



A Social Worker's View on Helping Individuals Return to Work Following Extended Medical Leave

Ryan Menard, RSW MSW

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What do social workers do?

Social workers are regulated health professionals who work with clients—individuals, families, groups and communities—to improve individual and collective well-being.

They often work in interdisciplinary teams to provide services, share resources, improve conditions and create opportunities for growth, recovery and personal development.





What do social workers do?

As well as working with clients, social workers respond to social issues and address barriers and injustice within society and organizations.

The profession advocates for social justice, human rights and fair access to health and social services (CASW).



Chasing recovery: an autoethnographic/ethnographic study of running in recovery from addiction



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Authors

Menard, Ryan

Abstract

Substance misuse, or addiction, is one of the most common issues facing individuals who use social work services (Smith et al., 2006), p. 109). The majority of Canadians who identify as being in recovery from harmful substance use report that exercise is one of the “[s]upports and resources” (McQuaid et al., 2017, p. 25) that helps them maintain this state. A growing body of research supports exercise as an adjunct treatment to conventional rehabilitation therapies due to a variety of benefits. This study sought to address the lack of qualitative research exploring how individuals use exercise to help maintain recovery from substance misuse use long-term.

Because of my lived experience and privileged knowledge in this area, I used a combination of ethnography and autoethnography to answer the question: How does running fit into your life as a person in recovery? Data gathered through in-depth one-on-one interviews and my own personal history suggests ways in which running can holistically improve the lives of individuals seeking recovery from substance misuse in a number of areas. Foremost among these were: improved mental health coping and relapse prevention skills, surrounding oneself with pro-recovery social supports, and adopting a post-addiction subjectivity. Based on these findings, I suggest social workers include the promotion of running in their toolkits for working with individuals seeking recovery from substance misuse who are mentally and physically healthy enough to do so, except where those service users are also experiencing co-occurring eating disorders.



Findings

Running promotes strengths-based social
work goals:

personal growth,
improved quality of life,
problem-solving skills,

And resilience to stressors (Heinonen &
Spearman, 2010)

**Be cautious recommending running to
individuals with disordered eating.**

How can running holistically improve the lives of individuals seeking recovery from substance misuse?

**improved mental health coping
and relapse prevention skills**

**surrounding oneself with pro-
recovery social supports**

**Goal setting and achievement
("Doing Hard Things")
building self-efficacy**

**adopting a post-addiction
subjectivity**

When Running isn't the Best Fit

- Walking provides almost all of the benefits of running

(Includes any sort of self-propelled movement over land)

- Swimming can also provide these benefits and is more accessible to many



- Treadmills are good
- Getting outside is better
- Getting outside and far from cars is best.

“There is no mind/body split. The mind is the body, the body is the mind.” (Perryman, 2013)



Mental Health Benefits of Exercise

- Increased feelings of well-being and quality of life (Sari et al., 2019)
 - Providing a healthy source of pleasure (Raichlen, 2012)
 - Replacing unhealthy coping mechanisms (Murphy et al., 1986)
 - Reducing sensitivity to stress (Salmon, 2001)
- Reducing symptoms associated with anxiety (Salmon, 2001) and depression (Cooney et al., 2013)
- 5/6 participants reported running helping with problem solving: offers different perspectives, provides distance from the issue

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

"Follow these precepts and you will revolutionize your life. Read this book!"
—Steven Pressfield, author of *The War of Art* and *Gates of Fire*

THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY

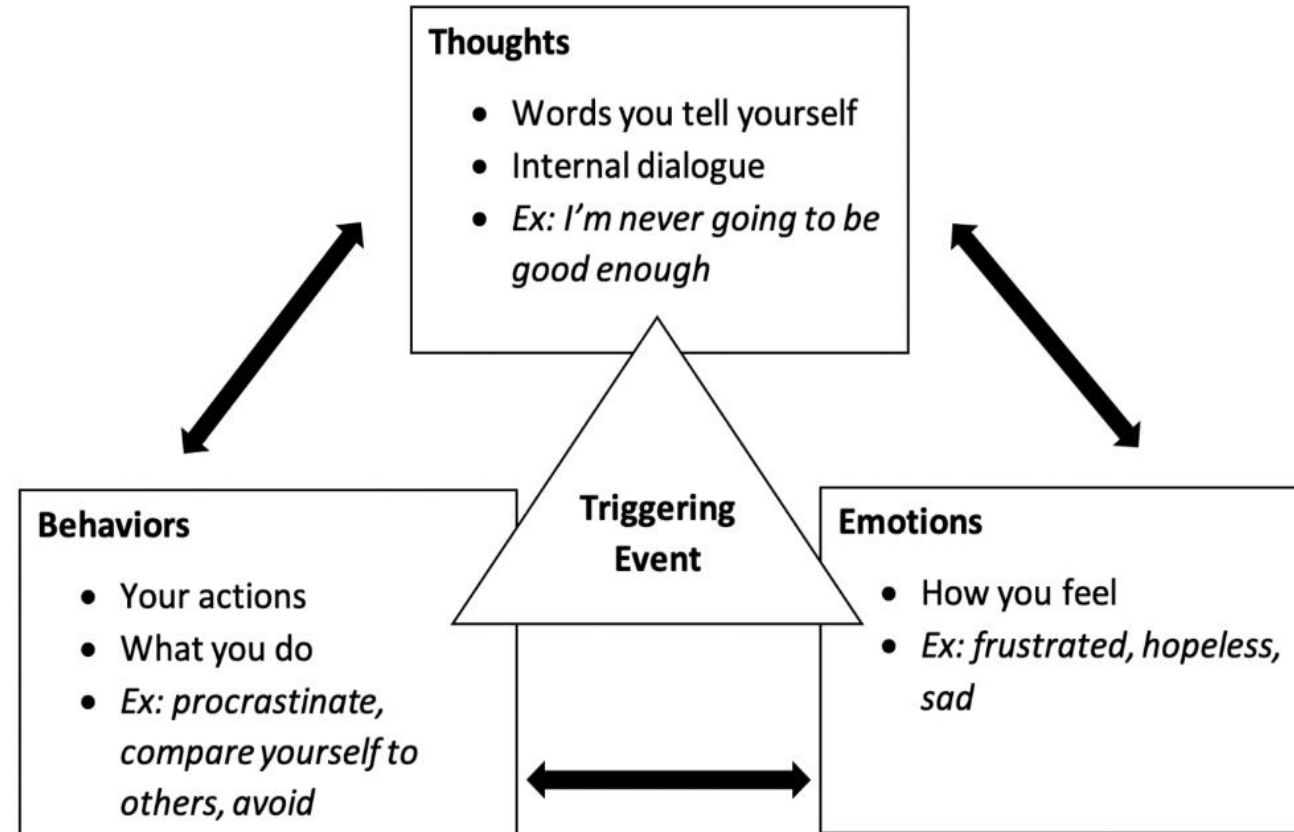


RYAN HOLIDAY

Author of the #1 New York Times Bestseller *Stillness Is the Key*

*God grant me the
serenity to accept the
things I cannot change.
Courage to change the
things I can, and the wisdom
to know the difference.*

CBT



Motivation follows action.
Commit to walking around the block.
If you go longer, great!



Social Connection

- Social workers promote access to a supportive social network in which one feels “a sense of belonging” (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010, p. 236).

- Making “changes in social networks that prompted greater self-esteem and confidence” linked to maintaining long-term recovery (Best, 2011, p. 372)
- Sharing pain-inducing activities promotes bonding (Bastian et al., 2014)
- 6/6: social support a key element of their recovery (not all found this in running)
- 3/6: running as providing opportunities to deepen the connections that also exist outside of their running lives



Walk & Talks

Pros: Side by side vs. facing each other in
'mental health office'

Benefits of movement

Challenges: at times, reduced
confidentiality

Running into people we know

Displaying intense emotional behaviour in
public

**Social workers meet clients where they are at and walk
alongside them towards their goals**

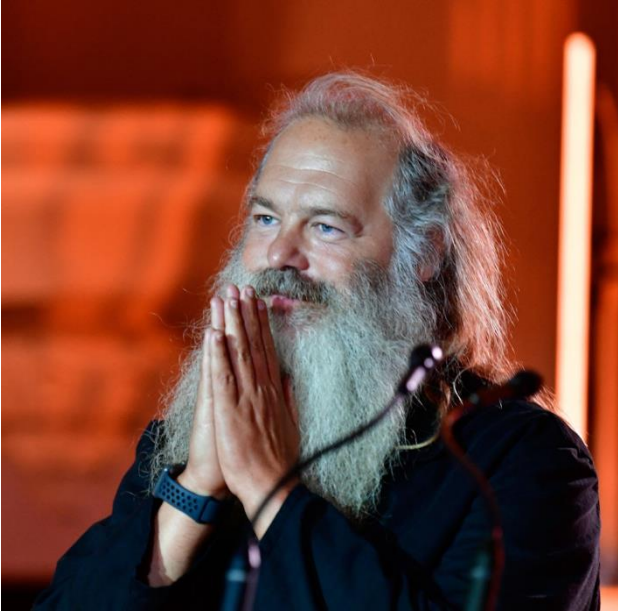




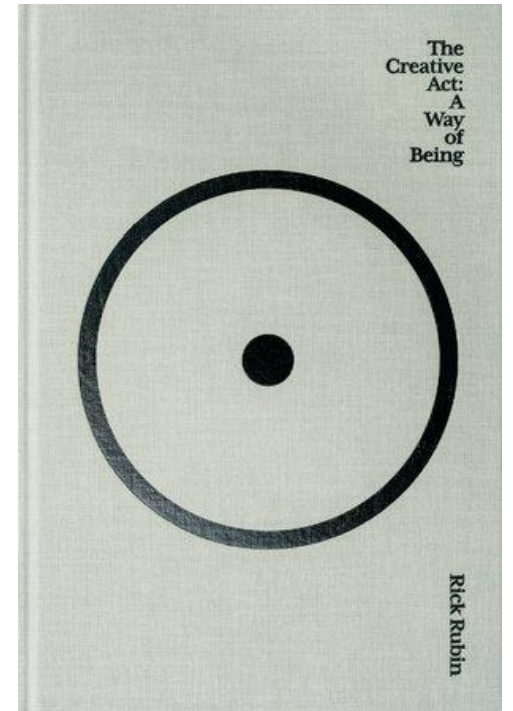
Goal Setting and Achievement

- Becoming “comfortable with being uncomfortable” (Melemis, 2015, p. 327)
- The further we push ourselves into discomfort, the more we realize we are capable of. This tends to make us try even harder. (Bandura, 1977)
- Self-efficacy gained in one activity transfers to other areas of our life (Bandura, 1977)

Spirituality



“If you prefer to think of spirituality as simply believing in connection, that’s fine. [...] The things we believe carry a charge regardless of whether they can be proven or not.



The practice of spirituality is a way of looking at a world where you’re not alone. There are deeper meanings behind the surface. The energy around you can be harnessed to elevate your work. You are part of something much larger than can be explained.” (Rubin, 2023)



Spirituality

Running has the power to improve our lives on a holistic level, positively affecting all four quadrants of the medicine wheel: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual

A sense of gratitude,
a feeling of appreciation for the natural world,
a connection with questions of the meaning of
one's life,
greater self-knowledge through overcoming one's
perceived limits,
and bonding with others (Jirásek, 2015)



Running as a grounding exercise: bringing us into the present moment

Mindfulness

- “A way of being”
- “A skill developed by deciding to slow down and taking the time to pay attention and be curious about things that we’re experiencing and things that we see around us.” (CMHA)

“Mindfulness was my way of dealing with pain in a way where not only was I able to survive the pain, I was able to thrive in it.” – George Mumford

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)



Created by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center “for chronically ill patients who were not responding well to traditional treatments [...] it is now used for a wide variety of reasons by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.” (Mindful Leader, 2024)

[Free Online MBSR Course](#)
[Klinik Life in Balance programming](#)

Identity




- Our sense of self changes in response to our environments (Koski-Jännes, 2002)
- Taking on healthy habits can change your life (Shinebourne and Smith, 2011)

WHEN YOU GET OLDER,
NO ONE EVER ASKS
WHAT YOUR FAVOURITE
DINOSAUR IS.



THEY DON'T EVEN CARE!



Rapid Access to Addictions Medicine

For general information about RAAM please
contact the Manitoba Addictions Helpline at:
1 (855) 662-6605 • mbaddictionhelp.ca

What is a RAAM Clinic and who is it for?

RAAM clinics are walk-in clinics for adults (ages 18+) looking to get help with high-risk substance use and addiction. No referral is needed.

This includes people who want to try medical assistance to reduce or stop their substance use. They may experience frequent intoxication or overdose symptoms, as well as unpleasant withdrawal symptoms when attempting to reduce or stop their substance use. RAAM clinics are also for people who may have substance-related health issues, such as hepatitis, pancreatitis and infections.

RAAM clinics are not for people needing urgent medical attention for serious physical problems or mental health symptoms such as psychosis (paranoia, delusions, hallucinations), agitation; who are at active risk of harm to self or others, or who require police/security involvement.

It can be very difficult to accept that your substance use is problematic, and it's normal to feel ashamed, frightened, or angry. But the good news is that medical treatment for problematic substance use and addiction is safe and effective.

You don't need an appointment, just show up during clinic hours. If you have a Manitoba Health card or Manitoba Health number, please bring this along.



Motivational Interviewing

Principle	Characteristics
Express Empathy	listen rather than talk; communicate respect for and acceptance of client
Avoid Argumentation	avoid confronting denial; encourage the client to make progress toward change
Roll With Resistance	divert or direct the client toward positive change; listen more carefully
Develop Discrepancy	promote the client's awareness of consequences of continued use; clarify how present behavior is in conflict with important goals
Support Self-Efficacy	elicit and support hope; encourage the client's capacity to reach their goals



We cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly accept what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed.”

- Carl Rogers

“Recovery has no endpoint; in fact, it is contingent on a process of ongoing change, of growth past the boundaries of the usual medical outcome of remission.”

- Dr. Carl Fisher

THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS?



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Images

Rick Rubin photo by Frazer Harrison/Getty Images for Spotify

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