on a daily basis.**

The therapist makes sure her patients understand that their disease is hereditary and buries itself in their brains, clouding their judgment.

People sometimes seek help before they're willing to receive it, but most hit rock bottom and have no other choice.

"People are not coming to my office because they think they have a drinking problem," French said. "Most people are forced into treatment by the police, social services, the justice system. There almost always is a crisis."

But Northwestern Community Services has a limited amount of funding, so it must be selective and confident in the order it chooses to help people.

The money invested by the organization can help people get into a treatment program or halfway house.

### **"A place to stay"**

Linda lives within sight of several sober-living houses, some of them rented to Oxford House Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides homes for groups of recovering addicts.

Others are simply houses with no affiliation.

Many of these halfway houses, particularly the Oxford Houses, have appeared in Winchester during the last decade in residential neighborhoods. Some neighbors have complained about them.

Linda views them in a positive light. "I wish I had a place to stay when I was almost homeless on the street out here," she said.

Some recovering addicts freely admit that a relapse would have been inevitable if they hadn't stayed in Winchester or moved into an Oxford House.

The Maryland-based organization takes a professional hands-off approach to sober living. So far, it has established seven houses in Winchester.

The men or women living in each Oxford House generally make their own rules. But all of the houses have one rule set in stone — a resident who uses alcohol or drugs must leave immediately.

Those who have lived in the houses say the self-imposed rules are much more stringent than the umbrella organization's philosophy might suggest to outsiders.

Residents are given drug tests randomly and often. The number of nights residents can spend outside the home is limited. A resident returning after an out-of-town trip can expect a drug test.

Former residents of the city's Oxford Houses say they have voted people out of the homes for disruptive behavior that had nothing to do with drugs or alcohol.

"If we didn't have these places, where would these people go?" Linda asked. "They'd be on the street."

For many in Winchester, that would mean homelessness on the streets of a small city far from home.

## **Out-of-towners**

Many people become addicted to alcohol and drugs elsewhere, then come to Winchester for help.

Through the advice of an attorney or a friend, or through simple research, they have discovered the city's recovery network.

A few years ago, Pam R. practiced law and owned a restaurant in West Virginia.

She drank, quit, and started drinking again. To cope with the stresses of juggling two jobs, she tried to stretch the day with cocaine.

### **It didn't work.**

Her business partner split, and her bank accounts dwindled because of daily drug buys.

"I could see my life going down the toilet," she said. "The whole thing was about to come crashing down."

Now 46, Pam has been sober and drug-free for nearly three years.

She and her brother researched places which could offer help. A link on nearly every Web site they viewed took them to Bridging the Gaps, a Winchester treatment center with a holistic approach that incorporates healthy eating and exercise into the recovery process.

Like Pam, others say they came to this city to get sober, and once they were here, they didn't want to leave.

### **In some cases, they couldn't leave.**

"Just plain terror," Pam said, describing how she felt about the thought of going back to West Virginia. "I couldn't go back. Winchester has an amazing recovery community, and [West Virginia] represented a big stress pile for me."

Winchester has a well-connected support system — from the treatment centers to the sober-living houses to the abundance of support meetings to the fellowship of peers.

Much of that fellowship centers around Edge Hill, a recovery center on Cork Street.

Some people from out of the city say they chose Edge Hill because it offered the least expensive recovery program they could find. Others say Edge Hill could get them in quicker, helping them to avoid the vulnerable moments between seeking help and getting it.

Everyone at Edge Hill is in recovery, including the staff.

Some of the people who have stayed there now work at accounting firms and lawyers' offices. They hold down jobs they used to get fired from.

Others have stayed at Edge Hill to help those next in line discover the 12 steps to recovery.

Places such as Edge Hill receive financial help from the state government.

A recent legislative study reported that the annual costs of substance abuse on state and local governments are more than \$600 million, mostly in the realm of public safety.

Another \$102 million in government funds pays for treatment programs, the study states.

Money from alcoholic beverage sales in Virginia is placed in the state's general fund to be used for substance-abuse treatment.

However, the study in Richmond found that it is unclear whether all of the money tagged for treatment was being used for it.

Legislators also discovered that many people with addictions don't seek help, are turned away for logistical reasons, or are shortchanged once they enter a treatment program.

## **Daily decisions**

Every night, sober people go to bed addicts.

They wake up the same way.

More than 500,000 Virginians have some sort of dependence on drugs or alcohol, according to the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

The disease doesn't go away.

Some people, newly clean, can forget this.

"People will walk into an Oxford House and think they're God," said 25-year-old Tina L., who has been clean for three years. "And then they'll relapse two weeks later."

Tina, who now works in a corporate office environment, is a far cry from the young woman whose alcohol and drug use forced her parents to change the locks on their door to keep her away.

She used to sneak out of the house to drink and use drugs, mostly cocaine, ecstasy, and LSD.

Addiction cuts a wide swath, and Tina probably falls somewhere in the middle of the road.

She never went to jail, was only arrested once, and came to terms with her problem at a young age before a career or family could be taken from her.

Many addicts committed serious crimes, or tried to deny and disguise their problems to save their careers.

"I went to rehab with lawyers and doctors [who also were seeking treatment]," Tina said. "The disease does not care."

### **And the urges never stop.**

"I wake up every day and have to make a decision," Tina said. "Do I go left or do I go right?"

All addicts make the same daily choice, and most acknowledge that the odds are stacked against them.

The statistics are not on their side. Some will die. The majority will relapse.

Success rates for drug rehab centers vary, according to research, generally falling between 2 and 20 percent.

Linda picked herself up from her latest relapse to achieve another five months of sobriety.

Tina and Pam hope to become part of the small minority that goes through hell once and stays clean the rest of their lives.

"Knock on wood," Pam said. "Lots of wood."

[www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org)  
[www.bridgingthegaps.com](http://www.bridgingthegaps.com)  
[www.edgehillrecovery.org](http://www.edgehillrecovery.org)  
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