

# Gratitude and Positive Activity Planning to Support Recovery from Alcohol and Substance Use Disorders

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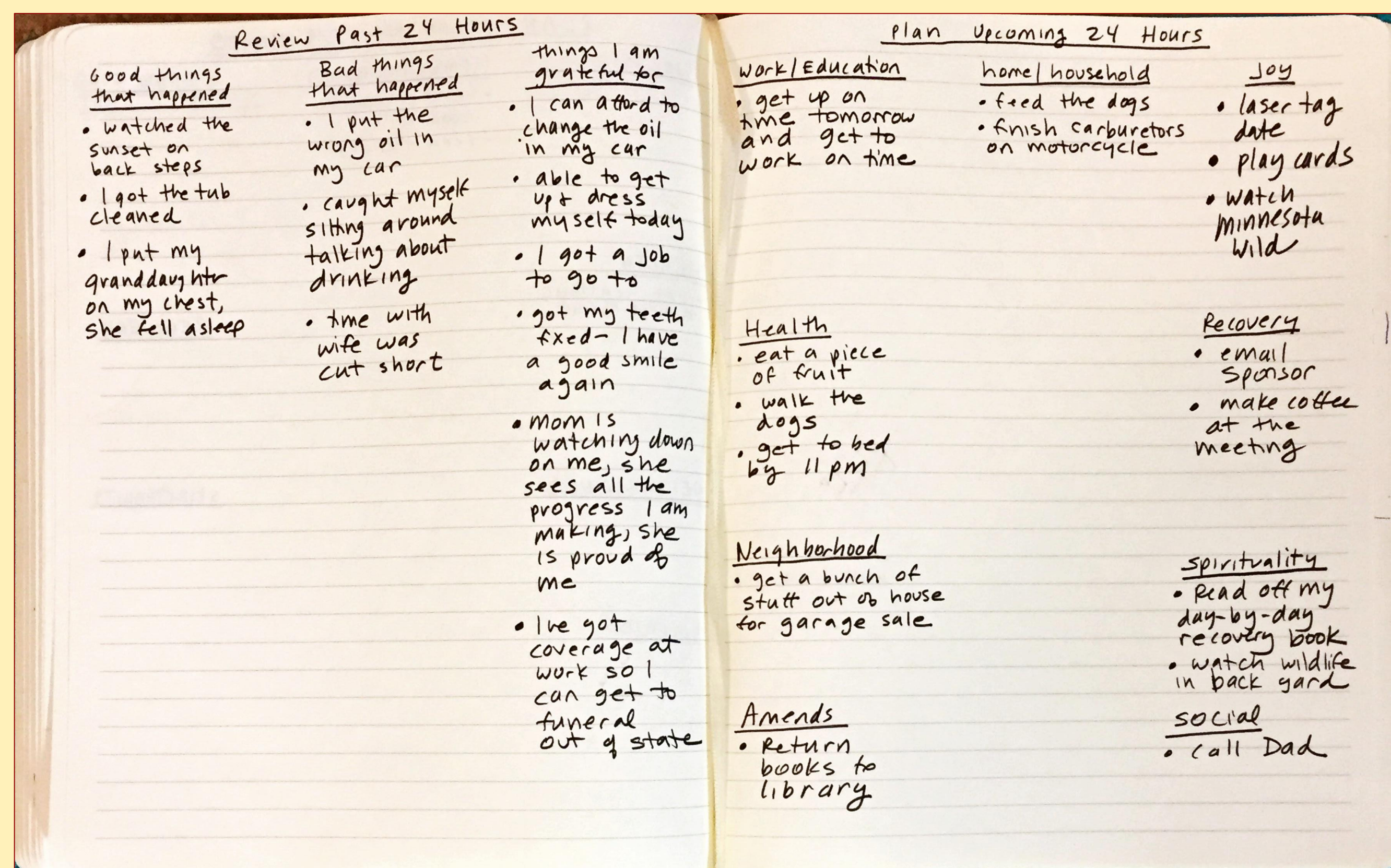
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## Introduction

- Enhancing quality of life during early abstinence is a compelling strategy for reducing relapse.
- Gratitude practices have been shown to improve affect (Dickens, 2017; Krentzman et al., 2015).
- Activity scheduling has been shown to promote enjoyment of daily activities (Daughters et al., 2008).
- Journaling helps express emotion leading to better health outcomes (Smyth, 1998).

## Intervention

- We developed a brief journaling intervention to encourage past 24 hour review and upcoming 24 hour planning to improve quality of life in recovery and reduce relapse.
- The journaling practice uses standard lined journals with column headings under which individuals make bullet-pointed lists.
- On the left-hand page, past 24 hours is recalled, itemizing “good” and “bad” things that happened and things for which one is grateful.
- On the right-hand page, activities for the upcoming 24 hours are planned via headings representing valued life domains.



## Setting and Sample (N=33)

- Rural counties, upper Midwestern USA
- 61% individuals in recovery, 15% treatment providers, 24% treatment providers in recovery; length of abstinence 11 days to 36 years (M=11 years, SD=13 years)
- 55% female
- 18-73 years of age (M=50 years, SD=16 years)
- 88% white, 12% other (black, Latino/a, multiracial)
- Education: 24% high school diploma, 27% bachelors degree, 9% masters degree
- Never married 36%, married 24%, divorced 30%

## Method

- In-depth semi-structured interviews to ascertain perspectives of the journaling practice.
- The journaling practice was presented and briefly practiced by participants.
- Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, analyzed for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and interpreted for relationships among themes.

## Questions We Asked

- What are your observations and thoughts about this journaling practice?
- How can this practice be helpful to individuals in recovery, if at all?
- What might be a downside to this practice, if any?

## Results

<b>Overall, the journaling practice was perceived to be feasible and acceptable...</b>	<b>Feasibility</b> 79% found the practice feasible, e.g.: “nothing too difficult,” “faster than I thought it would be,” “a really easy way to journal,” “simple,” “all on one page instead of all over the place,” easier than looking at a “blank sheet of paper” wondering “what do they want?” <b>Acceptability</b> 82% offered favorable impressions: “This is just a marvelous piece,” “I love it” 27% initially had objections to “journaling” but liked the practice after thorough introduction: “That’s my kind of journaling. Just a phrase.” 21% were ready to get started “I’m so pumped, I’m going to buy a notebook after this” 18% expressed more moderate intentions: “I <u>should</u> show this [to the sober house manager],” “I <u>could</u> see using this for [my treatment group],” “I can ... talk to my sponsor ... and see how we could put it in play.”
<b>...with two exceptions: writing and planning, which garnered mixed reviews</b>	<b>Positive Views of Writing</b> Individuals felt <b>writing was beneficial</b> , you would “get it out of your head,” when you “write it down, you’ve released it” <b>Negative Views of Writing</b> <b>Apprehension related to writing:</b> “I have a hard time concentrating,” “writing and all that kind of stuff, I’m not so good at it,” “I don’t know how to spell” A practitioner stated, “Just knowing how hard [homework is], this looks insurmountable;” similarly, an individual in recovery said, “It’s paperwork so it’s overwhelming.” Practitioners mentioned <b>obstacles</b> such as <b>clients’ limited education:</b> “some of my clients only made it to 3rd grade so they get embarrassed to write stuff” and <b>cognitive disability:</b> “I have some TBI clients who call me three times a day with the same question.”
<b>The practice would aid recovery by increasing awareness of “what is” and focusing attention on both the positive and the negative</b>	<b>Increased awareness of what is:</b> “a vision...of my day and ... where I am,” “you’re aware of your day more,” “be more aware of themselves, and more aware of what’s going on in their life day to day,” <b>often acknowledging something that might otherwise go unnoticed:</b> “you put it down on paper and you face yourself with it;” “you get it out and you can see it, you can say, oh, yeah, that did happen today.” <b>Tracking the positive would...</b> <b>Draw attention to what’s going well:</b> “because when you’re journaling in recovery, you tend to just write about all the bad things that you’ve gone through” <b>Give one’s self credit for what is going right:</b> “map out and see your successes” <b>Increase awareness of positive change:</b> “I did that two weeks ago and now look where I am” <b>Provide opportunity to practice gratitude</b>
	<b>Positive Views of Planning</b> <b>Planning would help prioritize tasks...</b> “I didn’t have time for my walk today, moving it up on the priority list” ...and <b>provide reminders:</b> “it might remind me like, ‘well, why don’t you take two hours tomorrow and do [something joyful]?” <b>Negative Views of Planning</b> Planning might engender <b>burdensome thoughts</b> “I hate remembering what I have to do in my home” and could cause <b>disappointment:</b> “My fear would be, I’d start it and then wouldn’t follow through...it would feed into my negative thoughts;” “I don’t want to set myself up for too many projects.” For some, <b>“tomorrow” seemed uncertain:</b> “I don’t know if I am going to ... be able to ... do things ... because you don’t know if you are going to make it today.”
	<b>Tracking the negative would:</b> <b>Identify issues that need attention:</b> “what I need to work on and change” <b>Put negative things into perspective:</b> “the dog peed on the floor...like how big is that compared to me going through withdrawals 9 months ago” <b>Inspire improvement:</b> “tomorrow I’m going to try harder”

## Discussion and Conclusions

- For many, the journal would feel validating and function as a mirror, providing perspective on past, present, and future self.
- Increased awareness of the good and bad from “today” could inform intentions and planning for the future.
- Participants valued the ability to track the negative as well as the positive.
- For some clients, poor literacy might pose a significant obstacle.
- Planning for the future was disagreeable for some.
- Participants found the left side of the page (past 24 h review) more acceptable and feasible than the right side of the page (future planning). Standardized behavioral activation therapy for substance use, involving activity planning, has been found to be acceptable to participants with high rates of treatment retention (Daughters et al., 2008, 2017; Magidson, 2011). Further work should reconcile the difficulties found in the current study with previous research where similar tasks were more acceptable.
- Future work will examine the efficacy of integrating gratitude journaling into existing standardized behavioral activation therapy for substance use, namely LETS ACT (Daughters et al., 2008, 2017; Magidson, 2011).

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