



FREE GUIDE

RECOVERY: WHY IT FEELS SO HARD — AND HOW FREEDOM BEGINS

The hidden contexts that keep you stuck

BY JULIE KERR

INTRODUCTION

THE READY-MADE INVISIBLE FRAME

Before you even began recovery, you probably knew what it was going to be like.

"A long, hard journey."

"A struggle."

That you already "knew" is hardly surprising.

But why is that?

Because these phrases have been repeated again and again — explicitly and implicitly — across articles and blogs, on institutional websites, and throughout recovery culture and in conversations between people trying to recover.

Over time, those phrases have become part of a shared context in which recovery is understood.

And context is no small thing.

CONTEXT

CONTEXT IS A READY-MADE INVISIBLE FRAME

Everything has a context, but as contexts are mostly unconsciously learned or inherited rather than consciously chosen, they are, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

That wouldn't matter very much if contexts were simply backgrounds to experience. But they aren't.

Contexts are organising frames.

- They organise what things come to mean.
 - They organise what seems possible.
 - They organise how we interpret our experiences.
 - They organise how we respond.
 - And ultimately, they organise the outcomes we create.
-

And here's how that works in recovery...

A difficult day is no longer simply a difficult day.

Within the context of recovery being "a long, hard journey" and "a struggle," that difficult day becomes evidence that recovery really is long and hard.

- A setback quietly whispers, *"I knew this wouldn't last."*
- A slip becomes failure.
- A relapse becomes proof.

The organising frame has become so familiar that the perspective it creates simply feels like "the truth."

Which is why I say: Context is no small thing. It has the power to trap us. And it has the power to set us free.

Contexts are human creations. They are not fixed. Nor are we limited to the ones we've learnt or inherited.

We can consciously create new contexts in which freedom becomes possible.

Over thirty-six years ago, my own recovery unfolded long before recovery itself had become an industry of information. Today, many women are not recovering in silence. They are recovering inside an echo chamber of inherited contexts about what recovery is supposed to be. And an excess of information makes the path to freedom harder to see.

A SECOND CONTEXT

"YOU NEVER REALLY RECOVER"

Alongside the contexts that recovery is "a long, hard journey" and "a struggle" sits a second, equally powerful one.

"you never really recover"

Again, through repetition this phrase has become part of the shared context for how recovery is understood. It has also been reinforced through psychiatric and treatment language, where recovery has often been framed in terms of behavioural management, symptom reduction, and risk control.

In some recovery pathways, bulimia is interpreted through the language of addiction, deepening the sense that relapse is always near and vigilance must be constant.

From here emerges a familiar message:

You will always have to be careful.

- Careful around food.
 - Careful around stress.
 - Careful around emotions.
 - Careful around life itself.
-

And beneath that sits a quiet fear:

If I am not careful enough, bulimia will come back.

Within the context of "you never really recover" something profound happens.

It places a woman under constant self-surveillance.

- She watches herself.
- She monitors herself.
- She second-guesses every feeling, every meal, every difficult day.

And life shrinks around the need to stay safe.

THE WEIGHT OF IT

CONTEXT IS TRULY NO SMALL THING

Those inherited contexts surrounding recovery do not all do the same thing. Each one places a different limit or constraint around what recovery is expected to be.

01

"Recovery is a struggle" shapes the nature of the process. It presents recovery as a fight: something requiring continual effort against difficulty, opposition or resistance.

02

"Recovery is a long, hard journey" shapes the duration and experience of the process. It suggests something arduous, prolonged and difficult to complete.

03

"You never really recover" shapes — and caps — the destination. It removes full freedom as a genuine possibility before recovery has even begun.

04

"You'll always have to be careful" shapes the life supposedly waiting beyond recovery. It promises not freedom, but permanent vigilance: careful around food, careful around stress, careful around emotions, careful around life itself.

Taken together, these inherited contexts create a bleak proposition: recovery will be a prolonged and difficult struggle, followed not by freedom, but by a lifetime of vigilance and self-surveillance to prevent bulimia from returning.

No wonder ambivalence in recovery is so common.

No wonder a woman can long for freedom while another part of her resists.

Why would a sane woman throw herself fully into a recovery framed in this way? Why would she want to embrace a process that appears difficult, endless and incapable of delivering the freedom she wants?

Within these contexts, managing bulimia better may seem preferable to the recovery she has been taught to expect.

From these contexts it's easy for women to reach a devastating conclusion:

bulimia is stronger than I am.

This may not necessarily be something she was explicitly told, but a conclusion produced by the recovery future she has inherited.

And recovery can begin to feel less like the way out — than another form of captivity.

But here's a truth I've observed:

Despite the seeming preference... hope remains alive in the part of a woman longing for freedom, because that part of her knows she is stronger and that there is a way out.

And the fact that you are here reading this — means that hope is alive in you too.

A NEW CONTEXT IS WHERE FREEDOM BEGINS

The way forward is not by changing yourself, as most women think.

It begins by becoming aware of the inherited contexts through which you've been understanding recovery.

Because once a context becomes visible...

it no longer has the same power over you — and because contexts can be consciously created, the inherited contexts are not the only contexts available to you.

And that is where freedom begins.

Before we go any further, I'd love to share something with you. It's something I share with every private client, so they can begin recovery on a different path — a path that leads to freedom — because it demonstrates, far better than words alone, how changing a context can completely transform an experience.

For that, I'm inviting you to watch a short video, just over two minutes, where Lang Lang — one of the world's most celebrated classical pianists — demonstrates this beautifully.

THE DEMONSTRATION

THE RESTORATION OF POSSIBILITY

Lang Lang did not create something out of nothing.

Für Elise — although one of the most recognised pieces in classical music — had, over time, become something most people no longer truly heard. It had been reduced to a study

exercise, elevator music, a ringtone. Pleasant, perhaps. But flattened. Stripped of the depth it was born with.

When Lang Lang was asked to perform it, his first impression was the same. Background music. Bland. Boring. Vanilla.

But before a single note was performed — something shifted. Not in the music...

In the context within which Lang Lang held it.

"This piece is very romantic. It's very light. It's kind of like a feather — it needs to come out from nowhere. There are some passages that need to move people, they are so beautiful. This piece needs to be treated like a real artistic work. You have to interpret it as a great masterwork, which it deserves — as it is a great masterwork."

— LANG LANG

With that the context for Für Elise was changed. And it wasn't just the context that was changed — the result was too. Lang Lang's rendition of Für Elise is held up as the best.

"Like so many kids learning to play the piano, Für Elise had been a dull finger training exercise for me — that was until I watched this video and saw, and understood, how Lang Lang turned it into a masterpiece. I see now how I can do the same for recovery."

— A CLIENT

The piece, Für Elise, hadn't changed.

What changed was the context within which it was held.

And that change happened first, before anything else.

It was his first step.

Recovery is no different.

"We dull ourselves and our lives by the way we conceive them; the context within which we live them and the language that we habitually use. We have stopped imagining them with any sort of romance, any fictional flair."

— JAMES HILLMAN

Recovery, too, has been flattened — not by the nature of recovery itself, but by the contexts unconsciously absorbed over time. Historical contexts repeated so often they've come to feel like facts. Contexts that were never truly yours. And ones that cannot deliver freedom.

THE POSSIBILITY

CONTEXT CAN BE CHANGED

As you've just seen, context can be changed consciously and deliberately — creating not just a better experience of recovery, but a different destination entirely.

What has been reduced to management, vigilance, and something merely to get through still contains the potential for something far richer.

Not simply symptom relief.

But life restored.

THE CHALLENGE

AN OLD CONTEXT IS WELL-REHEARSED

Right now, you may feel inspired — and yet it may still be difficult to imagine recovery as anything other than a struggle.

Perhaps self-doubt or scepticism has crept in.

That's the 'old' context doing what contexts do: shaping your thoughts and feelings and telling you what is possible and what is not.

But however old or familiar a context may be, it is still a context. And a new one can change both the experience of recovery and what becomes possible.

Right now, though, the new context is still only an idea, while the old one has been rehearsed for years. That familiarity is where much of its power comes from.

Yet, even within that doubt or scepticism, something else may also be present.

- A sense that something in what you have just read is true.
- A sense that perhaps recovery can be different.
- That the struggle you have known is not the only path.
- That there is an alternative.



That "Sense" Matters.

Because every human being possesses capacities upon which full recovery can be built. There is nothing recovery requires that lies outside human capabilities.

Freedom is an available human possibility.

What is needed first is not more effort.

But curiosity...

Curiosity to wonder whether recovery could be different for you.

WHAT FREEDOM CAN FEEL LIKE

The gifts of recovery are often invisible from where you are standing now because they belong to a life that hasn't been lived yet, and no amount of description fully crosses the gap,

But in my own experience, and in the experience of the women I've worked with, freedom rarely announces itself all at once. It arrives quietly, in ordinary moments:

- Being fully present in a conversation instead of half-absent in your own thoughts, being spontaneous without first calculating whether it's safe, choosing what to eat without negotiation.
- It is trust returning — in your body, in yourself, and in life.
- It is intimacy no longer shadowed by secrecy.
- A vitality that isn't rationed.
- A relationship with food that is, finally, peaceful and enjoyable.
- And beneath all of it, something harder to name but unmistakable when it arrives:

The sense of being a “yes” to your own life.

That and more is what waits on the other side of recovery.

