WHAT IS Recovery?
THERE IS Hope

It is said that addiction is a cunning and baffling disease. It is the only disease that tells people they are OK when they are not, as its main agenda is to perpetuate itself. Someone jokingly asked, "How come if alcohol kills millions of brain cells, it never killed the ones that made me want to drink?" When you are in the midst of addiction, it can feel like sinking in quicksand. Only when the pain of the addiction is greater than the pain of life and people "wake up" to the possibility of a better way are most people willing to enter recovery.
Yet the lure back into addiction will persist as long as the pain of existence persists and you cannot manage it skillfully. Abstinence addresses the symptom of addiction, but not the underlying dis-easiness with life. No one sober will want to be miserable. With sobriety, you can move from addressing the problem of addicting to addressing the problem of living. Recovery entails learning to live a happy, fulfilling, and successful life once you are sober. As one person with alcoholism put it, recovery deals with the "thinking problem" as well as the "drinking problem." There is a saying that "When you sober up a horse thief, all you have is a sober horse thief." Recovery transforms you, and thus your life, so you no longer feel the compulsion to steal horses. The way to stay sober is to do two things. The first is to learn to manage the cravings and compulsions of the brain's disordered drive-reward system. The second is to address the pain that drives addiction, so you are less vulnerable to a recurrence of the illness.

Through skillful living, along with learning to free yourself from suffering, you learn to lessen the pain of existence and to bear unavoidable pain without addicting for relief.
Addiction can destroy people. Sadly, it destroys many people. Yet recovery promises the hope of a transformation of an affliction into a blessing. When the fire of addiction sweeps through your life, you will either come out a cinder or a star.

With hope, patience, persistence, and the help of others, you can gradually attain a rewarding and fulfilling life free from addiction. Recovery is difficult. It is sometimes painful. As Portia de Rossi once said, "It feels like having to learn how to walk all over again." Yet recovery is also joyful, as you experience more fulfilling ways of being, seeing, and doing. With work, new attitudes, habits, knowledge, and life skills, you can and will succeed.
PAIN, ADDICTION, RECOVERY, AND LOVE

At its essence, recovery is the practice of skillful loving. Almost everyone has a compulsion to care—this is the essence of Life. We all want to feel good and to not feel bad. Too often people focus on the devastation of addiction without asking what is right about addiction. People fall into addiction for a million different reasons, but common to all of them are the desires to feel good and to not feel bad. Common to all these reasons, in almost all victims of addiction, is pain. Addiction originates from an impulse of self-love—it is just that this impulse is not skillful, as managing pain with pleasure can lead to addiction and multiply pain several fold.
Look closely. You will see that at the root of addiction there is almost always pain. It could be obvious pain, such as physical pain, anxiety, depression, stress, or loneliness. Often, however, the pain is more subtle—so subtle that many people are not even aware of their pain. It can be felt as a vague sense of emptiness, uneasiness, or boredom. For some it is a lack of a sense of wholeness. People who have suffered trauma or neglect often feel somehow broken, unworthy, or defective. Many experience pain as a lack of a sense of purpose or direction. For many it is a sense that life is somehow not "enough"—there is a feeling of a need for something more. Many people turn to addiction out of a sense of alienation, isolation, or disconnection.
People fall into addiction because they discover that pleasurable substances and activities temporarily ease their pain. With smoking, for example, people often start because their friends are smoking. In order to avoid the pain of being different and risking rejection, young people smoke to “be cool.” Many people fall prey to alcoholism or cannabis addiction because alcohol or marijuana help them to relax, to feel less stressed. With opioid addiction, the warm narcotic glow eases an edginess, anxiety, or irritable feeling. The power and confidence of a methamphetamine high can prove irresistible to someone who is shy, timid, or insecure. Food, sex, work, exercise, consuming, and technology all serve to soothe, numb, or distract us from our pain. When used to numb pain, food and pleasurable or rewarding activities can become addictive.

There are several problems with using pleasure to treat pain. The first is that it is temporary. It does not directly address and resolve the pain. If there is a problem, the problem is still there when we stop addicting. Addiction does not propel our growth or positive transformation. Instead, it does the opposite. Rather than progress, in addiction we regress.

The second problem is that addiction multiplies our pain. As addictive substances and behaviors damage our brain’s drive-reward system, victims now experience the twin pains of cravings and withdrawal. With smoking, for example, victims addict multiple times a day just to manage their nicotine withdrawal symptoms. With a cessation of addiction victims almost always experience withdrawal symptoms along with painful cravings and strong compulsions to addict.

Thus, treating pain with pleasure only creates much more pain.
While in addiction people treat pain with pleasure, in recovery we learn to manage pain with love. Recovery is skillful pain management through the practice of love—love for ourselves, love for others, and love for Life. We act to ease our pain in ways that truly work. If we are lonely, we learn to connect. If we are hurting, we learn to soothe ourselves nonaddictively. We learn to tap into the abundant love of others who are there to help us if we only ask. If we are ill, we get treatment to heal. If we feel broken, we work to discover the wholeness beneath our brokenness. If we are sad, we grieve. If we are resentful, we learn to forgive. If we feel empty, we fill the emptiness with generous, loving connection.

_Whatever the pain, there is a solution based in love._
In recovery, we renounce addicting, because out of love for ourselves, we commit to doing nothing to harm ourselves, including addicting. Thus, we learn to manage cravings and the triggers of cravings. We empower ourselves by asking for help when we risk losing control. We take responsibility for parenting ourselves as if we were our own child. We wake up and recognize the preciousness of this one gift of life we have been given. Seeing our sacredness, we take responsibility for taking very good care of ourselves. We vow to never do anything to hurt ourselves, including addicting.

**Recovery then is learning how to love more skillfully. It involves developing more skillful, love-based pain management strategies.**
Addiction vs. Recovery

Recovery and abstinence are different. Abstinence is necessary to heal from the devastation of addiction, but not sufficient. Many know “Dry Drunks” who may not be addicting but are still living miserable, hurtful lives.

Another way to think about recovery is that in addiction, people put gratification before self-love. In recovery, self-love comes before gratification. People in recovery don’t addict because their self-love motivates them to not act on self-destructive urges. People in active addiction do what feels good regardless of what is right. In recovery, people do what’s right regardless of urges to feel good through addicting.
In 2011, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) posted the following consensus definition of recovery: “Recovery is a process of change whereby individuals work to improve their own health and wellness and to live a meaningful life in a community of their choice while striving to achieve their full potential.”

SAMHSA articulated ten principles of recovery. Recovery:

- Is person-driven;
- Occurs via many pathways;
- Is holistic;
- Is supported by peers;
- Is supported through relationships;
- Is culturally-based and influenced;
- Is supported by addressing trauma;
- Involves individual, family, and community strengths and responsibility;
- Is based on respect; and
- Emerges from hope.

SAMHSA defines recovery as a holistic process that promotes positive relationships with ourselves and others. Recovery entails living with respect and hope while healing from trauma or other illnesses. It marks the death of an old, destructive way of living and the beginning of a new, productive way of living.

The following table lists some psychological, spiritual, and behavioral characteristics of addiction vs. recovery:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addiction</th>
<th>Recovery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>Health/healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief seeking</td>
<td>Facing/embracing/dealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-medication</td>
<td>Abstinence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character disorder</td>
<td>Character transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-centered</td>
<td>Other oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking disorder/delusional</td>
<td>Intact reality testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor judgment</td>
<td>Good judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childlike/immature</td>
<td>Mature/centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive/obsessive/compulsive</td>
<td>Thoughtful of consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative vicious cycle—destructive</td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life of deceit</td>
<td>Life of integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonesty</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking from others</td>
<td>Giving to others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relief/self-obsessed</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Remorse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>Hope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entitlement</td>
<td>Gratitude/appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation/disconnected</td>
<td>Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No sense of accountability</td>
<td>Accountable/responsible</td>
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</table>
You know recovery when you see it. As defined above, you are in recovery when you are healthy, well, living a positive, connected, meaningful life, contributing, and realizing your full potentials.

Yet guidance on how to achieve this state of recovery is all over the map, from 12-step recovery approaches to cognitive-behavioral approaches to network therapy to Buddhist-based approaches to psychopharmacology. All approaches can help. Many pathways to recovery exist.

**Each person’s path is unique to him or her and often changes over time as he or she changes.**
Addiction AND Intentionality

Recovery is work. Only those who put in the effort taste the benefits of recovery. It is a daily process of continual growth until the day you die. Through recovery you uncover the truth that life is uncontrollable, but manageable. You develop the capacity to both savor and nurture life while skillfully managing distress.

While there is no one too “dumb” for recovery, there are some who are too “smart.” They lack the humility necessary for healing. They cannot take feedback or consider suggestions. They are not open-minded. It takes courage to be humble, open-hearted, and vulnerable with others. While recovery does entail self-empowerment, this self-empowerment comes with help. Recovery therefore involves empowering ourselves by humbly asking for help.
Recovery is an intentional daily practice. It is the intentional practice of love. Each day, we get up and vow to ourselves that this day, we will love ourselves and others in all that we do and say.

In recovery, we start each day with an intention to not addict, to ask for help managing cravings and triggers, and to live each day out of love for ourselves and others. We make the intention to work on our recovery in some way, every day. It might be a recovery meeting, a call to our mentor, reviewing an autobiography of our addiction, or reading recovery literature.

Each day of recovery should start with stillness. This should be an intentional practice. We then get up and carry our sense of still groundedness into our day so that we might have clarity and freedom.

In setting the intention to love, we set the intention to manage any pain that arises skillfully, with love.
In our practice of love, we vow each day to practice compassion, empathy, generosity, hopefulness, patience, forgiveness, humility, and gratitude. We set an intention to be contented, savoring the gift of existence just as it comes to us. We set an intention to be helpful to others, and to yield to other’s needs as we practice mutuality. We set an intention to be considerate and kind. We vow to avoid harming anyone, including ourselves. We set an intention to support and affirm those we meet for their many positive qualities. We set an intention to treat each person we meet as the sacred being that they are.

We see the best that others can become and have hope for them that this will be realized.
Spirituality and Recovery

All recovery pathways involve your spirituality. In fact, recovery is a spiritual process rooted in love. As you cultivate your spirituality, you develop wholeness, peace, purpose, meaning, and a sense of harmonious, loving connectedness to something greater than yourself. That “something” is both imminent and transcendent. Your imminent connectedness is to the One Life that sustains you and of which you are a part. This connection is to the sacred people, places, and things that make up your life. For many, spirituality also involves a transcendent connectedness to a loving, intelligent force that permeates Reality. There is an intuited, felt sense of a force of love that some call God.
Spirituality involves your relationships both to others and to yourself. There are several shifts in your spirituality as you move from addiction to recovery. These include from fear to trust, from self-pity to gratitude, from resentment to acceptance, from self-hatred to self-love, and from dishonesty to honesty. The strength of your spirituality will increase as you nurture your relationships with yourself, others, and the world. Openness to and reverence for Reality promotes the experience of the inconceivable sacredness, preciousness, and beauty of life and the Universe. From wonder and awe springs the simple but profound joy of existence. Many people experience oneness and unity with What Is through their spiritual practices. Through the practice of stillness, people cultivate the experience the openness, clarity, and love. This causes a profound shift in perspective that helps protect people from needing to addict.

When there is pain—and there is frequently pain—the experience of love—of the wonderous fullness of existence—acts as a crucible for our pain.
Our spiritual practices help us to experience this one eternal moment freshly, as if it were both our first and last. We “dehabituate” to the miraculous. Awakened, we experience the sacred miraculousness of Life, including our life. We experience the abundance of the Now. We experience Love as a reverence for existence and the world, including others, that sustains us.

In this experience of unity, connectedness, and love, any pain that arises is experienced in its proper perspective. There is no need to addict.

*Immersed in Love, and out of Love, we tend to our pain with love.*
There are three overlapping phases of recovery:

1. **First**, you must cease addicting.  
   This is *the renunciation phase*.

2. **Second**, heal and learn to live life skillfully.  
   This is *the integration and repair stage*.

3. **The third stage** is learning how to live a fulfilling life without addiction.  
   This is *the self-realization phase*.
Renunciation

During early recovery, the primary focus is on renunciation, though people also begin the integration and repair process and at least think about their personal growth and spirituality.

For some, renunciation gets a bad rap. People think of it as deprivation. This could not be further from the truth. Rather than depriving yourself of anything, renunciation is a gift you give yourself. In fact, you get something great in return. It is the act of liberating yourself from compulsively grasping for something you want because of destructive cravings, even when the harm outweighs the benefit. The disease of addiction entails compulsions and cravings. In early recovery, we wake up to the truth that satisfying compulsions and cravings only perpetuates them...and the destruction that comes with addicting. Addiction entails damage to the brain's drive-reward system. We feel this damage in the form of withdrawal symptoms, cravings, and compulsions. Knowing your drive-reward system is damaged, you renounce artificially stimulating it with any addictive substances.

For food and potentially addictive behaviors such as work, sex, and technology use, what we renounce is eating and engaging in these behaviors compulsively to ease our pain. This requires mindfulness. When the addictive urge arises, we intentionally and lovingly face and embrace the pain that drives the urge. We then address the pain directly without addicting. We nurture and soothe ourselves, often with the help of those who love us. We also get help with our cravings, just as with other substance addictions. We vow to never crave alone. We replace addicting with connecting. We "talk out" both the positive consequences of not addicting and the negative consequences of addicting.
One of the most common renunciation issues in recovery is smoking. There is an old adage, “one addiction at a time.” This turns out to not be true. People increase their chances of successful recovery by 25% if they renounce all addicting, including smoking². Conversely, continuing to smoke is associated with an increased risk of relapse on other substances³. Intuitively, it makes sense that stimulating the brain’s drive-reward system with nicotine—continuing to addict—triggers cravings for other substances. Addicting creates distress, including addicting with nicotine, which causes increased rates of anxiety, stress, and depression⁴. In fact, quitting smoking is associated with reduced depression, anxiety, and stress. It is also associated with improved mood and quality of life⁵. There is also simply the fact that smoking kills two thirds of people who smoke⁶.

*If we are in recovery, we practice love. It is simply not loving to hurt ourselves in any way, including smoking.*

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Thus, out of love for ourselves and others, we renounce all addicting. We commit to managing cravings with the help of others. We take responsibility for our well-being. We become loving parents to ourselves. We take action to resolve urges to addict—even if just to sit in still presence, compassionately observing our pain.

We put our dorsolateral prefrontal cortex back in charge, thinking through or talking through with others what is best for us and others despite addictive urges to do otherwise. We replace immediate addictive gratification with the full abundance of delayed fulfillment. Like a loving parent, we commit to what is good, right, and true for us and others. Seeing that addicting is destructive, we renounce addicting. As the first step of recovery, we take the “no harm” vow; we vow not to harm Life—ours or others—to the fullest extent possible. We recognize the awesome responsibility Life has given us, to nurture our life and the lives of others.

For some, the damage to the brain’s drive-reward system can be such that compulsions and cravings are overwhelming. Empowering oneself by taking medications that help regulate cravings and compulsions is then an intelligent act of self-love.
Integration and Repair

In the middle phase of recovery, people primarily work on integration and repair.

This is a time of healing from trauma, including the trauma of addiction. Most people with addiction fall into addiction because of traumas that make the experience of existence painful. Sometimes the trauma can be subtle, such as a vague sense of lack resulting from growing up with loving but unhappy parents. The trauma of neglect can be invisible to the victim, because they never knew anything different. Yet neglect can be devastating, as it cripples victims' abilities to lovingly connect and resonate with others. Unable to regulate themselves emotionally through loving connection, victims turn in their emotional isolation and incompleteness to addiction. This is why people speak of addiction as being an attachment disorder.

The middle phase of recovery is thus a time for repair and growth of our emotional capacity for loving relatedness. Neurobiologically, this is a time of revision of the brain's limbic, or emotional, system. It generally takes hundreds to thousands of attempts to practice loving ourselves and others for this limbic revision to occur. This phase of recovery requires persistent, intentional efforts to love ourselves and love others skillfully, while setting limits and exercising good judgment to protect ourselves from harm. With persistence, most people can develop a stable sense of self-compassion, wholeness, and safe, loving attachments to others in a span of about 3-5 years.
Repair and integration also involves attending to underlying psychiatric and medical illnesses. Many people benefit from getting treatment for anxiety, stress, depression, unstable moods, impulsivity, attention difficulties, thinking disturbances, and many other psychiatric difficulties. For many, psychiatric treatment is essential for minimizing distress and optimizing functioning so that they can do the work of recovery.

For everyone, repair and integration includes learning to skillfully manage the inevitable pain of life, learning to minimize stress, and learning to cope with life's many difficulties. It is a time of learning to live intelligently, with love. During this period, we gradually transition from being ruled by unhealthy fear to being informed by healthy fear. We begin to act out of love, informed by fear, rather than acting out of fear without regard for what is truly best for us and others. More and more, in all things large and small, we ask the question, “What would love do?” and listen for the answer. When the answer comes, we act accordingly.

Life is a team sport. We are all here to help each other get by. In the repair and integration stage, we move from isolation to belonging. We move from disconnection to connection. As we practice showing ourselves self-compassion, we begin to take good care of ourselves. As we begin to connect with others with integrity, humility, respect, and love, we begin to experience a fullness of being we have never known before. Our brokenness gives way to wholeness. Our emptiness fills with the fullness of love. With healing well on its way, we are ready to move on to the third stage of recovery, self-realization.
Self Realization

Having begun to live and love intelligently with wisdom and compassion, we can now realize our purpose to nurture and savor Life in the ways that are unique to us. This will come through a process of intention and allowance. It requires a commitment to a regular spiritual practice, including daily mindfulness, combined with the daily practice of love.

In this last phase of recovery, people put more focus on realizing their life vision, purpose, and meaning. This is a time of coming into the wholeness and fullness of one’s life. It is a time of living more and more from the Higher Self (love) and less and less from the fear-based ego.

This is a time of self-transcendence, where we immerse ourselves in the flow of service to all of Life. We realize our harmonious interdependence with Life, solving the paradox of our simultaneous autonomy and interdependence. We are both an individual and one with Life. Our sense of self expands to become the One Life of which we are a part.

Having engaged in the practice of love for some time, our love practices begin to feel more natural. They gradually become a habitual way of being, seeing, and doing. We move through Life with an abiding reverence and respect for Life. It now begins to feel natural to love and be loved. We learn to maintain a reverent and respectful attitude for all of Life, even in the face of evil.

Our love becomes unconditional.
Because of our practice of stillness and mindfulness, we have experienced a shift in our identity to the process of Awareness, away from the various sense perceptions that fill Awareness. This is especially true with respect to the constant stream of thoughts and feelings. We don’t take our experience personally any longer—we stop taking our brains personally. We experience openness and clarity. There is a sense of freedom and lightness, even in the midst of pain.

We realize we are not our pain, and that this pain is part of the Sacred Whole of things. We humbly say “yes” over and over again to this One Changing Moment, doing what we can to enhance Life and ease suffering.

There is also a sense that we are somehow channels for a force of love that flows through us from beyond us. It seems to arise from our still Awareness and work its way through the fabric of our lives. There develops an experience of spontaneous flow in all that we do. Meanwhile, we are the Aware Observer, watching life unfold as we engage in the flow.

*This can be a time of tremendous generativity and creativity. With our pain healed, now right with Life, our fullest capacities can manifest.*
In this phase, we continue to practice intentional attention to the Now. We continue to practice a friendly, reverent attitude towards all experience. We also continue our intentional engagement in the practice of love. By doing this, we engage in a harmonious dance with Reality—with Life. We resonate with what Life asks of us. It is in our response to the call of Life that we realize our highest, truest selves. We are now living consistently from our Higher Selves, informed by our egos. The ego has switched from being the operator of our lives to being the navigator, telling us when we need to look out and take care.

With self-realization, there is a change in our life agenda. Where before it was all about us, it is now about Life, including us. Many experience liberation from an agenda of trying to make themselves whole, now realizing they were whole all along. Now it is about enjoying this amazing experience of life and doing what we can to be helpful to others. It is a time to play and have fun while contributing.

As so many have loved us, so now we go forth and love others.
Conclusion

Recovery is about transformation, for it is through healing and transformation that we attend to and resolve the pain that drives addiction and manage the process of addiction itself. In recovery, the neurobiological vulnerability to addiction becomes a gift. Addiction spurs the process of growth and transformation of our way of being, seeing, and doing. For many, the loving coherence brought about by recovery is a necessity, not an option.

We can be grateful for the pain that forced us to change. Through recovery, the disease of addiction can become a blessing. So too does our pain become a blessing.

Of course, recovery is work. It requires effort. It requires a balance of intention and allowance.

While we intentionally engage in the practice of love, we allow for grace, healing, and transformation to occur. We allow love to change us.

_**Recovery is a testament to the truth that love truly does heal.**_
The Joy of Recovery
Dr. Michael McGee

This book - The Joy of Recovery - shows you how to heal the wounds that drove you to addiction in the first place, and to resurface as a better version of yourself.

In it, you will learn:

- Risk and failure are part of life. Don’t let them hold you back.
- Practice boldness in your conviction to do the right thing, regardless of your fear. If you don’t take a chance, you won’t have a chance.
- Your passion drives you on to overcome life’s obstacles. Succeed by devoting your entire self to your life.
Testimonials

What experts in the addiction field are saying

“Recovery is about building a life that is just too good to give up. The healing power of Love runs through this book like a golden thread.”

— William R. Miller, PhD
Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, University of New Mexico

“This book can turn today’s failures into tomorrow’s miracles.”

— John Harsany, Jr. MD (DFSAM)
Medical Director, Riverside Country Substance Abuse Program, Department of Mental Health

“At last a self-help book that really works. Anyone who reads and applies these teachings can get clean and stay sober.”

— Edward Kauffman, M.D.
Founding President of The American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry and current Medical Director of Northbound Treatment Services.
About Dr. McGee

Dr. McGee’s approach to recovery is not just recovery through treatment, it’s recovery through integrated care for the mind, body and spirit.

Michael McGee, MD, believes that every person deserves psychiatric and behavioral healthcare with a human connection, clinical expertise, spiritual support, and private, personal, compassionate delivery, no matter where you are.

The 12 Touchstones of Recovery™ are the cornerstone of the Wellmind Method™ and your treatment success.

Dr. McGee graduated from Stanford University in 1979, with a Bachelor’s degree with distinction in Biology. He then graduated in 1985 from Stanford University School of Medicine and completed his residency training in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. McGee conveniently treats patients living throughout Massachusetts, California, and New Hampshire through online telehealth applications that securely support computer and smartphone access.
With over 30 years of experience in psychiatry, Dr. McGee's many years of research and clinical interests have included the integration of spirituality and meditation into psychiatric treatment to create a “bio-psycho-social-spiritual” approach to psychiatric and behavioral care. He has extensive experience in addiction treatment, geriatric psychiatry, medical psychiatry (psychosomatic medicine), and general adult psychiatry. Dr. McGee has presented and is published extensively on the topic spirituality, addiction and dementia.

On a personal note, Dr. McGee tends to practice what he teaches in his sessions. He balances his professional life of helping others with outdoor activities including running, hiking, backpacking, Barre, and yoga, and is enthusiastic about nutrition and overall wellness strategies that best support “the whole person”.

“Dr. McGee saved my life and made me have purpose again. I abused substances to deal with my life problems and slipped into a life I was not proud of. Dr. McGee gave me back my life. I will be forever grateful for his wisdom and caring.”

- Patient