

## Session 31: Looking Forward; Managing Downtime

### Goals of Session

- Help clients appreciate the risks of boredom as a relapse trigger.
- Help clients understand the benefits of planning rewards and downtime.
- Help clients explore different ways to break the monotony of recovery.

### Handout

- RP 31—Looking Forward; Managing Downtime

### Presentation of Topic (15 minutes)

#### *1. Understanding That Boredom Can Be a Relapse Trigger*

It is normal for clients to feel bored, listless, and unexcited during recovery. This boredom may be caused by chemical changes that are part of the brain's healing. It also may be a function of the rigid structure of recovery. Although the structure of recovery is necessary, the boredom that it can breed acts as a relapse trigger for many clients; using was the way many clients filled their free time and made their lives more interesting. In addition, clients who are bored may lack the mental energy to maintain a smart and strong recovery. It is necessary for clients to fight through their feelings of boredom to keep their recovery on track.

#### *2. Understanding the Benefits of Breaking Recovery Into Manageable Chunks of Time*

One way for clients to combat the routine nature of recovery is to plan little rewards for themselves every couple of weeks. These rewards need not be large purchases or big events. In fact, it is better if clients think of small things that they enjoy but that still constitute a special treat (e.g., eating a favorite meal, buying a new CD, taking a day trip). The rewards should be things that clients can look forward to and that will pull them through the dreary parts of recovery. It also is important that the rewards not disrupt recovery. For example, leaving town for more than a few days would not be a good idea during treatment. Clients can think of these rewards as extensions of the marking progress activity from the Early Recovery Skills sessions. Both components are exercises in breaking the sameness of recovery into smaller periods that are punctuated by rewards.

#### *3. Exploring Ways To Enhance Recovery by Planning Activities and Structuring Downtime*

In addition to occasional rewards such as rest and fun, clients may need more frequent breaks from the predictability of the recovery routine. For most clients, relaxing from the stress of everyday life used to involve substance use. Now that they are in recovery, many clients need to find new ways to unwind or to cope with the stress of their lives. Physical activity is an excellent way for clients to relax. Exercise is known to reduce stress levels. When clients exercise, they also boost their self-esteem and help ameliorate any remaining physical symptoms from stopping substance use. Exercise need not be vigorous—just consistent; walking or bicycling several times a week is good exercise during recovery.

Activities that involve clients' minds are important, too. Starting a new hobby or picking up an old interest is an excellent way to fight boredom. Clients might consider taking lessons or classes; learning something new (e.g., how to play a musical instrument or speak another language) orients clients toward the future. When clients become engaged in learning something or participating regularly in an activity, they make a commitment that supports their recovery.

### **Handout and Focused Discussion (45 minutes)**

Clients should be given time to complete the handout before the discussion begins. Clients should not be forced to comply if they find it difficult or uncomfortable to complete the handout in the group. The handout is primarily a tool for discussion. The counselor steers clients away from reading their responses and encourages them to converse about the issues the handout raises. The counselor ensures that all clients have an opportunity to participate.

- Go over handout RP 31—Looking Forward; Managing Downtime.
- Ask clients whether they have been experiencing boredom and emotional tedium. To what do they attribute these feelings?
- Ask clients what effect boredom has on their recovery. What do they do now to relieve daily boredom?
- Ask the recovering co-leader to discuss how he or she used the practice of building islands (from handout RP 31) to stay engaged in the recovery process.
- Ask clients what activities they can use as rewards to combat the routine nature of treatment and recovery.
- Ask clients how they know whether they need to relax. What physical or emotional signs tell them that they need some downtime?
- Ask clients to describe hobbies and activities that they have found relaxing and satisfying.
- Ask the recovering co-leader to discuss his or her experience using activities to combat boredom. To relieve stress, what does the co-leader do in place of substance use?

### **Open Discussion (30 minutes)**

The counselor should carry over from the previous discussion any important issues that have not been addressed fully. Although it is important for clients to be able to speak about what is on their minds, the counselor should make sure that the session's topic has been explored completely.

Five minutes before the end of open discussion, the counselor should ask clients to share briefly their experience of doing the homework from the previous session. The counselor can decide how detailed the followup on homework should be. The goal of asking is not to discover which clients have not done the homework but to encourage clients to work on their recovery between sessions and to share that work with the group.

### **Homework**

Have clients explain in detail one of their islands and one of the activities or hobbies they are going to pursue.

## Islands To Look Forward To

There are many important elements to a successful recovery. Structure is important. Scheduling is important. Balance is important. Your recovery works because you work at it. Amid the hard work and the structure of recovery, do you feel as if something is missing? The activities and routines of recovery can seem stifling. Do you feel that you need to take a break from the routine and get excited about something?

The emotional flatness you experience during recovery may be explained by the following:

- Many people feel particularly bored and tired 2 to 4 months into recovery (during the period known as the Wall).
- The recovery process the body is going through may prevent you from feeling strong emotions of any kind.
- Life feels less “on the edge” than it did when you were using.

Planning enjoyable things to look forward to is one way to put a sense of anticipation and excitement into your life. Some people think of this as building islands of rest, recreation, or fun. These are islands to look forward to so that the future doesn't seem so predictable and routine. The islands don't need to be extravagant things. They can be things like

- Going out of town for a 3-day weekend
- Taking a day off work
- Going to a play or a concert
- Attending a sporting event
- Visiting relatives
- Going out to eat



## RP 31

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- Visiting an old friend
- Having a special date with your partner



Plan these little rewards often enough so that you don't get too stressed, tired, or bored in between them.

**List some islands that you used to use as rewards.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What are some possible islands for you now?** \_\_\_\_\_

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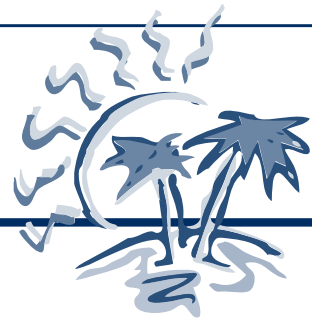
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## Handling Downtime The Problem

Being in recovery means living responsibly. Always acting intelligently and constantly guarding against relapse can be exhausting. It is easy to run out of energy and become tired and bitter. Life can become a cycle of sameness: getting up, going to work, coming home, lying on the couch, going to bed, and then doing it again the next day. People in recovery who allow themselves to get to this state of boredom and exhaustion are very vulnerable to relapse. It is difficult to resist triggers and relapse justifications when your energy level is so low.

## The Old Answer

Drugs and alcohol provided quick relief from boredom and listlessness. All the reasons for not using substances can be forgotten quickly when the body and mind desperately need refueling.



## A New Answer

Each person needs to decide what can replace substance use and provide a refreshing, satisfying break from the daily grind. What works for you may not work for someone else. It doesn't matter what nonusing activities you pursue during your downtime, but it is necessary to find a way to relax and rejuvenate. The more tired and beaten down you become, the less energy you will have for staying smart and committed to recovery.

Notice how often you feel stressed, impatient, angry, or closed off emotionally. These are signs of needing more downtime. **Which activities listed below would help rejuvenate you?**

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|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Walking                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking a class                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to the movies          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing team sports                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meditating or doing yoga               | <input type="checkbox"/> Bicycling                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Knitting                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Painting, drawing                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playing with a pet                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Exercising at the gym                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Scrapbooking                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Becoming active in a church            | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Window shopping              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking with a friend who does not use | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to 12-Step or mutual-help meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing a musical instrument |

**On a day when you're stressed and you realize that in the past you would have said, "I really need a drink" or "I need to get high today," what will you do now? What will you do in your downtime?**

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## Session 32: One Day at a Time

### Goals of Session

- Help clients avoid feeling overwhelmed by the past.
- Help clients understand that the past does not define the future.
- Help clients explore different strategies for focusing on the present.

### Handout

- RP 32—One Day at a Time

### Presentation of Topic (15 minutes)

#### *1. Avoiding Defeatist and Fatalistic Ideas About the Past*

When many clients enter treatment, their immediate past is characterized by failure. They can use little in their histories to build their self-confidence. Little in their experience convinces them that they can succeed in recovery. Paradoxically, once clients are in recovery, the process of clearing up problems from the past often leaves them overwhelmed and unable to face the present or the future optimistically. Negative feelings and a bleak outlook on the future add stress to clients' lives and increase the chances of relapse. The counselor needs to persuade clients that they are capable of making a break with their past behavior. As evidence that this is possible, the counselor can point to the fact that clients made the decision to enter treatment. They can build on this decision to make their future different from the past.

#### *2. Understanding That the Future Is Determined by the Individual, Not by Past Behavior*

Clients often feel that, because they have failed to stay abstinent in the past, they will fail to do so in the future. Although it is true that people often repeat past behavior, they do so by choice, for the most part. The mere fact that a client had quit using and then went back to stimulant use does not mean that the same thing will happen again. Clients decide whether they will be abstinent. Taking a smart approach to recovery helps clients succeed where before they did not.

The counselor should remind clients of the times in their lives when they decided to change their behavior and succeeded. For example, perhaps some clients altered their diet or gave up cursing. Most clients probably can identify some point in their lives when they made a decision to change their behavior and stuck with it.

The counselor also should be aware that some clients come to treatment with serious psychological problems other than substance use. These problems may be the result of significant trauma that has scarred clients. If the counselor notices serious psychological problems in clients, the counselor should refer the clients to a mental health professional for assessment.

#### *3. Exploring Strategies To Keep Recovery on Track by Focusing on the Present*

The phrase "One Day at a Time" comes from 12-Step programs and is useful for clients to bear in mind. Twelve-Step and mutual-help programs teach clients a new way to structure their experience so

that they are focused more on their immediate reality. Clients should strive to be less concerned about the past and less fretful about the future. The counselor might suggest exercise (especially repetitive exercise like walking, running, or swimming), meditation, or journal writing, but clients will know better than the counselor what practices and thoughts will help them focus more on the present.

### **Handout and Focused Discussion (45 minutes)**

Clients should be given time to complete the handout before the discussion begins. Clients should not be forced to comply if they find it difficult or uncomfortable to complete the handout in the group. The handout is primarily a tool for discussion. The counselor steers clients away from reading their responses and encourages them to converse about the issues the handout raises. The counselor ensures that all clients have an opportunity to participate.

- Go over handout RP 32—One Day at a Time.
- Ask clients whether they let thoughts from the past affect their current behavior. What kind of thoughts about the past do they have?
- Ask clients whether they tend to focus on negative thoughts about the past. What positive aspects of their past could clients recall instead?
- Ask clients whether fears about the future overwhelm them. What fears do clients have about the future?
- Ask clients whether they find it hard to make changes in their lives. Can they point to a time when they made a change in their lives and stuck with it?
- Ask the recovering co-leader to share his or her experiences of letting go of past worries and future fears and focusing on the present.

### **Open Discussion (30 minutes)**

The counselor should carry over from the previous discussion any important issues that have not been addressed fully. Although it is important for clients to be able to speak about what is on their minds, the counselor should make sure that the session's topic has been explored completely.

Five minutes before the end of open discussion, the counselor should ask clients to share briefly their experience of doing the homework from the previous session. The counselor can decide how detailed the followup on homework should be. The goal of asking is not to discover which clients have not done the homework but to encourage clients to work on their recovery between sessions and to share that work with the group.

### **Homework**

Have clients describe one activity that will help them focus more on the present and put it into practice before the next RP session.



People in recovery usually do not relapse because they cannot handle one difficult day or one troubling situation. Any given day or any single event usually is manageable. Things become unmanageable when the person in recovery allows events from the past or fears of the future to contaminate the present.

Beating yourself up about the past makes you less able to handle the present. You allow the past to make your recovery more difficult when you tell yourself

- “I can never do anything right. I always mess up every opportunity.”
- “If I try to do something difficult, I will fail. I always do.”
- “I always am letting people down. I always have disappointed everyone.”

You need to find a way to reject those negative thoughts when they come up. The thought-stopping techniques you learned in Early Recovery Skills (session 1) can help you move past these negative thoughts. Exercise, meditation, and journal writing also help you focus your mind and control your thoughts.

**Can you think of a recent situation in which you allowed the past to make the present more difficult?**

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Don't allow things that *might* happen in the future to overwhelm you in the present. You can plan ahead and be prepared, but you can do little else about the unknown. You can address only what is happening right now, today. You are filling yourself with fear when you tell yourself



## One Day at a Time

- “Tomorrow something will happen to ruin this.”
- “That person is going to hate me for this.”
- “I will never be able to make it.”

**What things do you tell yourself that make you fear the future?**

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When you have these thoughts, it may help to remind yourself of times when you did not let your past behavior influence the future. Think of times when you broke away from an old, destructive pattern. Calling a friend who can remind you of your successes is a good way to keep yourself focused on today and reject fearful thoughts of the future.

**What things can you tell yourself that will bring you back to the present?**

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