The DRAM, Vol. 21(3) – The role of social validation from significant others in achieving and maintaining sobriety

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Editor's note: *Today's review is part of our month-long Special Series on Addiction and Social Support. Throughout March, the BASIS is highlighting the role of social support in addiction-related experiences.*

Social identity change is an integral part of addiction recovery. Recovering persons often adopt a new 'sober identity,' becoming a member of a social group whose values and behaviors revolve around recovery (as opposed to substance use). Social relationships that promote this identity shift may be important for achieving and maintaining sobriety. This week, as part of our Special Series on Addiction and Social Support, The DRAM reviews a study by Gary Westwell and colleagues that investigated the role of social validation from significant others in achieving and maintaining sobriety among people in recovery from alcohol misuse.

What were the research questions?

(1) What factors and experiences relate to achieving and maintaining sobriety among people in recovery from alcohol misuse? (2) What are recovering persons' perspectives on and experiences with social validation from their significant others?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 18 people from alcohol peer support groups in northern England. All participants had been in sobriety for at least one year after experiencing problems with their drinking for at least five years. The researchers interviewed the participants about their experiences achieving and maintaining sobriety, and then thematically analyzed the responses. One subtheme that emerged was *the role of family and friends in maintaining change*. The authors of this paper focus on one aspect of this subtheme – validation of the new 'sober me' from significant others (e.g., family, friends).

What did they find?

Three-quarters of participants organically mentioned instances where their new sober identity had been either validated or invalidated by significant others. In general, many participants expressed an overall desire for validation and acceptance (see Figure). Participants who had experienced validation felt as though they were being taken seriously, that they were trusted, and felt accepted and believed in. For many, validation helped them maintain their sobriety. On the other hand, some participants experienced resistance from significant others who didn't acknowledge their new identity and continued to treat them like their 'old self.' For some, this invalidation made their recovery more challenging.

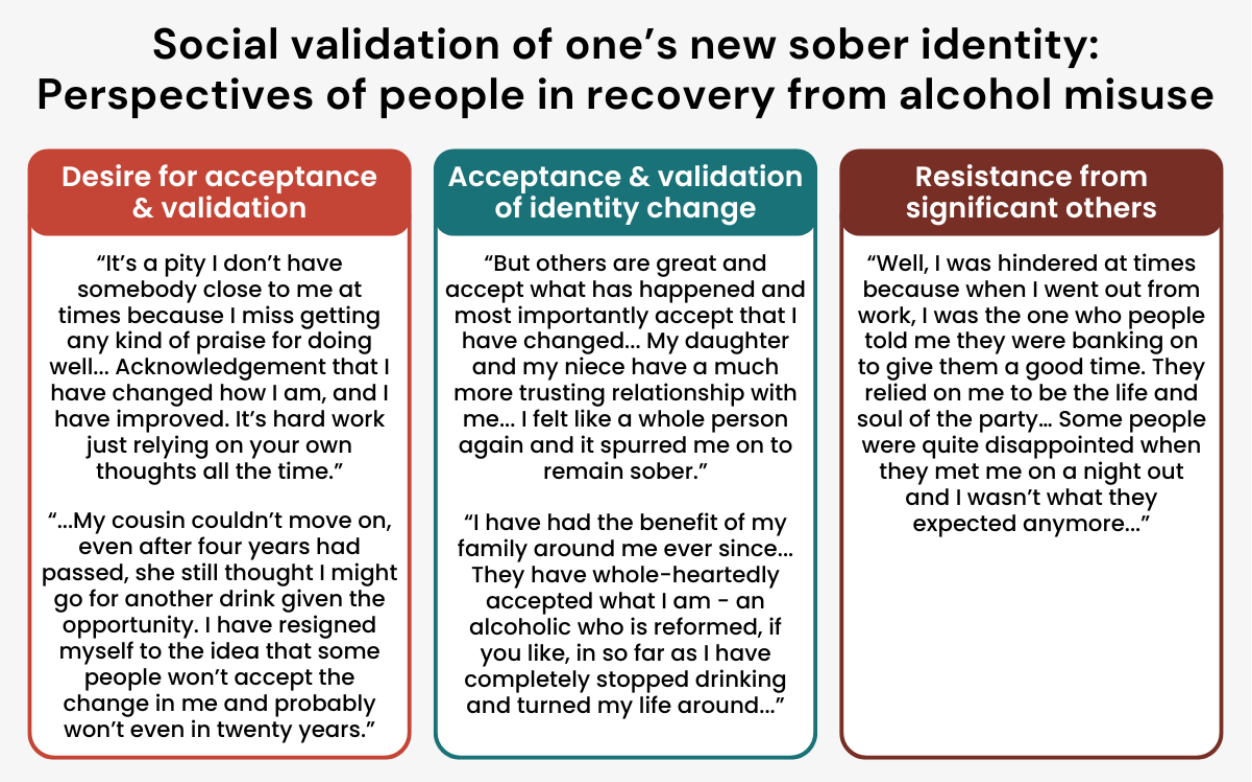


Figure. The perspectives of people in recovery from alcohol misuse on social validation of their new sober identity from their significant others. Quotes from participants cover experiences with validation and invalidation of their new identity, and the desire for acceptance. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

It is well-documented that social support plays a crucial role in addiction recovery. This study enhances our understanding of one aspect of social support—acceptance and validation of the recovering person's new sober identity by their significant others. These findings suggest that this validation is important to people in recovery and may help them maintain sobriety. Techniques that help significant others build acceptance, like role-play exercises to practice validation

behaviors, may be important. Significant others may benefit from taking the *Responsibility without Blame* course, which can help them recognize and change their attitudes and behaviors towards their loved one in recovery.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations of this study?
Study participants were in long-term sobriety. These findings might not be generalizable to people who have not achieved or maintained sobriety. All study participants maintained sobriety, even though many experienced instances of invalidation. Future studies should examine the nuances of validation and whether it plays a causal role in maintaining addiction recovery.

For more information:
The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has tips and resources for people looking to change their relationship with alcohol. For additional drinking self-help tools, please visit our Addiction Resources page.

— Kira Landauer, MPH

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