



Alcohol, Nicotine & Vaping

The legal drugs, taken seriously · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Two drugs get a pass that no other drug gets. They're sold at every corner store, advertised at every game, and woven so deep into ordinary life that calling them drugs can sound dramatic. So let's say it plainly: alcohol is a sedative that kills more Americans than almost every illegal drug combined, and nicotine, in any package, is one of the most addictive substances known. Legal has never meant safe. Legal only means the government regulates and taxes it.

Both matter to this room in specific ways. Alcohol, because "I never had a drinking problem" is one of the most common doorways back to a drug problem: alcohol lowers the same guard, feeds the same wanting system, and sits legally on every table you'll ever eat at. And nicotine, because most people in recovery smoke or vape, most want to quit someday, and the research says something most treatment programs didn't used to: quitting nicotine during recovery doesn't threaten sobriety. It strengthens it. This session takes both seriously: what alcohol does and where it hides in a recovery, what nicotine does in its new packaging, and how to decide, honestly, what each one's place in your life is going to be.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

- | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| CLASS 1 | 1. Alcohol, the Licensed Drug | 2. The Side Door |
| CLASS 2 | 3. Nicotine's New Packaging | 4. Your Policy |

After this session you will be able to

- Describe what alcohol actually does, including the four-stage slide into dependence
- Explain why alcohol is a side door back to any drug of choice
- Say what vaping actually delivers, behind the fruit flavors
- Write your personal policy on both, with reasons you believe

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to look at the legal drugs with the same honesty you've learned to aim at the illegal ones, including the ones in your pocket right now. Nobody here will shame a smoker; most rooms like this are full of them. The ask is honesty, and a policy you choose on purpose.

Part 1: Alcohol, the Licensed Drug

WAIT, REALLY?

Coming off alcohol after heavy, long use is **more medically dangerous than coming off heroin**.

Opioid withdrawal is misery; serious alcohol withdrawal can be seizures and death. The legal one is the one that needs a doctor to quit.

What it is: a sedative. It quiets the brain, loosens the brakes, and at higher doses shuts down coordination, judgment, memory (blackouts), and eventually breathing. Dependence builds in four rough stages: tolerance creeps up; memory gaps appear; control slips (this is when the self-made rules start: only beer, only weekends, never before five); and finally drinking becomes maintenance, drinking just to feel normal. The body damage reads like a textbook index: liver, heart, blood pressure, cancers, brain. None of this needs to be your story for alcohol to matter to your recovery, and that's Part 2.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. Alcohol was part of my story, main or supporting role. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I've seen the four stages in someone I know. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I knew alcohol withdrawal could be deadlier than opioid withdrawal. ☐ Yes
☐ No

EXERCISE 2: ALCOHOL'S ROLE IN MY STORY

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Main character | ☐ The comedown manager |
| ☐ Supporting role (rode along with my drug) | ☐ The social cover ("at least I'm just drinking") |
| | ☐ Barely present |

In one sentence, alcohol's job in my using years: _____

Part 2: The Side Door

Here's the conversation this part exists for: the person whose problem was meth, or pills, or heroin, who figures a beer is a different question. The biology disagrees, three ways. Alcohol lowers the guard: the first thing it sedates is judgment, the exact faculty running your recovery. Alcohol wakes up the craving itself: a buzz reminds your brain what "more" felt like, and your brain knows your drug of choice delivers more than a drink does. And alcohol rebuilds the old scene: the drink puts you back in bars, parties, and company where the drug of choice is one conversation away. Treatment lore has a blunt name for it: the side door. People rarely relapse through the front.

EXERCISE 3

Answer yes or no:

1. Alcohol has ever led me back toward my drug of choice. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I've told myself drinking "doesn't count" for me. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I know someone whose relapse started with "just drinks." ☐ Yes ☐ No

Trish

Trish's problem was pills, never alcohol, and everyone agreed, including her. Five months in, she has two glasses of wine at her sister's birthday, and genuinely, nothing happens. Which becomes the evidence: see, wine is fine. Wine on Fridays, then wine on hard days. The night it mattered, she wasn't even drunk, just two glasses soft, when an old friend texted about pills. Sober Trish had deleted that number twice. Wine Trish typed back "what do you have." She said later the wine never felt like relapse. It just unlocked the door and left it open.

EXERCISE 4

1. What did the uneventful first night "prove," and why was that the trap?

2. Name the three side-door mechanics in Trish's story:

3. What's your honest side-door risk, even if alcohol was never your thing?

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What has "at least it's legal" excused in your life or your family's?
- Wine Trish texted back. What's the version of that split in you?

Part 3: Nicotine's New Packaging

WAIT, REALLY?

One vape pod can carry **about as much nicotine as a pack of cigarettes**, and research keeps finding that people in recovery who quit smoking are **more likely to stay sober**, not less. The old advice to "worry about that later" had it backwards.

What changed: nicotine's delivery got engineered: salts that go down smooth, flavors built for young palates, devices that never have to be stubbed out, so there's no natural end to a session the way a cigarette ends. Same drug, better packaging, and the same two-way habit loop: nicotine for stress, nicotine for boredom, nicotine tied to coffee, driving, and breaks, so it ends up attached to the same daily moments that hold your other triggers. The health picture did not improve either: smoking remains the thing most likely to eventually kill a person in recovery who beats their drug of choice, and vaping's long-term health costs are still unknown. None of this is a demand to quit today. It is just the honest information, because most people here were handed the "worry about it later" advice without ever being given the facts.

EXERCISE 5

Answer yes or no:

1. I smoke or vape now. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. My nicotine is tied to other routines (coffee, driving, breaks, stress). ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I was told "worry about cigarettes later" in treatment or the rooms. ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Part of me wants off nicotine someday. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 6: WHERE NICOTINE IS TIED INTO YOUR DAY

Nicotine attaches itself to daily routines. Check yours:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| ☐ With coffee | ☐ Stress moments |
| ☐ Driving | ☐ Outside meetings (the smokers' circle) |
| ☐ Work breaks | ☐ Boredom / scrolling |
| ☐ After meals | ☐ First thing after waking |

The routine that would be hardest to separate from nicotine:

Part 4: Your Policy

Here's the honest frame for both drugs: you're going to have a policy either way. Drifting is a policy; it's just one nobody chose. A chosen policy has three parts: the rule, the reason you actually believe, and the plan for the moment the rule gets tested. For alcohol in recovery from any substance, the clinical recommendation is plain and this program makes it plainly: abstinence, because of the side door. Your reason, though, has to be yours; borrowed reasons fail at parties. For nicotine, the honest options are: quit now (with help, free help exists: 1-800-QUIT-NOW, patches and gum often covered, and your counselor can route you), pick a quit window ("when I hit six months"), or not yet, honestly held, with at least one routine separated from nicotine so a smoke break isn't carrying your other triggers around.

EXERCISE 7: MY ALCOHOL POLICY

My rule: _____

My reason, the one I actually believe: _____

The moment it will get tested next (be specific): _____

My line for that moment, word for word: _____

EXERCISE 8: MY NICOTINE POSITION

Where I honestly am (quitting now / quit window / not yet):

If a window: when, and what help I'll use: _____

One routine I'm willing to separate from nicotine this week:

SKILL OF THE DAY: SAY YOUR POLICY

Say your alcohol policy, the rule and the reason, out loud to one person this week. A policy you have never said out loud is not fully real yet. Saying it to another person is what locks it in.

Take it to the group

- What did your family's relationship with alcohol teach you before any drug did?
- Side door: who's seen it happen? What did it look like at the start?
- What would quitting nicotine actually cost you, and what might it buy your sobriety?
- Say your policy's reason out loud. Does it sound like yours or like something borrowed?

Session summary

Legal never meant safe. Alcohol is a sedative with a four-stage slide into dependence and a side-door relationship to every other drug of choice, and nicotine is the same old drug in engineered new packaging, attached to the daily routines that carry your other triggers. In this session you got the honest facts on both, examined the side door up close, and wrote chosen policies (the rule, the real reason, the tested moment, the exact line) instead of drifting into accidental ones.

Words used in this session

- **The side door:** alcohol's path back to a drug of choice: lowered guard, fed wanting system, rebuilt scene.
- **The four stages:** tolerance, memory gaps, slipping control, maintenance drinking.
- **Nicotine salts:** the chemistry that makes vapes smooth enough to use all day. Same drug, better packaging.
- **A chosen policy:** rule + reason you believe + plan for the tested moment. The alternative is drifting, which is also a policy.

Takeaway: Take the legal drugs as seriously as the ones that brought you here. Close the side door on purpose, see nicotine for what it is behind the packaging, and have a policy you chose, with a reason that is actually yours.
