

# Nutrition as a Stabilizing Force in Substance Use Disorder Communities



## Executive Summary

At NEXDINE, we believe dining plays a critical role in recovery. In Substance Use Disorder communities, food is not just nourishment. It is structure, regulation, and trust.

Individuals in substance use disorder recovery often enter treatment with significant nutritional deficiencies, disrupted eating patterns, blood sugar instability, and compromised brain chemistry. These factors directly influence mood, impulse control, sleep quality, anxiety, and engagement in treatment. This White Paper outlines how intentionally designed, recovery-informed nutrition programs delivered through dining services can support stabilization, improve daily functioning, and strengthen treatment environments.

Grounded in clinical research and behavioral health best practices, the evidence shows that when nutrition is consistent, balanced, and thoughtfully delivered, dining becomes a therapeutic support that reinforces recovery rather than a background service.

## The Role of Nutrition in Addiction Recovery

Substance use disorders are closely linked to nutritional depletion and metabolic disruption. Alcohol and drug use interfere with nutrient absorption, appetite regulation, and gut-brain signaling, often leaving individuals deficient in key vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients upon admission to treatment.

These deficiencies contribute to irritability, fatigue, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and cognitive fog. In early recovery, unmanaged nutrition-related symptoms can intensify cravings, emotional volatility, and disengagement from programming.

Consistent access to balanced meals helps stabilize blood sugar, support neurotransmitter production, and restore physical resilience. Predictable meal timing and adequate nutrition create a sense of safety and routine, which is foundational in trauma-informed and recovery-oriented care.

## Nutrition, Brain Chemistry, and Emotional Regulation

Recovery requires neurological healing. Nutrition directly influences the brain systems responsible for impulse control, mood regulation, and reward processing.

Adequate intake of protein supports neurotransmitter synthesis, including dopamine and serotonin pathways disrupted by substance use. Complex carbohydrates support steady glucose delivery to the brain, reducing irritability and emotional swings. Healthy fats, including omega-3 fatty acids, contribute to neural repair and inflammation reduction.

Deficiencies in B vitamins, magnesium, and zinc are common in individuals with substance use disorders and are associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and impaired cognitive function. Diets high in refined sugar and ultra-processed foods can further destabilize mood and exacerbate cravings.

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Tailored nutrition strategies that prioritize whole foods and metabolic stability support emotional regulation and improve residents' ability to participate fully in therapy and recovery programming.

## The Impact of Structured, Recovery-Informed Dining Programs

Standard food service models often overlook the unique needs of addiction treatment environments. Recovery-informed dining programs are designed to support both physiological and behavioral stabilization.

### Effective programs include

- Regular meal timing to support routine and predictability
- Menus designed to stabilize blood sugar and reduce craving triggers
- Adequate protein and nutrient density at every meal
- Limited reliance on ultra-processed foods and excess added sugars
- Hydration strategies that support cognitive clarity and physical recovery
- Service approaches that reinforce dignity, respect, and autonomy

Behavioral health organizations that adopt structured, nutrition-forward dining programs often report calmer milieus, improved engagement in treatment activities, and fewer food-related behavioral disruptions.



## The Value of a Dining Partner with Substance Use Disorder Awareness

Addiction treatment providers benefit most from dining partners who understand recovery environments and clinical priorities.

A dining services provider with registered dietitians and behavioral health experience can translate recovery science into daily execution. Nutrition strategies are embedded into menu planning, procurement, culinary training, and service flow to support consistency and therapeutic alignment.

This partnership reduces friction between clinical teams and operations, ensuring that dining reinforces treatment goals rather than undermining them. Food becomes a trusted component of care delivery.

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## Benefits for Patients, Staff, and Organizations

Recovery-informed nutrition programs deliver measurable benefits across addiction treatment settings.

### For patients, benefits include

- Improved mood stability and emotional regulation
- Reduced fatigue, irritability, and anxiety
- Greater capacity to engage in therapy and group work
- Stronger sense of routine, safety, and respect

### For staff and organizations, benefits include

- Calmer treatment environments and fewer behavioral incidents
- Reduced staff burnout and emotional strain
- Improved patient satisfaction and perceived quality of care
- Stronger alignment between clinical philosophy and daily operations

Dining becomes a stabilizing influence that supports both patient outcomes and staff sustainability.

## Strategic Conclusion

Addiction recovery is complex, and progress depends on stability across mind and body.

Behavioral health organizations that partner with dining service providers like NEXDINE, who combine culinary excellence with clinical nutrition expertise and recovery awareness, are better positioned to create environments that support healing, engagement, and long-term success.

When dining is designed with recovery in mind, it becomes more than a service. It becomes a daily reinforcement of care, structure, and hope.



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