



Psychological well-being in former drug users

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the dynamics of recovery among former drug users through the lens of psychological well-being, based on the six dimensions developed by Carol D. Ryff (1989): self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. A qualitative approach, employing a narrative case study design, was used to explore in depth the experiences of two primary informants who have been drug-free for over a year, along with two supporting informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and information gathering from various relevant sources. The findings indicate that the cessation of substance use does not solely mark recovery, but also involves the formation of a new identity, psychological growth, and meaningful social engagement. External factors such as family support, social acceptance, and participation in positive activities were found to contribute to sustained recovery. These results underscore the importance of a holistic recovery approach grounded in humanistic values and contextualized within the individual's social reality.

Keywords: psychological well-being, recovery, drug abuse, social

1. Introduction

The introduction has multiple paragraphs that encompass the subject being examined, its importance, and an Drug abuse is a complex issue that has wide-ranging impacts on various aspects of human life. Its effects are not only visible in an individual's physical and mental health but also extend to social, economic, and familial stability, as well as to the broader community. Data from the Badan Narkotika Nasional (BNN, 2024) show an increase in the prevalence of drug abuse in Indonesia, particularly among the young productive age group between 15 and 24 years, which rose from 1.44% in 2021 to 1.52% in 2023. This condition affirms that drugs are not merely a threat to individual health but also a serious risk to the psychological well-being and quality of life of the nation's younger generation. Therefore, drug abuse must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that requires a comprehensive, sustainable, and psychologically grounded recovery approach to address the problem effectively.

Recovery from drug addiction is not the end of a former user's journey, but rather the beginning of a new, equally challenging process. Many individuals who have completed rehabilitation often face greater social pressure when reintegrating into society. Negative stigma, discrimination, and social alienation frequently hinder their social adaptation. Research by Laudet (2007) shows that strong social support and community acceptance play a crucial role in maintaining post-rehabilitation recovery. In other words, recovery success is not only measured by abstinence from substance use but also by the individual's ability to rebuild a healthy, meaningful, and productive life within a social environment that may not always be accepting.

In this context, it is important to examine recovery from the perspective of psychological well-being, which emphasizes personal growth and life meaning rather than mere freedom from addiction symptoms. One comprehensive model for understanding psychological well-being was developed by Carol D. Ryff (1989), who formulated six core dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. This model provides a more humanistic perspective, viewing human beings as capable of growth and development despite past traumatic or destructive experiences. Using

this framework, the recovery process of former drug users can be seen as a journey toward self-actualization and holistic improvement in quality of life.

Previous studies support the importance of psychological approaches in understanding addiction recovery. For example, research by Best et al. (2012) emphasized that recovery success depends not only on cessation of substance use but also on recovery capital, which includes social support, positive lifestyle changes, and stable psychological conditions. Meanwhile, according to Mutiara (2010), psychological skills training during rehabilitation plays a crucial role in enhancing the self-efficacy of drug users. This increase in self-efficacy enables individuals to cope with stress and manage their behavior, thereby reducing the risk of relapse and facilitating adaptation to a healthier, more fulfilling life. In this context, psychological well-being is not only positioned as the ultimate outcome of recovery but also as a fundamental component that shapes and sustains the recovery process.

External factors such as family support, a supportive social environment, access to psychosocial services, and public policies that favor drug addiction survivors play important roles in recovery success and the enhancement of psychological well-being. Former drug users should not merely be seen as "ex-addicts," but as individuals in the process of becoming the best versions of themselves, both psychologically and socially. Society and the government must create an inclusive and empowering recovery ecosystem that promotes mental health and psychological well-being. Identity transformation becomes crucial in this process, where individuals begin to view themselves not through the lens of their past, but through the potential future they can achieve with proper support and guidance (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

This study aims to describe the life transformation process of two former drug users from the perspective of psychological well-being. Specifically, it aims to identify how the dimensions of Ryff's theory manifest in their experiences and to explore the factors that support and inhibit their psychological recovery and growth processes. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the participants' subjective experiences will be deeply explored to gain a comprehensive and contextual understanding of their recovery dynamics. The findings of this research are expected to provide practical contributions in designing more humanistic and effective rehabilitation and psychological intervention strategies.

Understanding psychological well-being as a central aspect of recovery shifts the perspective toward former drug users, from merely focusing on "healing" to emphasizing "empowerment." This approach values the diversity of life experiences and the potential of each individual to rise, grow, and contribute to society again. This view aligns with Ryff (2014), who stated that psychological well-being is closely related to life meaning and positive relationships with others, and that everyone has the capacity to build a meaningful life despite a complicated past.

Recovery from drug addiction is not the end of a struggle, but a long journey toward balance, self-awareness, and the development of human potential. By understanding psychological well-being and its components, we can view addiction survivors not as "victims" or "offenders," but as individuals transforming their lives for the better. Therefore, it is crucial for psychologists, social workers, and policymakers to design recovery programs that focus not only on treatment but also on empowerment and approaches that uphold the dignity of every individual.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological well-being of former drug addicts after undergoing rehabilitation. The case study approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are difficult to distinguish (Yin, 2012).

The qualitative approach is used because it focuses on complex and subjective realities. The researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and directly analyzing data in the field, utilizing multiple data sources to enhance data validity (Sugiyono, 2019). This study focuses on individuals' personal experiences and how they rebuild their quality of life following rehabilitation.

The research was conducted in the city of Surakarta in June 2025, a location where the subjects live their daily lives with stable recovery and active participation in social activities. Informants were selected purposively, based on their relevance to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2019). The primary informants were two male former drug users who had been drug-free for at least one year, were physically and mentally healthy, capable of good communication, and willing to openly share their experiences. Supporting informants included family members and rehabilitation companions to complement the data.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. The interviews provided an opportunity for informants to share their stories freely within the scope of the topic. At the same time, observations were used to record the subjects' behaviors and social interactions in their daily

lives. To ensure data validity, data were collected from multiple sources and methods, with confirmation of interview results through observations and information from other parties (Sugiyono, 2019). Interview transcripts and field notes formed the basis of analysis to ensure that the research findings truly reflected the subjects' actual conditions and possessed high credibility.

3. Result

This study aims to explore in depth the recovery process of two former drug users, F (41 years old) and H (46 years old), using the framework of psychological well-being developed by Carol Ryff (1989). The primary focus of this research is to understand how these two individuals reconstruct the meaning of life, identity, and social relationships after going through a long and complex phase of drug addiction. In this regard, Ryff's six dimensions of psychological well-being — self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth — are used as lenses to analyze the dynamics of psychological change they experienced.

The approach used in this study is a narrative approach, which involves exploring the informants' subjective experiences through the life stories they openly share. These personal narratives serve as a crucial tool to uncover the deeper meaning of the recovery process, including internal conflicts, motivations for change, and struggles in rebuilding a healthier mental, social, and spiritual life. This approach aligns with the ideas of Lieblich et al. (1998), who argue that life narratives reflect an individual's identity and psychological structure, particularly during significant life transitions.

To enhance the validity and depth of the data, the researcher also conducted interviews with two supporting informants, R and D, who are close acquaintances of each of the main subjects. The inclusion of these supporting informants aims to strengthen the credibility of the main narratives through data collection from multiple sources, while also providing external perspectives on the behavioral and psychological changes experienced by F and H. Collecting data from various sources is essential in qualitative research, as it enriches understanding of the subjects' social and psychological contexts more holistically (Patton, 2002).

By integrating psychological and narrative approaches, this study not only highlights the behavioral aspects of recovery but also explores deeper existential dimensions, such as the meaning of life, spiritual values, and the reconstruction of identity following rehabilitation. The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of more humanistic, value-based recovery intervention approaches that holistically consider the psychological well-being of individuals.

Table 1: Main Informants' Identity

Informan	Age	Highest Education Level	Gender
F	41 years old	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Male
H	46 years old	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Male

Table 2: Supporting Informants' Identity

Informan	Age	Highest Education Level	Gender	Role
R	41 years old	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Male	Close Friend
D	46 years old	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Male	Close Friend

Self-Acceptance

Both informants, F and H, have complex and severe backgrounds of drug use. They did not consume only one type of substance but a variety, including marijuana, methamphetamine, heroin, putaw, and pil koplo (sedative pills). F even admitted to having sold his car and other valuable possessions to buy methamphetamine, a confession that reflects the depth of his addiction and a highly destructive lifestyle.

However, in their current narratives, both F and H display an attitude of acceptance toward their past without excessive denial or shame. Instead, they have turned those dark experiences into a foundation for building a better and more meaningful life.

F stated:

"I once sold my car to buy meth... but that is my past. Now I am free, calm, and focused on my family."

Meanwhile, H also said:

"For me personally, I do not want to dwell on my dark past. It is enough to take it as a lesson. Now, my life is for my family and finding ways to provide for them."

This attitude demonstrates genuine self-acceptance, in which an individual no longer denies parts of their past but instead accepts them realistically and regards them as an integral part of their psychological growth. Within the framework of Ryff's (1989) theory, self-acceptance is a key indicator of mature mental health, marked by one's ability to evaluate oneself positively while also acknowledging the negative aspects of life experiences.

Supporting this, Khaira and Retnowati (2016) found that former drug addicts who have undergone rehabilitation experience positive growth after enduring difficult times. They learn to accept their painful past experiences, cope with the pressures of addiction, and manage their emotions more effectively. This process helps them become mentally stronger and develop into more mature individuals.

Positive Relations with Others

After being released from prison, F and H actively rebuilt the social relationships that had previously been damaged. They regularly conduct drug awareness sessions in villages, schools, and government institutions such as the Social Services Office, at least once a month. These activities serve not only as a form of social contribution but also as a means to strengthen their renewed positive identities in the eyes of society. At first, they had to face stigma and suspicion from their surroundings. F expressed:

"At the beginning, people were doubtful. However, we kept going, continued to participate in activities, and often joined social work initiatives, such as community clean-ups, neighborhood service, and occasionally night patrols. Now, people often ask me to help with socialization programs."

This testimony was supported by additional informants, R and D. R mentioned that F has undergone significant change. However, some residual physical effects from his past remain, such as suddenly falling asleep and snoring loudly, sometimes even drooling. Meanwhile, D observed H's transformation into a Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher who inspires his students, driven by his deep love for his family.

"Yes, we are grateful. He is now a guidance counselor at one of the local high schools, and he frequently motivates his students. He draws his strength from his love for his family, especially his wife and children." (D)

This supportive social relationship is crucial in the recovery process. Laudet (2007) emphasized that the presence of social support, particularly from family and community, is one of the most significant factors in sustaining long-term recovery from addiction. This finding reinforces the understanding that recovery is not an individual process, but one that is deeply influenced by a supportive social system.

Autonomy

One of the key indicators of sustainable recovery is the presence of strong internal motivation that is not solely based on external pressure. Both informants clearly demonstrated this attitude. For instance, F made a vow to God that if he were granted an early release from prison before completing his one-year sentence, he would devote himself to serving in the church. Eventually, he was released after nine months and kept his promise by actively engaging in voluntary church service.

F stated:

"I once made a vow that if my sentence could be reduced to less than a year, I would devote myself to the church voluntarily, even without payment. That felt like an answer from God, and it really came true."

H, on the other hand, rebuilt his spirituality while in prison through Hindu religious activities. He not only strengthened himself spiritually but also became a motivator for fellow inmates:

"I believe life can change, and I often gave motivation to my friends in prison, because from that they could be inspired, 'Oh, there is someone who has managed to break free from drug dependence and change.' From there, I just gave them insight, but the rest was up to them; they had to be willing to change, with the intention coming from within themselves."

This autonomy in decision-making aligns with Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), which posits that autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation. When individuals perceive that change originates from their own desires and personal values, rather than from external pressure, such change tends to be more enduring and meaningful.

Environmental Mastery

F and H have demonstrated a high capacity for adaptation to social environments that initially rejected them. F is now actively involved as a band guitarist, regularly participates in social activities, and serves as a drug awareness counselor in various forums. Similarly, H also works as a drug awareness counselor in several

forums while fulfilling his role as a guidance counselor (BK teacher). Both have successfully built environments that support their personal growth and the development of a new, positive identity.

F expressed:

"I realized that, well, it is not easy for people to trust me again. However, I thought to myself, if I wait until people trust me first before I change, my life will never move forward. So, I just started living a new life, joining social activities, serving at church, and staying active in the band. Over time, people could see the change for themselves. Now, I am often invited to community events or awareness programs. At first, of course, the environment did not immediately accept me... but I have proven myself little by little."

Meanwhile, H also said:

"When I first got out, it felt like... yeah, like being a stranger in my own neighborhood. It was really awkward. So, I tried to adapt gradually, starting by talking with the locals, joining community clean-ups, and participating in Independence Day celebrations. Sometimes I also give socialization sessions to students, because like it or not, we have to adapt quickly too."

The Environmental Mastery dimension, as defined by Ryff (1989), refers to an individual's ability to effectively manage and organize daily life while feeling capable of handling environmental demands. Keyes et al. (2002) also emphasized that environmental mastery is closely related to one's capacity to build social role control and utilize growth opportunities. In this context, F and H have demonstrated their ability to create new safe spaces that strengthen their recovery journeys.

Purpose in Life

Both individuals now possess a far clearer sense of direction and life vision compared to their past. For F, his commitment to the vow he made while in prison became a central reason for his transformation. His family, particularly his wife, who has supported him from beginning to end, has become the core of his new sense of meaning in life, as well as his primary motivation to stay away from drugs and continue sharing with others. Meanwhile, H has developed a strong commitment to making his family happy and living a life guided by healthy and meaningful values. F stated:

"My life now is for my family, especially my wife... In the past, I only thought about myself, finding meth, selling stuff, cars, even our house, it was that bad... I did not care. But my wife never left me, even at my lowest point. Now I am fulfilling my vow, participating in church ministry, and my goal is to send my three children to school. If they want to go to college, I will support them, but if not, like my first child, that's fine too... my task now is to ensure all my children finish school."

Meanwhile, H also said:

"Back then, when I first got into drugs, it was when I was single—life had no direction during those dark times. After I got married, my wife became the reason I rose again. Now I am grateful to be a guidance counselor, and sometimes I share my story so my students feel motivated and do not fall into the same mistakes I did."

Their statements reflect that this new sense of meaning, centered on family, service, and sharing experiences, has become an essential foundation in their recovery journey from drug dependence. These findings are consistent with the study by Hasanah et al. (2023), which revealed that individuals who succeed in constructing new meaning after experiencing hardship or trauma tend to show positive psychological development and possess stronger mental resilience in facing life's challenges.

Personal Growth

The transformation of identity experienced by both informants is evident not only in their behavioral changes but also in their perspectives on life and themselves. From individuals who were once trapped in drug dependence and had lost their sense of direction, they have now grown into respected public figures and even agents of change within their communities.

F stated:

"In the past, before I changed like I am now, I didn't know God. However, after making the vow and promise at that time, I came to know God and wanted to devote myself to the church. I also have a hobby of playing the guitar, as I used to play in a band with friends before being imprisoned. My potential lies in the music world... Sometimes, when there's a job to be done, we perform; we also engage in socialization through music, so it doesn't get boring. However, if there's no job, we usually hang out around the Ngarsopuro area in Solo with the band members."

Meanwhile, H also said:

"As for now, my potential is... I want to focus on my family first while also working side jobs, because as a guidance counselor, I only teach twice a week. Since I have a passion for music, I offer private guitar lessons, which is a profitable side job with a flexible schedule. For each session, I set a rate of 100,000 rupiah, and it depends on the customer's preferred time." (H)

This process demonstrates the presence of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG), a concept introduced by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), which refers to a substantial positive development experienced by individuals as a result of struggling with crises or trauma. PTG encompasses five dimensions: enhanced relationships, personal strength, appreciation of life, spiritual transformation, and the discovery of new meaning, all of which are evident in the narratives of participants F and H.

The findings reveal that recovery from drug dependence is not merely about ceasing substance use, but also involves a holistic process of rebuilding one's life, encompassing self-identity, social relationships, life purpose, and societal roles. In this context, Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being is beneficial for comprehensively understanding the recovery process, as it emphasizes essential aspects such as self-acceptance, healthy interpersonal relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth with a sense of meaning.

F and H, as participants, demonstrated that the changes they experienced did not occur instantly but through a reflective and gradual process. Engagement in social activities, spiritual strengthening, and family support emerged as crucial factors in sustaining their journey. This aligns with McIntosh & McKeganey's (2000) perspective, which highlights that recovery is closely related to the formation of a new identity and the development of meaningful social connections.

Therefore, genuine recovery should be understood as a holistic process rather than merely a medical or psychological effort. Community support, social acceptance, and the individual's active role in rebuilding their life are key elements to ensuring that recovery remains sustainable and generates a positive impact, both for the individuals themselves and for their surrounding environment.

4. Discussion

Recovery from drug addiction is not merely about stopping substance use, but rather a comprehensive process of rebuilding one's life psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Based on the findings of this study, the dimensions within Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being have been shown to effectively represent how individuals who have experienced addiction can recover and grow meaningfully.

Through the six main aspects—self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy in decision making, environmental mastery, a clear sense of purpose in life, and personal growth. Both participants underwent a process of continuous positive transformation. They not only succeeded in overcoming dependence but also actively built healthy social relationships, developed stronger spiritual lives, and made positive contributions to their communities.

External factors, such as family support, participation in social activities, and the opportunity to be accepted by society again, play a crucial role in maintaining the stability of their recovery. These findings reinforce the view that the recovery process should not be perceived solely from a medical or clinical perspective, but also from a humanistic standpoint, one that values personal meaning and individual potential.

Therefore, psychological well-being should not be seen merely as the ultimate goal of recovery, but rather as an integral part of the journey itself. To ensure that this process is significant and sustainable, it requires systemic support that facilitates holistic individual growth through the roles of family, community, and more inclusive public policies.

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