

# Bridging the Treatment (Harm Reduction) Gap

Alex Elswick, PhD

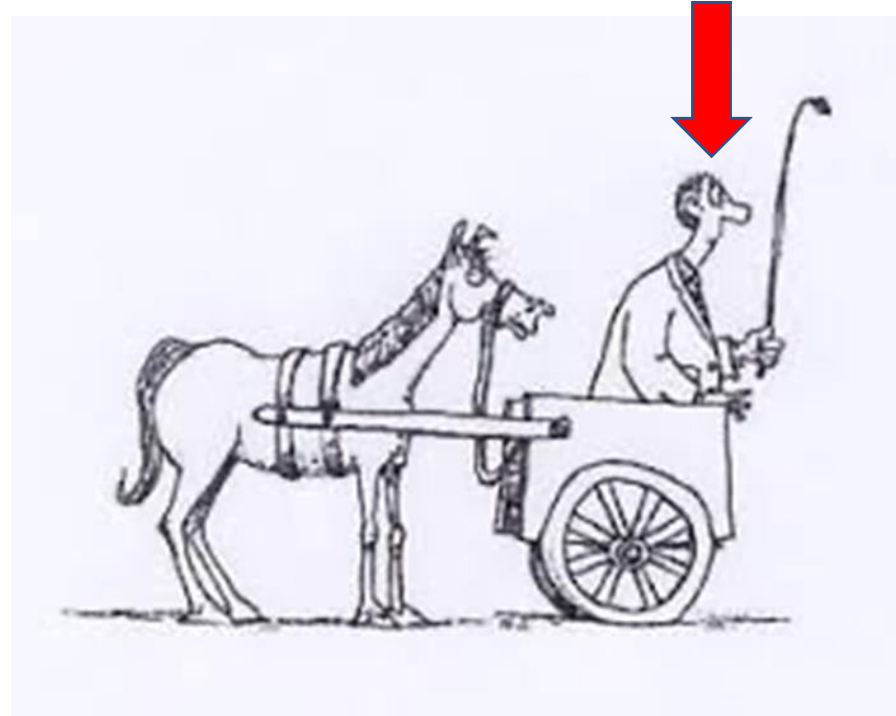
Assistant Extension Professor

Substance Use Prevention and Recovery

# My Recovery



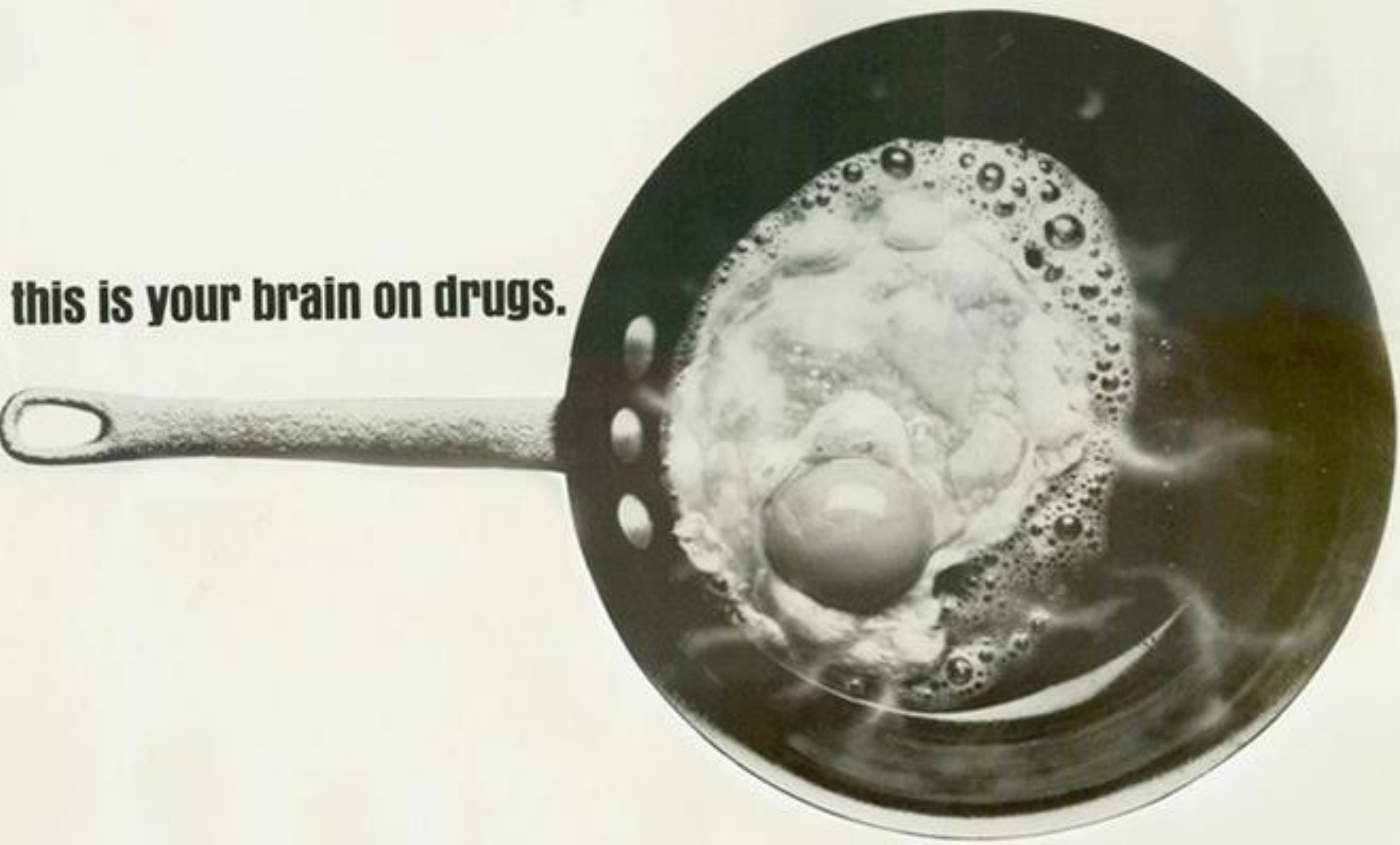
Alex Elswick ca. 2015



Three Things I Needed to Learn:

1. Addiction is a chronic disorder; recovery is a process (not an event)
2. Recovery Capital drives recovery; not abstinence
3. Harm Reduction is a pathway of recovery

**this is your brain on drugs.**



## Partial Recovery of Brain Dopamine Transporters in Methamphetamine (METH) Abuser After Protracted Abstinence



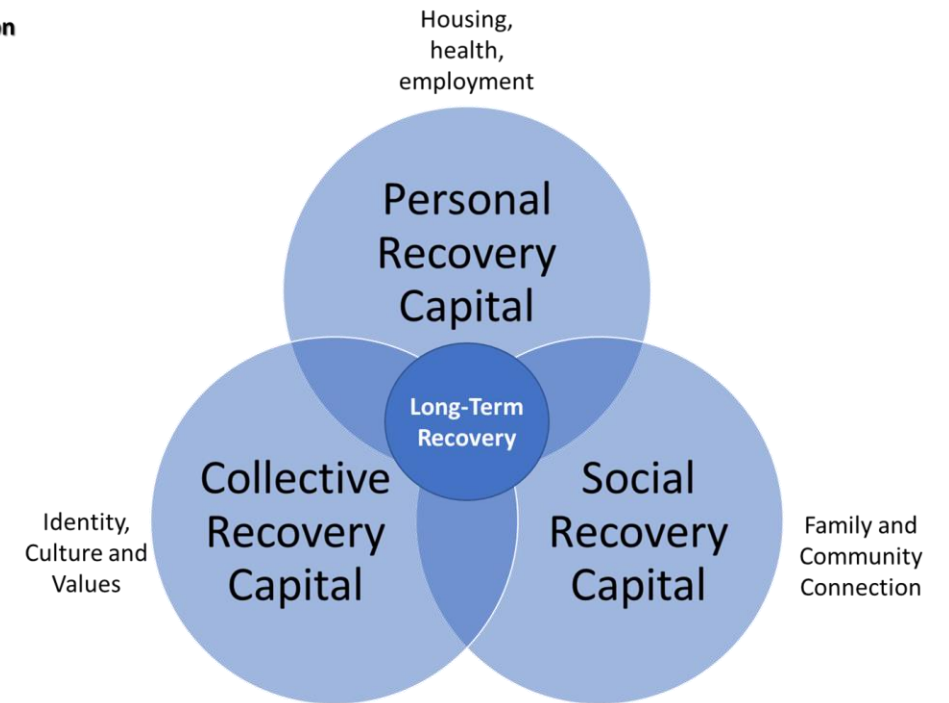
*Source: Volkow, ND et al., Journal of Neuroscience 21, 9414-9418, 2001.*

# Recovery Capital

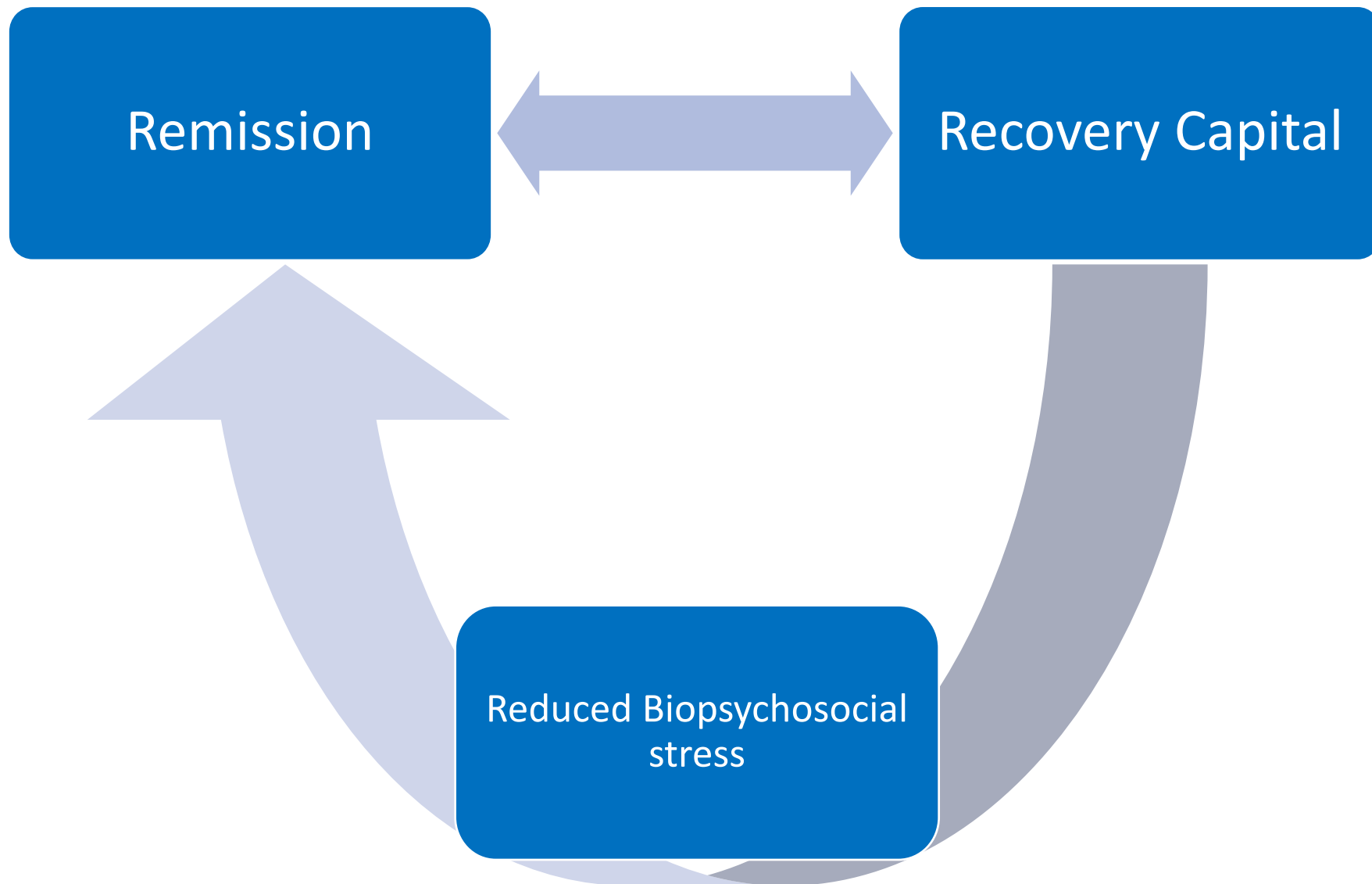


Adapted from Maslow (1943)

## The Solution



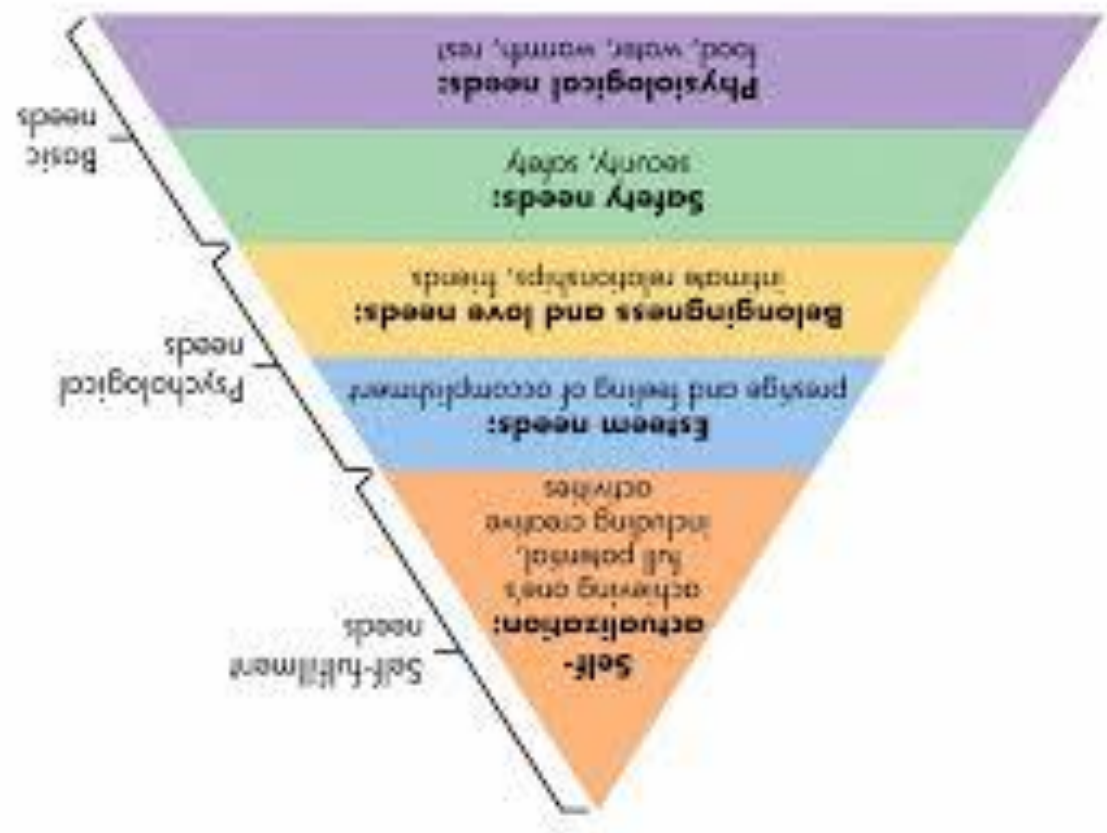
Adapted from White & Cloud (2008)



# Abstinence or Resources: Chicken & Egg

- Should we wait for individuals to become abstinent before building recovery capital?
- Abstinence as a precondition for:
  - Housing (Pauly et al., 2013)
  - Social services (Rigaud, 2019)
  - Caregiving (Patton, Best, & Brown, 2022)
  - Mental health services
  - Continued treatment (White, Scott, Dennis, & Boyle, 2005)
  - Acceptance in the recovery community (von Greiff, & Skogens, 2021)

# We've Got it All Upside Down!



# Expert Thoughts on Rock Bottom

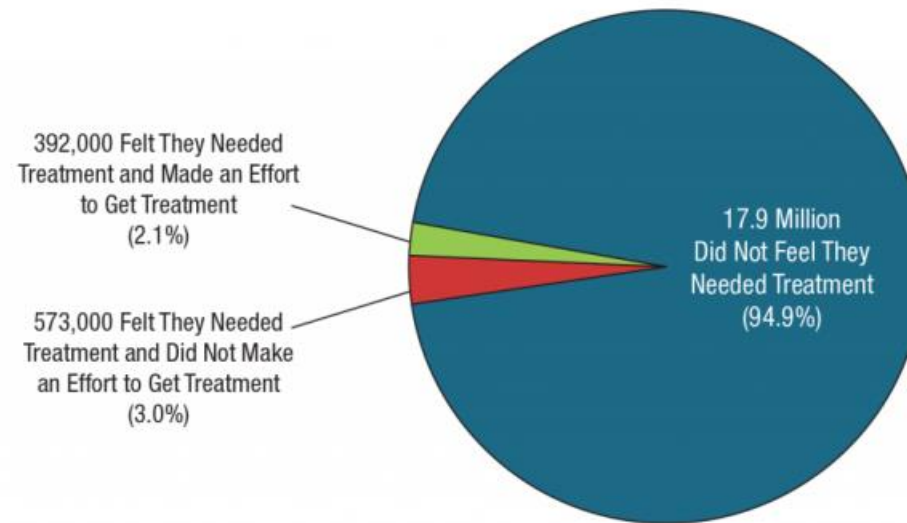
“It’s remarkable that people believe what’s needed is more punishment. If punishment worked, nobody would be addicted. It’s a pretty punishing experience.” -Keith Humphreys

“Bill, you’re not getting it! My clients don’t hit bottom; my clients live on the bottom. Their capacities for physical and emotional pain are beyond your comprehension. If we wait for them to hit bottom, they will die! The issue of engaging them is not an absence of pain, it is an absence of HOPE!” -William White

# The Treatment (Harm Reduction) Gap

FFR1.66

Perceived Need for Substance Use Treatment among People Aged 12 or Older Who Needed but Did Not Receive Specialty Substance Use Treatment in the Past Year: 2018



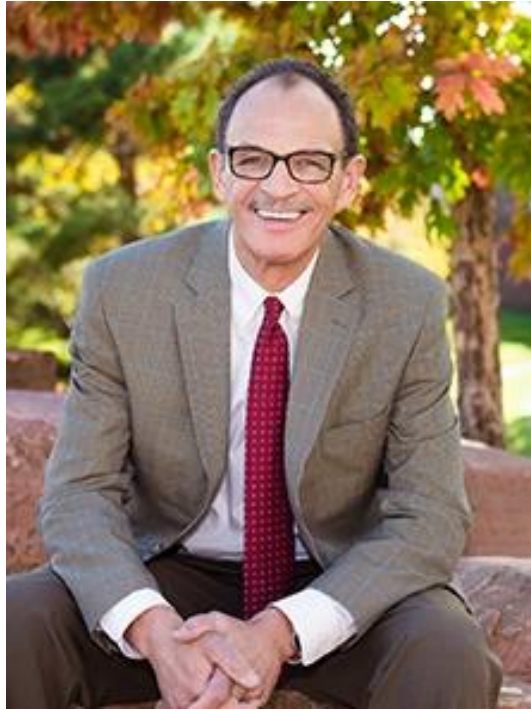
18.9 Million People Needed but Did Not Receive Specialty Substance Use Treatment

**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

  
**VOICES of HOPE**

# Where does the “Recovery Capital” construct originate? (White, 2008)

**Dr. William Cloud**



**Dr. Robert Granfield**

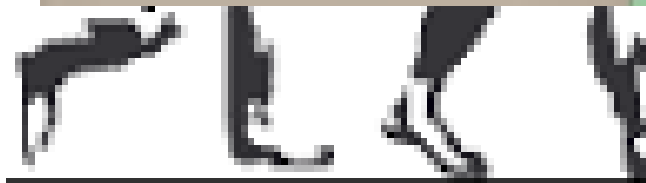


# The Elephant that No One Sees: Natural Recovery Among Middle Class Addicts

(Granfield and Cloud,  
1996)

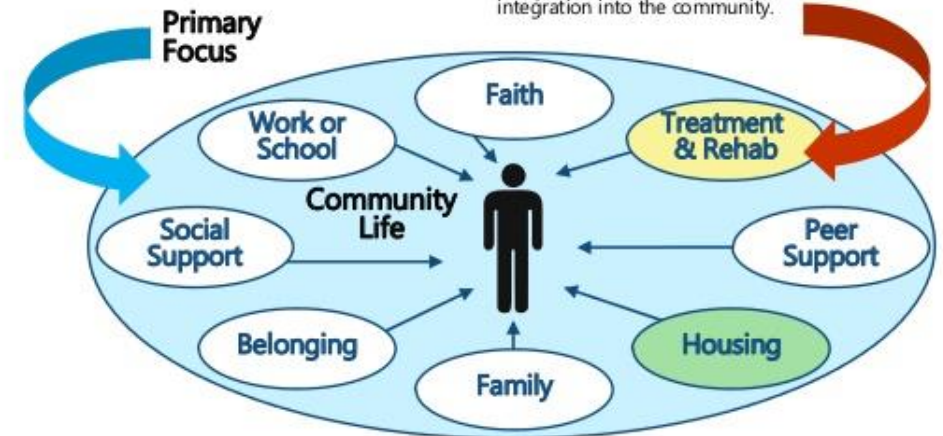
- Natural recovery is the *rule* and not the exception
- Unassisted recovery
  - 46.1% of people with SUDs (Kelly, Bergman, Hoepner, Vilsaint, & White, 2017)
  - 75% of people with AUDs (NIAAA, 2009; Sobell & Cunningham, 1996)
- How is Natural Recovery possible? → Recovery Capital

# Evolving Approach to Addressing Addiction: A (Really) Short History



## Recovery Oriented System of Care

In the model, clinical care is viewed as one of many resources needed for successful integration into the community.



RECOVERY, RESILIENCE & SELF-DETERMINATION

CHARTER

# Band-aids and Bullet Wounds (White, Kurtz, & Sanders, 2006)

- “Given the **chronic** nature of substance dependence disorders (McLellan, Lewis, & O’Brien, 2000) and the **scarcity** of funds for treatment, neither single nor serial-episode acute care will ever meet the vast need that exists. Only a focus on **ongoing recovery support/management** can address effectively the chronic nature of this illness.”

# EXAMPLES OF HARM REDUCTION IN OTHER AREAS



SUN  
SCREEN



SEAT  
BELTS



SPEED  
LIMITS



BIRTH  
CONTROL



CIGARETTE  
FILTERS

# What is Harm Reduction? (NHRC, 2024)

## **harm reduction**

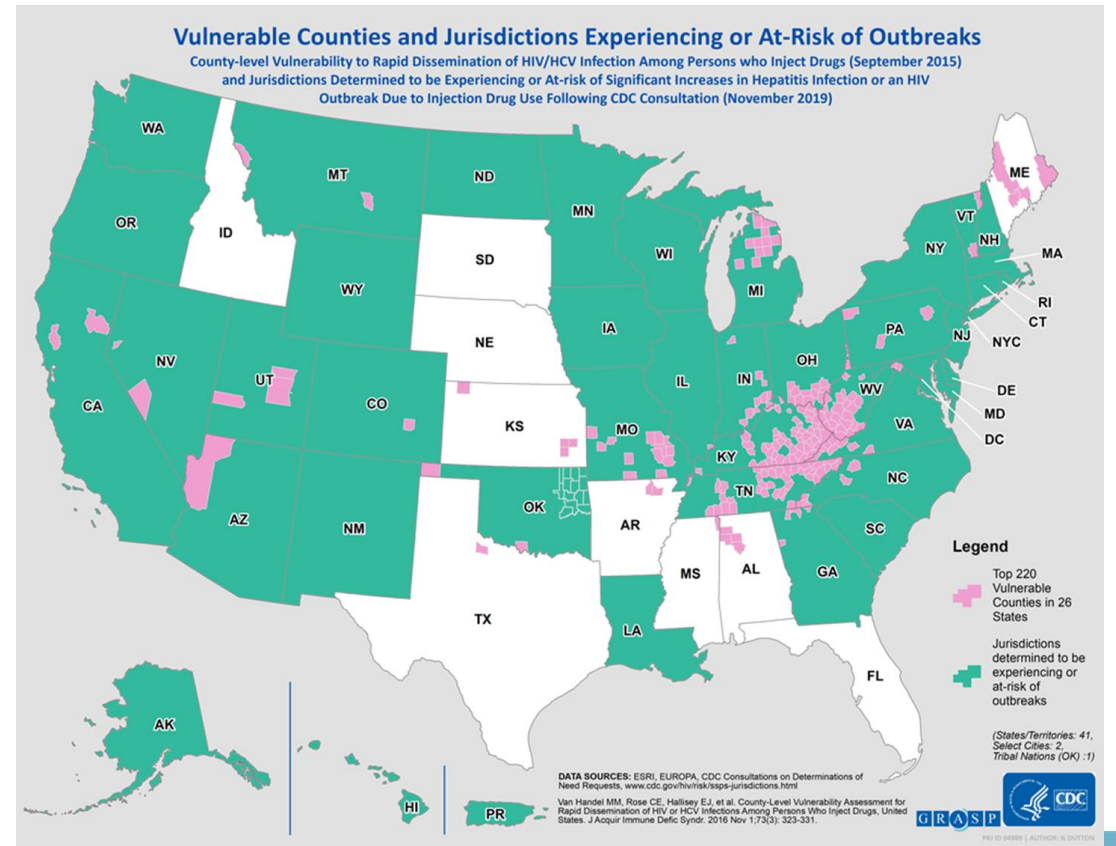
- hr is a "practical set of strategies aimed at reducing the negative consequences associated with substance use"

## **Harm Reduction**

- HR is "a movement for social justice, build on the belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs"

# What is the value of harm reduction?

- For example: SSPs
  - Reduce incidence of HIV/Hep C
  - Reduce injection frequency and injection-site wound frequency
  - Increase entry to treatment, (inpatient, IOP, and MOUD)
  - Increase access to physical and mental healthcare
  - Reduce the number of improperly discarded syringes
  - Reduce first responder needle sticks



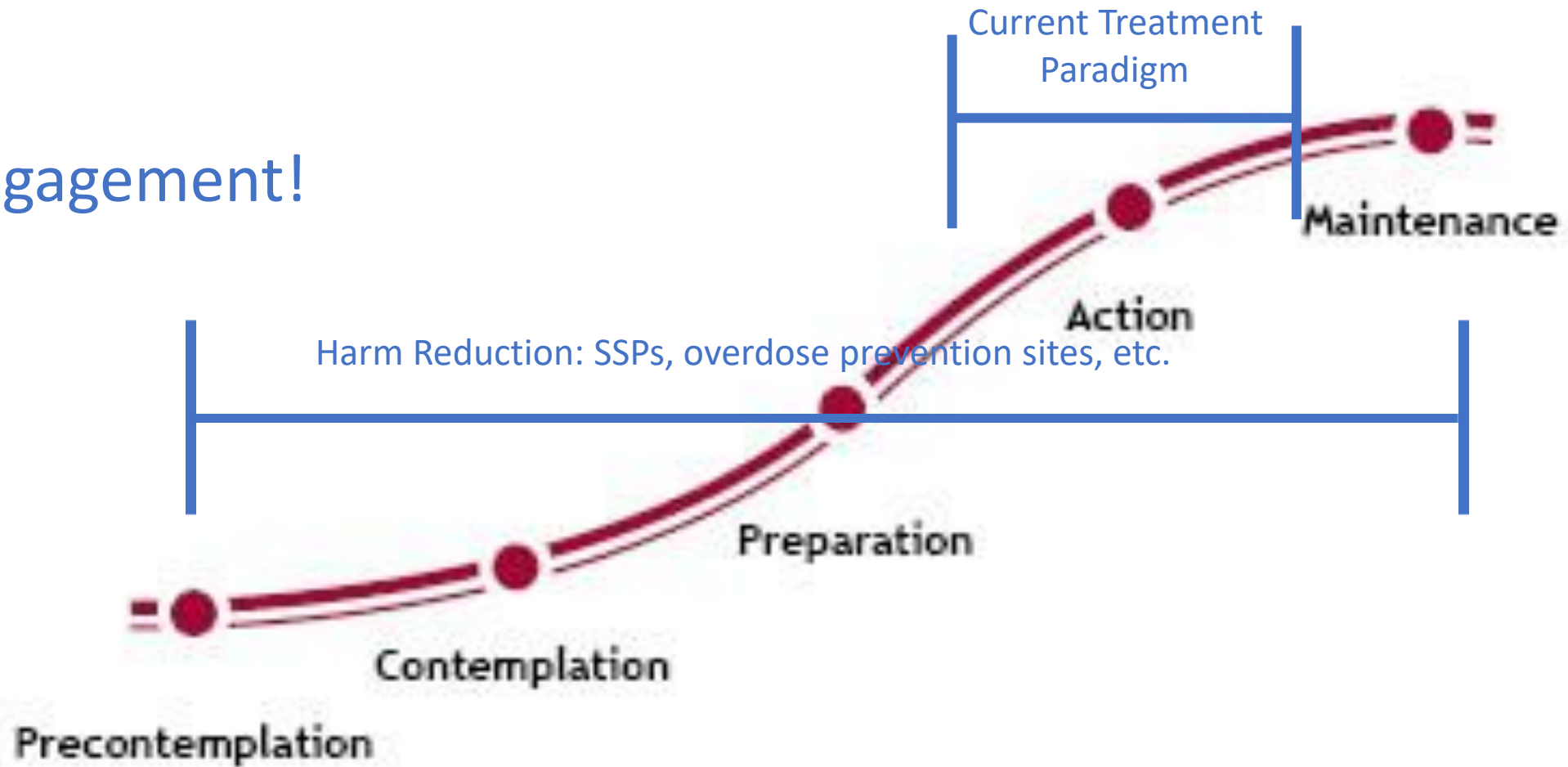
# What is the value of Harm Reduction?

Transtheoretical Model: Stages of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente)



# What is the value of Harm Reduction?

Engagement!

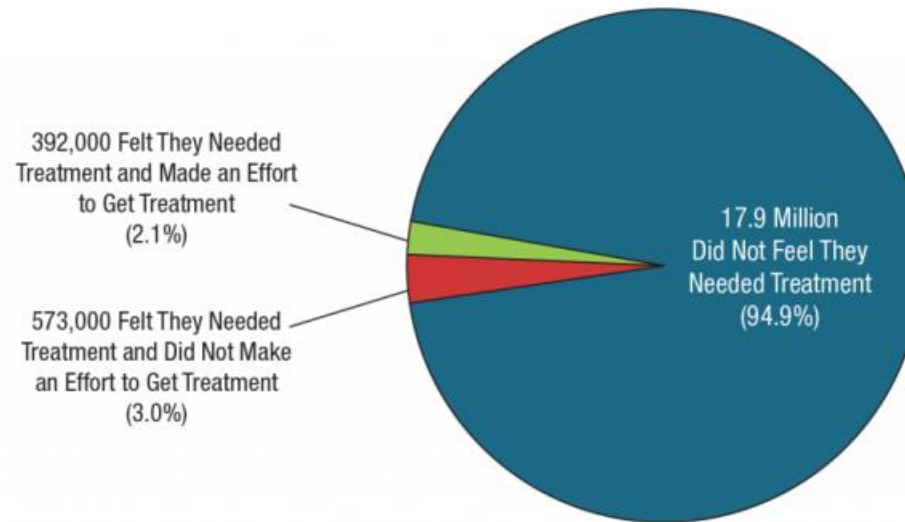


I walked by staring straight onto  
the sidewalk unable to lift my  
head. ~~It~~ If I wasn't nodding or  
barely able to lift my head from  
the cogs I was so damn hopeless  
I ~~wasn't~~ didn't feel human enough  
to wanna look at another human being

# Bridging the Treatment (Harm Reduction) Gap

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18.9 Million People Needed but Did Not Receive Specialty Substance Use Treatment

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**VOICES of HOPE**

Questions or  
Comments?

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