PATHWAYS OF HOPE - LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DRUG + ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE, AND RECOVERY. A PUBLIC INFORMATION COMIC

CO-CREATED WITH THE RECOVERY COMMUNITY, MEDICAL STUDENTS AND DOCTORS.



University of Glasgow

Humanising Healthcare

Visual Inquiry

IMAGES AND WORDS BY NIC DICKSON AND OSCAR DICKSON;
WITH LYNSAY CRAWFORD AND ANDREA WILLIAMSON FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW;
AND HUGO JOBST, ALLAN HOUSTON AND SEONAID ANDERSON OF HUMANISING HEALTHCARE

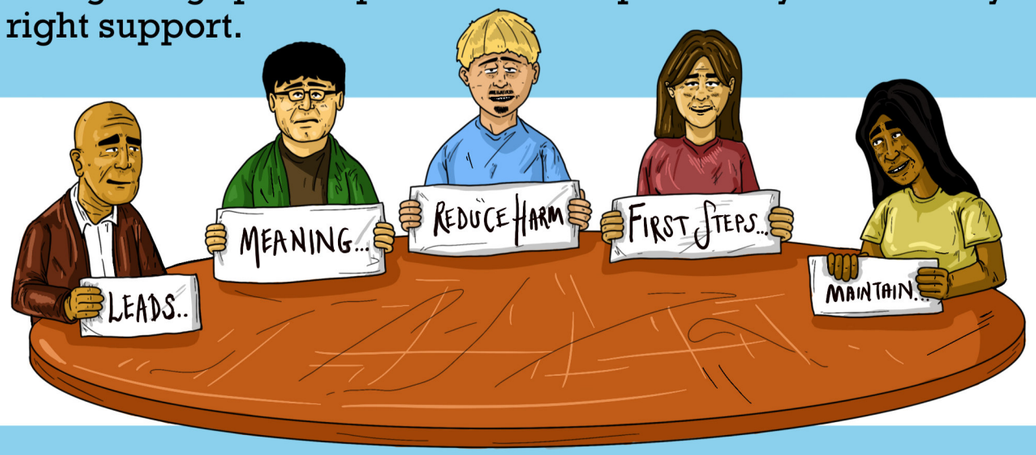
Pathways of Hope is a Public Information Comic that brings together real stories and insights from Glasgow's recovery communities. These stories were shared at Humanising Healthcare's Conversation Cafés with University of Glasgow medical students.

We recognise that there can be many forms of substance dependence, and whilst the themes covered are applicable to other dependencies, this comic specifically focuses on drugs and alcohol.

The comic is structured around five key themes from the Conversation Café's:

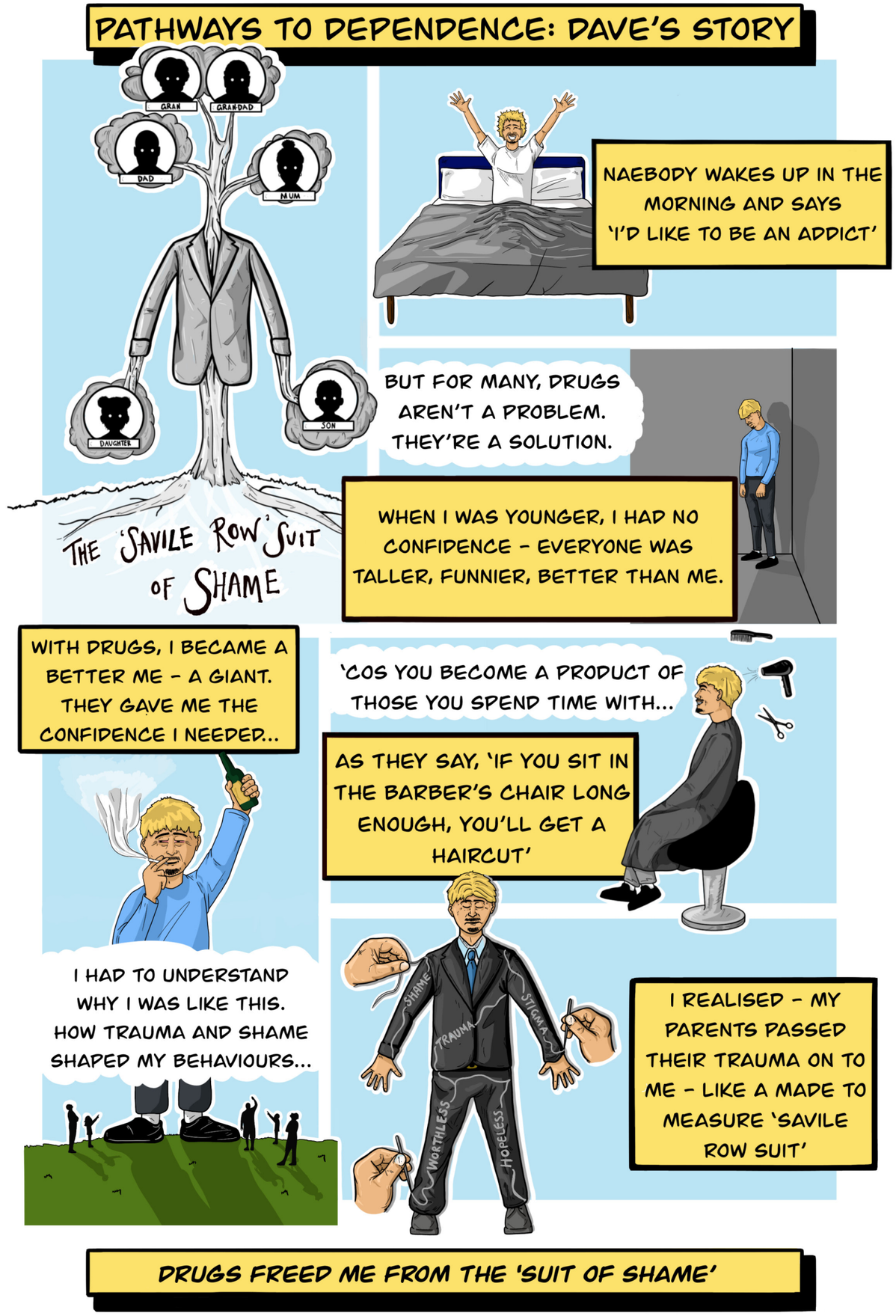
- ➤ What leads to drugs and alcohol dependence
- ➤ The meaning of recovery
- ➤ Harm reduction strategies
- ➤ First steps to recovery
- ➤ Maintaining recovery

Framing the comic is Dave's Story - two single-page narratives depicting the grip of dependence and possibility of recovery with the right support.



The themes were shaped through a collaborative research process. Conversations at the cafés were captured as visual notes by Dr Nic Dickson. The themes were refined with Dr Lynsay Crawford and Prof. Andrea Williamson, alongside Dr Hugo Jobst, Allan Houston and Dr Seonaid Anderson from the Humanising Healthcare team. The imagery and words were then presented to the recovery community, medical students and doctors in workshops, to ensure the material felt appropriate and impactful. Illustrators Nic and Oscar Dickson created the graphic content of this comic.

Thank you to all who contributed to the creation of this comic



What leads to drug and alcohol dependence?

Drug and alcohol dependence does not begin in a vacuum. It is often rooted in childhood trauma, local culture, and a lack of support.

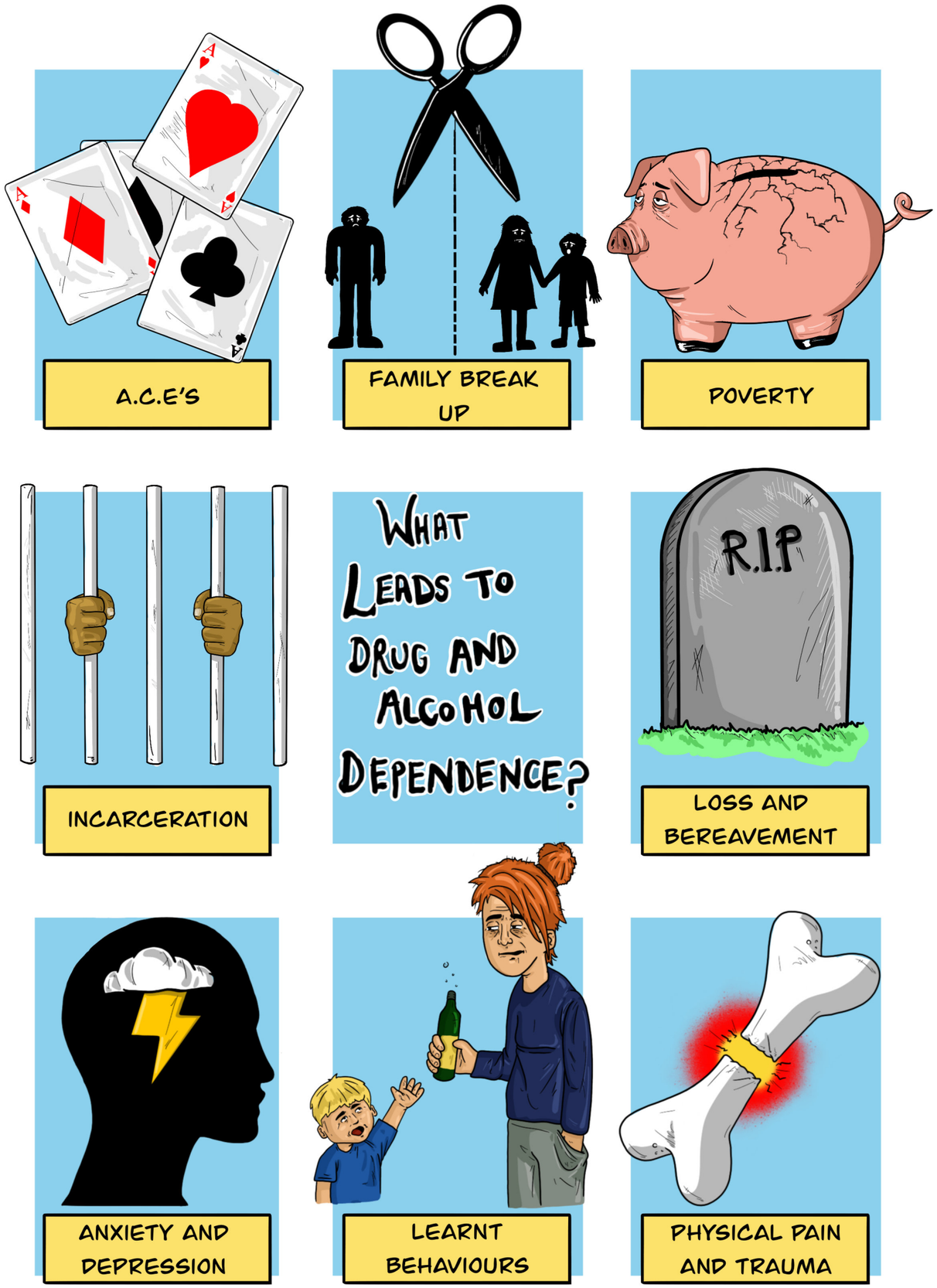
Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
Childhood trauma, such as neglect, abuse, violence or household instability, can have lasting effects on brain development and emotional wellbeing. People with multiple ACEs are more likely to experience substance use issues later in life.

Poverty and social exclusion
Living in poverty can mean constant stress, insecure housing, limited access to education, and fewer opportunities. Social exclusion (living on the margins of society) can lead to hopelessness and isolation. People may turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with life's challenges.

Exposure to the culture of substance use
Early or repeated exposure to substances in the home, in care or in peer groups can normalise their use. If substance use is a regular or accepted way of coping with life, it becomes easier to fall into patterns of dependence and 'unhealthy coping mechanisms'.

Emotional pain and loss
Grief, heartbreak, abandonment or the loss of identity and purpose can leave people overwhelmed. For some, substances offer temporary relief or numbness; a way to silence the pain when other forms of support feel out of reach.

Mental health issues
Anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health conditions often go hand in hand with substance dependence. Sometimes, people use drugs or alcohol to self-medicate or manage distressing symptoms.



What does recovery mean to you?

Recovery means different things to different people, but it is more than just stopping substance use. It is about rebuilding, reconnecting, and rediscovering what it means to live well. For many, recovery is a deeply personal and ongoing journey.

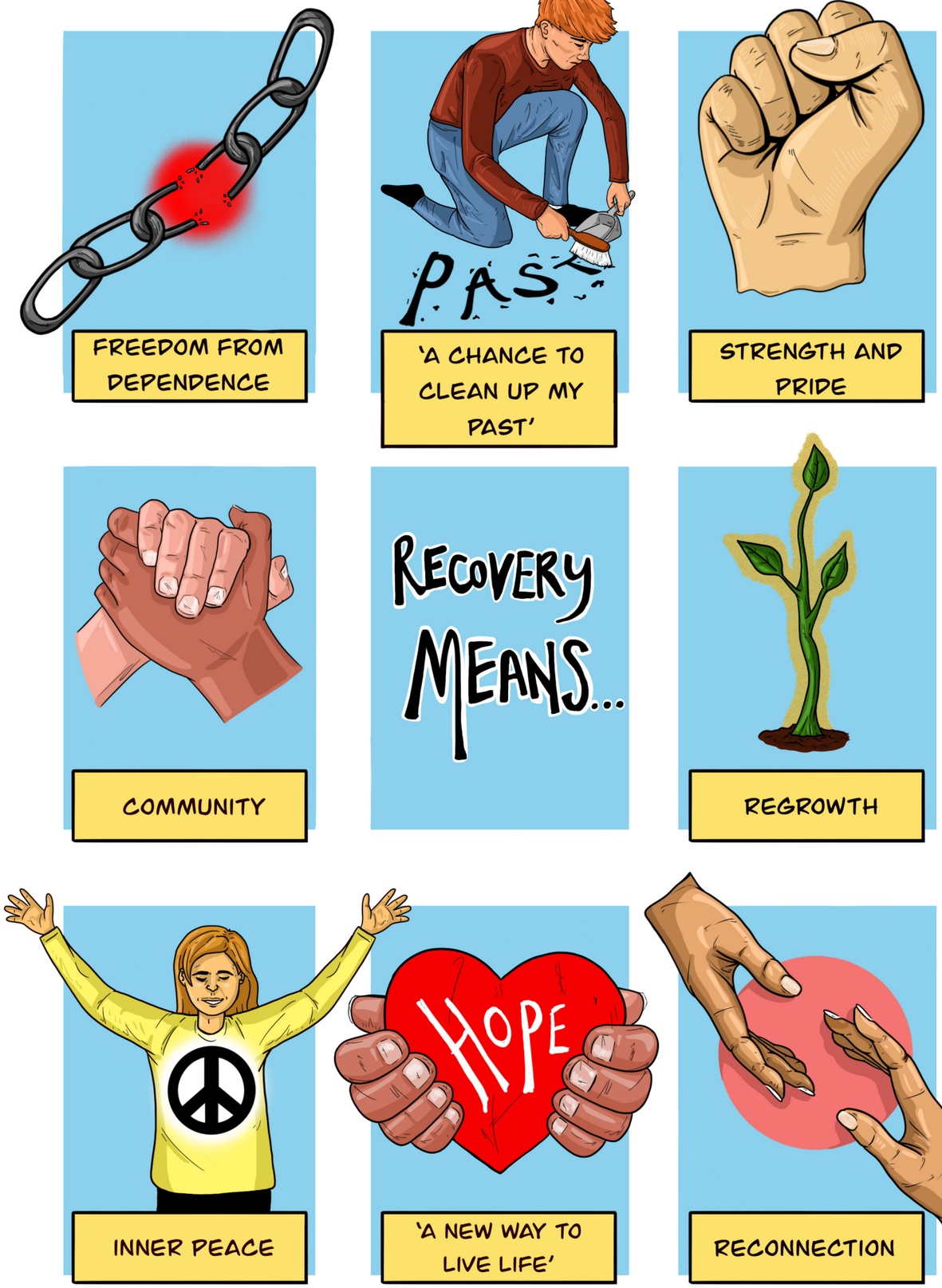
Hope and self-belief
Recovery is founded on hope and positive change. Even when life feels at its lowest, it can get better. Supported and guided by a community who understand the process of recovery, self-belief grows with time. People learn how to cope with who they are, without having to turn to drugs or alcohol.

Peace and serenity
Substance dependence often brings challenges. Recovery can bring a sense of peace, not just in day-to-day life, but within. For some, serenity means having fewer crises. For others, it is about inner stillness and learning how to sit with difficult feelings without needing to numb them.

Freedom to choose
Drug and alcohol dependence can feel like all your choices have been taken away. Recovery is about getting those choices back, the freedom to decide how you want to live, where to go, who to be with, and what brings you joy or meaning.

Connection to self and others
Substance dependence can isolate. Recovery helps rebuild relationships with family, friends, community and most importantly, with yourself. Learning to trust again, to ask for help and to feel part of something can be life changing.

A new and positive identity
Recovery is not about going back, it is about moving forward. It means developing a new understanding of yourself: one that is not defined by substance dependence, but by strength, resilience and growth. Many in recovery find new purpose, roles, and meaning in helping others.



What can health professionals do before someone is ready? (Harm reduction)

Recovery is not always a straight line, and readiness can take time. This means healthcare professionals will meet people dependent on substances with no plans to stop. This is where harm reduction has a key role.

Understand the role of harm reduction
Harm reduction is about keeping people safe before they are ready to stop using drugs and alcohol (abstinence); a stepping stone to recovery.

Offer harm reduction
This requires knowledge about what is available, such as Opiate Substitute Therapy (OST), naloxone for opioid overdose, blood-borne virus (BBV) testing, clean injecting equipment, access to rehab and detox facilities.

Respect readiness and encourage engagement
Expecting abstinence before someone is ready can create shame and shut down trust. Health professionals can support people to reduce harm in the meantime, recognising that any step toward health, safety or stability is progress. If someone is not ready for treatment, they may benefit from connecting with services, peer support, or community groups.

Recognise substances as coping tools
Substance use often serves a purpose, for example helping people manage trauma, pain or mental health challenges. Understanding this helps shift the focus from judgement to compassion. Rather than asking, “Why won’t they stop?” we ask, “What’s happened to you?”

Maintain contact and build trust
One of the most powerful things a health professional can do is to maintain a supportive relationship. Consistent, non-judgemental care - even during setbacks - builds trust. When someone is ready, they are more likely to reach out to a person they know.



What are the first steps in recovery and how can health professionals help people make them?

The first steps of recovery are often the hardest, not only for those experiencing drug and alcohol dependence, but also for the people supporting them. Health professionals, families and friends all play a part in recognising when help is needed and walking alongside someone on their recovery journey.

Recognising and accepting the problem
Recovery begins when someone is able to see there is a problem and feels ready to make a change. For people living with substance dependence, that moment may come through crisis, reflection or a conversation.

Health professional empathy, non-judgement and knowledge
For some, a conversation with a healthcare professional can be a turning point. Listening while showing empathy and taking time to understand the person behind the dependence can be powerful acts of care. For health professionals, it means acknowledging when substance use is impacting on health, and discussing it with knowledge, compassion and without judgement.

Finding sources of support
Recovery does not happen alone. Support can come from many places: family, friends, peer support groups, fellowships or recovery services. Feeling safe, seen and understood at a time of crisis is key.

Meaningful connections
Connecting works best when it is personal and relevant. Recovery is not one-size-fits-all. Health professionals can help by connecting people to the right support, at the right time, in the right way. Mapping the area you work in for valuable resources may be beneficial.



What helps maintain recovery?

Recovery does not end when substance use stops. It is a lifelong journey of rebuilding, reconnecting, and staying well. For many, it is about finding what works day-to-day.

Structure and routine
Having a daily rhythm - even something simple like waking up, eating, exercising and showing up for a recovery café or fellowship meeting - can bring stability. Routine can reduce the challenges that often fuel relapse, helping people feel more in control.

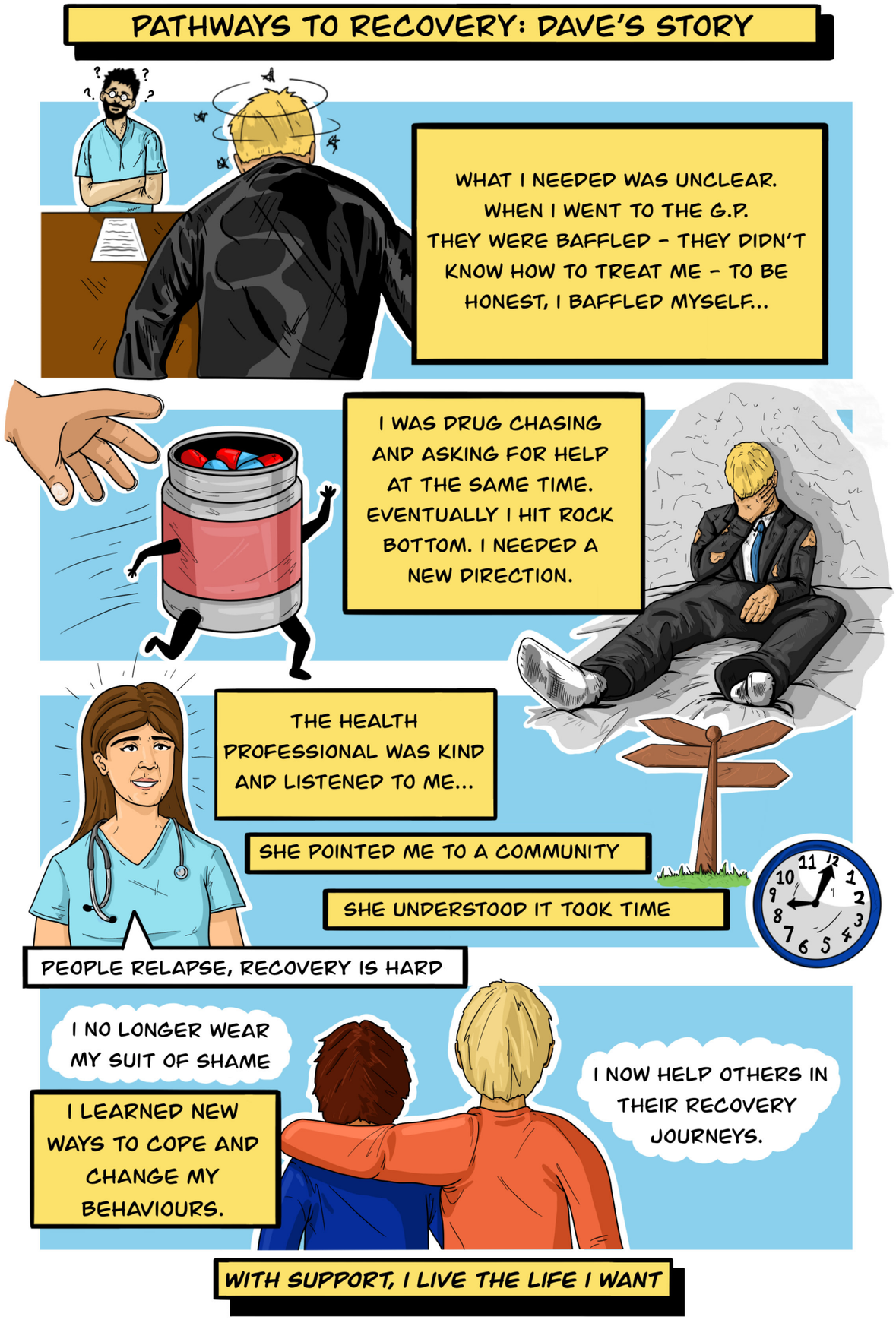
Peer support and fellowship
Recovery thrives in community. Mutual aid groups, peer mentors, and fellowship networks (such as NA or AA) offer understanding that comes from shared experience. These spaces help people stay accountable, feel less alone, and celebrate progress together. Attending these meetings regularly (often daily in the early stages) helps people maintain their recovery.

Mindfulness and spiritual practice
For some, practices like meditation, prayer, connection with nature, or quiet reflection bring calm and clarity. These tools help people reconnect with themselves, manage cravings, and find meaning in recovery, whatever their beliefs.

Family reconnection
Rebuilding trust with family can be challenging, but for many, it is also deeply healing. Open communication, time and support can help repair relationships and become a source of strength.

Meaningful activities
Volunteering, learning, creative work, or employment can give life direction and purpose. Having a reason to get up, a sense of value, and something to work toward helps recovery feel worthwhile. Many people in recovery like to ‘give something back’ by supporting others on their journey.





Recovery is a journey best taken with support. Whether you are in recovery yourself, supporting someone, or working or studying in health and social care, there are people you can speak to. These free and confidential services are available across Scotland, with dedicated support in Glasgow:

National Helplines

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
📞 0800 917 7650 🌐 alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
📞 0300 999 1212 🌐 scotland.ukna.org

Cocaine Anonymous (CA)
📞 0141 959 6363 🌐 cascotland.org.uk

With You (Drug, alcohol, and mental health support)
📞 0808 164 4261 🌐 wearewithyou.org.uk

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs
📞 0808 010 1011 🌐 sfad.org.uk

Breathing Space (Mental health support for over-16s)
📞 0800 83 85 87 🌐 breathingspace.scot

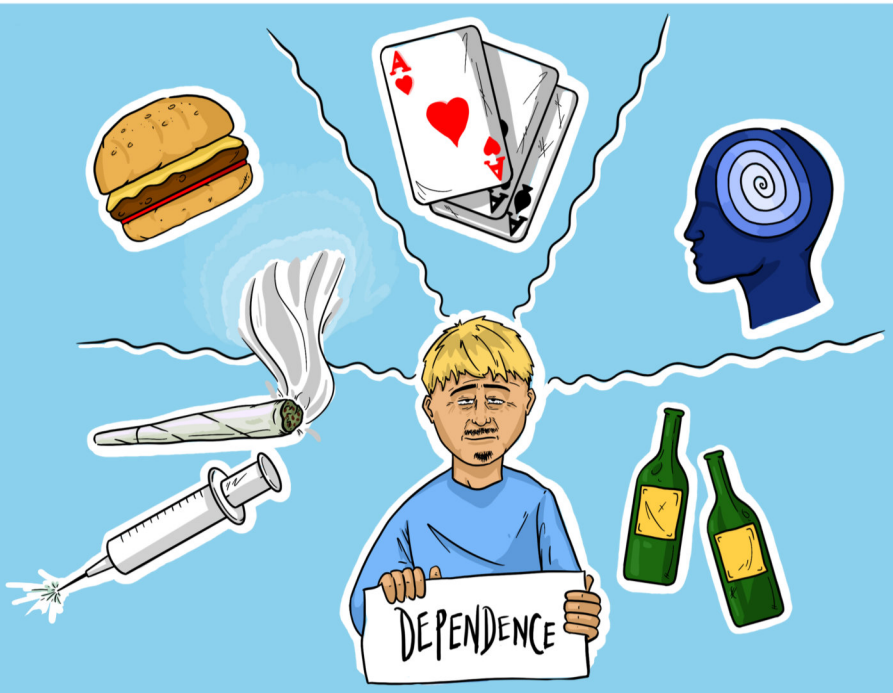
Local Recovery Resources – Glasgow

North East Recovery Community (NERC)
📞 0141 554 5235 🌐 glasgowhelps.org/north-east-recovery-community

North West Recovery Communities (NWRC)
📞 0141 328 4578 🌐 nwrc-glasgow.co.uk

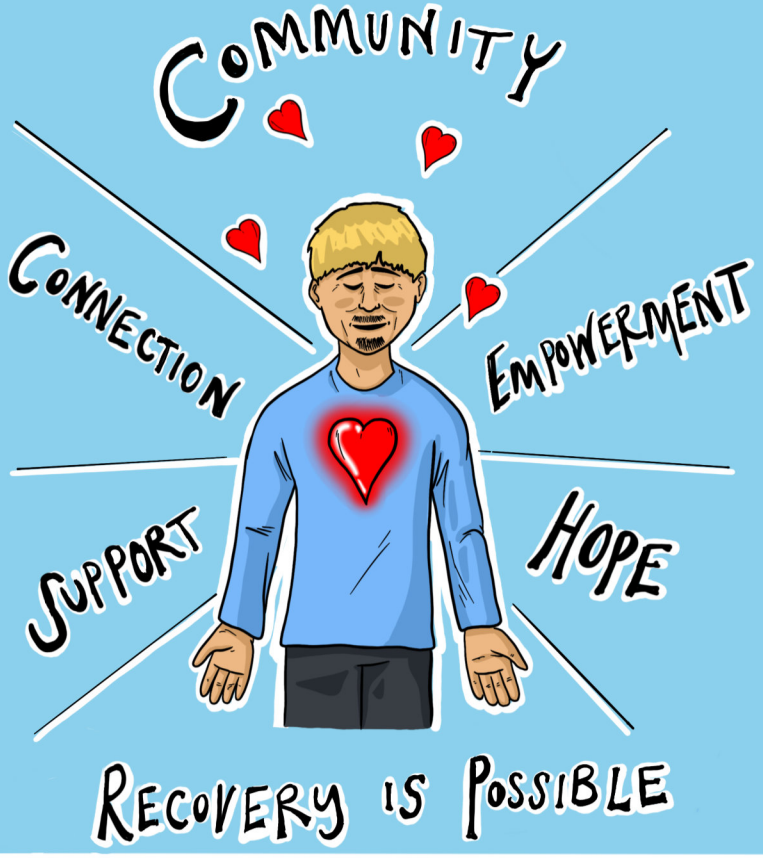
South Community Recovery Network (SCRN)
📞 0141 429 8181 🌐 scrn-recovery.co.uk

Need More Support?
Scan the QR code to connect with other services



Thank you to everyone who shared their story.
These contributions, gathered through Conversation Cafés, reflect real experiences and thoughtful conversations held in safe, supportive spaces. This comic is both a record and a resource.
It can be used for free in community groups, teaching and support - by those in recovery and those walking alongside them.

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