

A woman from the chest down to the waist is shown wearing a bright pink tank top. She is holding a large, textured red heart with both hands in front of her. The background is a plain, light grey color.

[GIRL] FRIEND OF BILL

12 Things
You Need to Know about
Dating Someone
in Recovery

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Some names, details, and circumstances have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

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For Reta and Ray,
my parents and biggest cheerleaders.
And for my faithful writing companions:
Dot, my “laptop cat,” and
Annie and Lady Thiang, my angels.

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Introduction

I've dated a number of guys in recovery. Maybe it's my personality type on the e-dating questionnaires; maybe it's my involvement in a type of church to which many in recovery go; or maybe it's my amazing ability to attract what I need to work on myself. (Patience, for instance, was never a virtue for me, but sometimes it's just what you need when you're in a relationship with someone in recovery.) At any rate, it's been a real learning experience.

When I first started dating Steve, I knew very little about him. I knew he was in recovery. I knew he attended Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings every night, and I knew he was originally from my hometown area. He had a son from a previous marriage. He seemed like a lot of fun. He liked tennis and so do I, and I confess he was one handsome dude! But I did have questions about protocol while dating a person in recovery, and later, about why he did some of the things he did.

Steve was really funny and very generous, and he had a good heart. On the outside, he appeared to be perfectly

normal. I figured, “Well, he isn’t drinking, so everything must be okay, right?” Later on I realized that some of his behaviors that were odd, different, and sometimes hard to deal with were related to his addiction disorder. I had no idea that simply stopping drinking or using other drugs does not automatically prevent other addictive behaviors from occurring.

How I wished I’d been given a manual of sorts that explained it all! I found plenty of books for people in recovery, and some books for people already in a relationship with someone in recovery, but nothing specifically for someone who is new to such a relationship or who is thinking about dating someone in recovery.

I decided to write the book that I’d needed back when I first met Steve. It’s based on my experiences dating people in recovery (I’ll use “PIR” or “PIRs” throughout the book to represent a person in recovery or people in recovery) and my involvement with recovery groups. It includes interviews with others who shared their experiences about dating someone in recovery. How differently I would have handled many situations had I known that many of Steve’s behaviors were common for those with an addiction disorder, that they were often predictable, and—with the right kind of support—that they were even manageable. On the other hand, had I known then what I now know about addiction and recovery, I may not have chosen to stay in that particular relationship as long as I did.

People in Twelve Step recovery often call themselves “friends of Bill,” a reference to Bill W., the cofounder of AA. Being a “friend of Bill” is a sort of code for those in recovery who want to protect anonymity by not having to say they’re

in AA. For example, if a recovering alcoholic is at a party and they see someone else who's not drinking, they may eventually ask, "Are you a friend of Bill?" If the answer is yes, then both people know they are "in the program" and have something in common. When I dated someone who was seriously working a recovery program, that reality loomed so large in our relationship that it affected my actions and reactions to him and how we interacted as a couple. If he was a "friend of Bill," I felt like I had become, by extension, a "girlfriend of Bill," which explains this book's title. If your boyfriend or girlfriend is also in a recovery program, we also have something in common. So I say, "Welcome to the club."

If you're reading this book, you're probably dating or thinking about dating someone in recovery, and you want to learn more about recovery—especially how it may affect your dating experience and relationship with that person. I've included what I think are the twelve most important things to know or consider when dating someone in recovery from an addiction disorder. (I am specifically referring to alcoholism and drug addiction—I'm not including behavioral addictions like gambling or sex, although much of what I talk about probably applies to those too.)

1. Not all recovering people are alike
2. Addiction is a disease
3. Twelve Step recovery makes sense
4. Why some people call Steps Four through Ten the "relationship" Steps
5. Addictive behaviors don't magically disappear
6. How addictive traits can affect a relationship
7. Codependency is common, so healthy boundaries are essential

8. Emotional sobriety is an ongoing process
9. How spirituality can help
10. Relapse is a possibility
11. You can still have fun on dates
12. Some things to consider if the relationship gets serious

Of course, not all PIRs have all of the behaviors that are discussed in this book. Also keep in mind that you might meet your boyfriend or girlfriend after they've had many years of sobriety and have worked diligently on these behaviors. But no matter what stage they may be at in their recovery journey, perhaps learning about addiction and recovery can build a bridge to better understanding and open the door to more honest communication between the two of you.

When PIRs continue to “work their program”—which basically means going to Twelve Step meetings and applying the Steps in their lives (more about that later)—they also work to uncover parts of themselves that were hidden by their addictions. They usually learn to trust once again after having lost that ability during their drinking and using years, and most PIRs develop or deepen their spiritual lives, since that's at the heart of the Twelve Step program. Ideally, they are learning to be open to a new way of living. These skills can be wonderfully beneficial in a dating (or any) relationship. Also, many people in recovery are quite sensitive to others' feelings and needs because they've spent so much time in deep reflection and self-examination. “A sensitive man?” you women readers might be saying. “It's every woman's wish!” “A woman who doesn't try to ‘fix’ or change

me?” you male readers might be thinking. “She’d be the perfect date!”

For me, it was important to know how my boyfriend Steve got to where he was, and this knowledge helped me learn about the biological, psychological, and social factors that make up addiction. I include that information in this book, and I also discuss what I’ve learned about recovery by giving an overview of AA, Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, and the practical wisdom of the Twelve Steps, including some popular slogans and affirmations. I hope you’ll find, as I did, that learning about addiction and Twelve Step recovery can not only help you support your PIR, it can also help you help yourself.

There are stories throughout the book from people I know who are in recovery, from their significant others, and from books I’ve read. The partners of those in recovery gave me great tips based on how they’ve handled many of their PIRs’ issues. The people I interviewed who are in recovery gave me firsthand information on what they were feeling and thinking as they dealt with these issues, and how they overcame many of them. I am grateful for their honesty, candor, and generosity in sharing their stories. I also include examples from my own relationships, including what I did to (gulp) enable my PIRs’ behavior. I’ve changed names and any information that might identify these people to protect their anonymity.

I am a member of a church that is very open to Twelve Step programs, and I thought I was knowledgeable about what my friends in recovery went through—but I was not. So it’s no surprise that I was unprepared to pursue a dating relationship with a person in recovery. I soon found out that

when it came to dating these people, I was both a “wuss,” in terms of being honest with my feelings, and a control freak. (Coincidentally, these can be addictive characteristics.) You, too, might find that you have your own set of issues that are eerily similar to those of your partner. If so, take heart—learning about addiction and recovery can provide a huge opportunity for your own personal growth, if you are brave enough to examine your own behaviors to see if they help or hinder your desire to build a strong relationship. My main goal in writing this book was to help people like you with that process.

Knowledge is both clarifying and empowering. I hope the information in this book will help you make healthy decisions about the person you are dating, and will also help both of you work together in a positive way. Blessings on your journey!

[1]

**Not All
Recovering
People
Are Alike**



I N THESE PAGES you'll read many stories about my friends who are in recovery, as well as stories about two of the five men I dated who were in recovery. I met many of these friends and one boyfriend in a "recovery friendly" church in which I was the music director, but since I wasn't in recovery myself, I didn't really know at the time what recovery meant. Their groups sounded more than a little mysterious to me. Was their recovery the same as recovering from a sprained ankle or from a cold? All I knew was that my friends were following something called the Twelve Steps, and that these Steps were so popular that they were even included in some of our non-recovery church programs.

What I found out was that being in recovery from an addictive substance is not at all like recovering from a knee injury, hip surgery, or a broken heart. I discovered I wasn't the only one who was confused. For a lot of years, even many people in the field of addiction studies were of the opinion that recovery from alcohol and other drugs simply meant being abstinent—getting "clean and sober." But in

recent years, research has shown that effective recovery includes much more than abstinence.

Here is the definition of *recovery* that came from a panel convened by the Betty Ford Center, a well-respected leader in the recovery movement:

Recovery from substance dependence is a voluntarily maintained lifestyle characterized by sobriety, personal health and citizenship.¹

In this definition, *sobriety* means abstinence from alcohol and all other nonprescribed mood-altering drugs. *Personal health* is about an improved quality of life that includes physical health, psychological health, and independence, as well as spirituality—a sense of something bigger than you that gives life meaning. And *citizenship* refers to living with regard and respect for others.

This definition of recovery strikes me as holistic and positive. And the reference to recovery being “voluntary” is always a good reminder to me that, although we can support, befriend, and love them, people in recovery (PIRs) are ultimately responsible for their own recovery.

People in recovery from alcohol and other drugs come from all walks of life and backgrounds. Some of them (the “friends of Bill” I mentioned in the introduction to this book) attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and follow a recovery program that is based on the Twelve Steps—established principles and practices that offer a blueprint for living a healthy, drug- and alcohol-free life. In addition to AA and NA, there are Twelve Step groups that focus on a particular drug, such as Marijuana Anonymous, Pills Anonymous, and Cocaine Anonymous

(which is open to all people who desire to be clean and sober regardless of their drug of choice). In addition, there are support groups for people with co-occurring addiction and mental health disorders: Double Trouble in Recovery, Dual Diagnosis Anonymous, and Dual Recovery Anonymous.

Although I focus on Twelve Step recovery in this book, your PIR may attend a recovery group that offers alternatives to the Twelve Steps, such as SMART Recovery, Women for Sobriety, or Secular Organizations for Sobriety. Some PIRs prefer support groups that are made up of people from their same occupation, such as Physicians Serving Physicians, Peer Assistance Program for Nurses, Accountants Concerned for Accountants, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Dentists Concerned for Dentists, or Pharmacists Helping Pharmacists. Other PIRs have found the ongoing support they need in groups at their church, at their synagogue or temple, in their mental health peer support or therapy group, or in a support group based on a nonreligious spiritual path.

PIRs can range from highly educated to barely educated, from rich to poor, from young to old. They can come from seemingly normal families or totally dysfunctional families. They can be male or female, be of different races, be heterosexual or from the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community. Some PIRs are very religious and active in their faith communities. Others might consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Some might be atheists or agnostics. In other words, there is no single way to categorize PIRs. They are as varied as the general population.

You may have heard the old adage “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” As I mentioned earlier, even a PIR wouldn’t

know at first, or even second, glance if someone they meet is recovering from an addictive disorder. How much easier it would be if the stunningly beautiful woman you're interested in had a "Recovering Alcoholic" tattoo on her right arm, or if the cute guy you flirted with at the gym wore a "Recovering Meth Addict" tee shirt. PIRs can be charming and smart, quick to have a funny retort, very social, and have many other attractive traits. I laugh out loud at some of the witty comments my friend Sandy comes up with. On the other hand, PIRs can have some downright irritating traits: for example, my friend Don can be a walking wave of negativity. Everyone is different.

I have many friends in recovery, all of them with unique issues and personalities. I've also dated five men in various stages of recovery. Three of these men were not following their program, and I decided not to date them any further. Mike, three years sober, stopped going to meetings, declaring, "Hey, I know I'm not going to drink or use again, so I don't need that stuff anymore." Another one, Pat, decided that beer didn't really affect him as much as pot did, so, even though he wasn't smoking pot, he'd occasionally have a beer or two. He also had a pretty loose lifestyle, living with whatever woman he was currently dating and not accepting responsibility for his children. I knew right away that these guys weren't for me, and I hope they have not *relapsed* (started drinking or using again—more about that later).

Because you've read this far, I assume you're dating or thinking about dating someone in recovery. Perhaps your PIR attends AA or NA meetings, maybe even every night. If they are going to AA, they will most likely be reading and following *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the basic text of AA, more

commonly referred to as the Big Book. The Big Book was first published in 1939 by the two men who founded AA to show other alcoholics “precisely how we have recovered.”²

Or your PIR might be attending NA. The Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous was formed in the 1950s when some people who were addicted to drugs other than alcohol (or in addition to alcohol) realized they could benefit from their own support group. In 1962, they published their own basic text, *Narcotics Anonymous*. It too uses the Twelve Steps as a basis of its recovery program, and today there are thousands of NA meetings in the United States and in many foreign countries.

The first chapters of both the Big Book and *Narcotics Anonymous* describe how their programs work and include details on the Twelve Steps. In the latter part of each book, one can find many stories about people in recovery and how they came to their recovery. What an array of personalities and circumstances!

The stories reflect the variety of people in recovery. For example, in the Big Book, an African American physician who lost almost everything to alcohol tells how he became sober and helped start the first black AA group.³ A stay-at-home mother describes how she hid her bottles in clothes hampers and dresser drawers in her home.⁴ A Native American woman with a troubled past tells how she was rescued by a caring “angel” of a woman in a Laundromat.⁵

In *Narcotics Anonymous*, an Orthodox Jew tells how recovery helped him forge a new relationship with his Higher Power.⁶ (The concept of a Higher Power will be discussed more fully in chapter 3.) A Kenyan boy who lived on the streets talks about how he felt like he had finally found a

home in NA.⁷ A Mexican woman tells how she walked through the doors of NA and was treated with more love and respect than she'd ever had before.⁸

You may already know some people who attend Twelve Step meetings, or you may be new to the world of recovery. If you become involved with a PIR, you will most likely get to know a couple of your partner's friends who will have similar stories. That happened to me, and I also met a variety of other PIRs on my own over the years. Some of these folks have become longtime friends to me, and each of them has their own unique stories.

One dear friend is Mark, who is from a Puerto Rican family that settled in New York. He's been clean and sober nine years now. He has chronic depression and struggles sometimes with balancing his prescribed medications. He's sensitive, kind, and spiritual, and I treasure our friendship.

Denise was a professional actress in New York, but returned to her native North Carolina for recovery and family purposes. She is hysterically funny and enormously talented. She also battles depression.

Joe was a former teacher who became an addictions counselor after he got sober. He died recently, and scores of folks he had helped attended his memorial service. One young lady tearfully claimed, "Joe saved my life."

Josh, a gay Cuban American, was a cocaine addict. He's been sober for fifteen years, works in management for a very successful not-for-profit company, and occasionally still sings professionally with his God-given glorious voice.

I'm friends with several couples as well. Seth has been happily married to Pam (who is not a PIR) for thirty-six years. He is a former businessman who was addicted to

drugs and alcohol. After getting sober, he earned a master's degree in psychology. They are now retired and are active in the adult community in which they live. They are two of the most spiritual people I know.

Frank and Donna are two of Mark's best friends. Frank is a PIR; Donna is not, but she came from abusive circumstances as a child. They are examples of yin and yang in a relationship, as they both support each other and contribute their own unique strengths.

Paul and Sandy are both PIRs who met in a recovery program. Both are very active in the recovery community in my town. Paul has established and manages several recovery centers in the area. Paul and Sandy are shining examples of two people who successfully live and work their recovery programs.

Although I speak admirably of these people who are my friends and inspirations, it is essential for you to know that they have not always had an easy time of it in their recovery. They are continually working on the issues that led to their drinking and using in the first place. Several of them have had at least one relapse. Their experiences taught me that even people in long-term recovery know that they must always be vigilant in their sobriety.

My friends in recovery taught me the difference between the words *recovered* and *recovering*. Although many of these PIRs might say they "recovered" their lives, their families, their relationships with friends, or their spirituality when they stopped drinking or using, most of them do not consider themselves as recovered when it comes to their addictions. They may have learned how to manage their lives, but they tell me they will always be "recovering" addicts or

alcoholics because addiction is a tough, chronic, and potentially fatal disease from which one never fully recovers.

It is not always easy to have a relationship with someone in recovery. Many PIRs have seen their relationships fail because of their addictive habits. I struggled with several of my former boyfriends' issues, and even if I knew then what I know today, it still wouldn't have been easy for me. My hope is that as you read about addiction and recovery in this book and learn how I and others handled (or didn't handle) our relationships, your own journey will be a little smoother.

About the Author

Karen Nagy lives and works in South Florida, having moved there many years ago from her hometown in western Pennsylvania. She has a master's degree in music theater and has been seen onstage as a singer and actor, in the pit as a musician, or backstage as a technician in theaters throughout South Florida. She is a proud member of AEA (Actors' Equity Association), NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing), and NSAI (Nashville Songwriters Association International). She teaches voice, music theater, sightsinging, and music appreciation at the college level. Karen has sung, played, or music-directed in churches and synagogues since the age of seven, and each experience has brought her further on her own spiritual path. Karen's passions are therapy-dog work, sea turtle rescue, golf, and the Steelers.

Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

A life of recovery is lived “one day at a time.” Hazelden publications, both educational and inspirational, support and strengthen lifelong recovery. In 1954, Hazelden published *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the first daily meditation book for recovering alcoholics, and Hazelden continues to publish works to inspire and guide individuals in treatment and recovery, and their loved ones. Professionals who work to prevent and treat addiction also turn to Hazelden for evidence-based curricula, informational materials, and videos for use in schools, treatment programs, and correctional programs.

Through published works, Hazelden extends the reach of hope, encouragement, help, and support to individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction and related issues.

For questions about Hazelden publications, please call **800-328-9000** or visit us online at **hazelden.org/bookstore**.

Being in a new relationship is hard enough,



but if the person you're dating is a recovering alcoholic or addict, there may be more to consider than just mutual interests and attraction. For Karen Nagy, dating a recovering alcoholic felt, in some ways, as if she were seeing someone "from another planet" — with his own language, culture, and social behaviors.

With humor, compassion, and a great respect for what it takes to recover from an addiction, this first-of-its-kind field guide offers an "inside scoop" on what people do in Twelve Step meetings, why they need a sponsor, what *is* a sponsor, and why phrases like "Let go and let God" and "Easy does it" keep creeping into your conversations. Nagy offers twelve key points that you need to know about dating a person in recovery. She also helps you identify the warning signs of developing your own codependent tendencies by playing into your partner's addictive thinking and behavior—and what to do about them.

By gaining a greater understanding of your companion's recovery program, you can help him or her stay sober, learn how to deal with character flaws, and also build your own confidence in the potential for a healthy, successful relationship.



Karen Nagy is a college professor, actor, and songwriter. She wrote this, her first book, based on her own dating experience and love of the Twelve Steps.

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