



RECOVERY IN FOCUS · GROUP CURRICULUM · FACILITATOR GUIDE

Boredom and the Flat Months

Anhedonia, empty time, and rebuilding reward. Four parts, two group classes.

Topic category (billing anchor)	Relapse Prevention / Craving Management, with Emotional Regulation
Clinical focus	Post-acute reward blunting and unstructured time as relapse drivers; structured scheduling and behavioral activation as relapse prevention
Evidence base	Behavioral activation (CBT) · Relapse Prevention (Marlatt) · MI stance
Format	One participant packet · two group classes of about 2 hours each · Class 1 = Parts 1–2 · Class 2 = Parts 3–4
Group rules	2 to 12 clients, same time · at least 1 active Medi-Cal beneficiary · no minors mixed with adults

This file: facilitator guide

class agendas, depression-screen handoff, FIRP

Companion file: participant packet (print one 4 parts · 9 exercises · 1 vignette · empty-hours list per member) · restart plan

FACILITATOR GUIDE

How to run this session

- **VALIDATE THE FLATNESS FIRST:** this session succeeds the moment the room hears that flatness is chemistry, temporary, and almost universal. Members have been quietly concluding "sober life is just like this." Retire that conclusion early and watch shoulders drop.
- **LINK:** the dangerous-hour go-around is the linking engine; members who share a Sunday-at-five should leave with each other's numbers.
- **TEACH LIGHT, TALK PLAIN:** the packet uses exactly one image for the neurobiology, a volume knob turned down low. Use that image and no other; do not add science on top of it, and do not improvise extra metaphors. This packet was deliberately rewritten in plain language after group members found figurative phrasing confusing.
- **LAND IT CLINICALLY:** every segment returns to "I was just bored" as a real relapse pathway, and planning empty hours as real relapse prevention.

Mixed-functioning group adjustments

- Read everything aloud; writing optional; you or a peer can fill maps.
- The empty-hours list works at every level; for lower-functioning rooms, run the whole session on the list, one planned hour, and one restart.

DEPRESSION HANDOFF GUARDRAIL

Exercise 2 deliberately separates ordinary flatness from depression. A member who marks the third option (two-plus weeks, most of the day, nothing sounds good) gets a same-day individual check-in and routing per facility protocol, not a group discussion of their symptoms. If anything darker surfaces, follow your crisis protocol; 988 is call-or-text. The Hard Emotions session carries the full safety protocol; this one borrows its handoff.

HOOK SOURCE NOTE: the shock study is real (University of Virginia, published in Science, 2014: participants sat alone with their thoughts 6 to 15 minutes; a majority of men and a quarter of women self-administered shocks they'd earlier said they'd pay to avoid; one outlier shocked himself 190 times). Reward-system recovery over weeks-to-months reflects imaging research in stimulant recovery (the classic 10-day vs 100-day scans). Present numbers as approximate.

CLASS 1

Parts 1 and 2 (about 2 hours)

Opening (10 min)

Frame: *"Nobody warned you about this part: why everything feels flat, why that's temporary, and why boredom deserves respect as a relapse risk."* Icebreaker: "One word for how sober life has felt lately." Collect the words; "fine," "flat," and "quiet" will dominate, and that's the session's permission slip.

Part 1: The Flat Feeling (40 to 50 min)

Teach (5 min or less): anhedonia in plain words, using only the volume-knob image: years of oversized signals made the brain turn its own volume down, and it comes back up slowly. Then the shock-study hook and its turn: if normal brains fight nothingness that hard, respect what nothing feels like in this room.

PLAIN "What used to feel good that feels quiet now?"

DEEPER "What have you decided the flatness means about sober life? Where did that conclusion come from?"

- **Exercise 1** (yes/no): item 3 is the confession half the room is carrying; normalize it loudly.
- **Exercise 2** (flat / rested / possibly depressed): walk the three distinctions on the board; handle third-option marks per the guardrail, individually.
- **Exercise 3** (the discouraging thought): volunteers only; board the thoughts. "Is this it?" appearing twice on the board does more than any lecture.

Part 2: Why Boredom Is Dangerous (45 to 55 min)

Teach (5 min or less): a bored wanting system searches memory for the biggest reward it knows; boredom doesn't feel like danger, it feels like a slow Sunday; and it stacks with lonely, restless, and payday.

- **Exercise 4** (yes/no): item 2 (empty days beat hard days for using thoughts) reframes risk for most of the room.
- **Cole vignette + Exercise 5:** read aloud. Question 2 is the core: "something to do" out-argues "I need it" because it sounds harmless. Question 3's day-and-hour specificity sets up Class 2; collect the answers, you'll reuse them.

Close Class 1 with the talk-it-out questions. Assign: notice your flattest, emptiest hour this week and just write down when it was.

CLASS 2**Parts 3 and 4 (about 2 hours)**

Opening (10 min)

Check in: when was the flattest hour this week? Compare against the dangerous hours named last class; the matches teach the pattern.

Part 3: Empty Time (50 to 60 min)

Teach (5 min or less): planning ahead beats arguing with boredom in the moment; using filled the whole week and sobriety hands those hours back empty; appointments beat intentions because an appointment has a time and a person attached.

- **Exercise 6** (empty-hours list): members fill in their week, then go around on the single highest-risk stretch. Board the stretches; cluster the matches.
- **Exercise 7** (put a plan in the hour): all four lines, read aloud, with start times. Challenge vagueness kindly: "'hang out more' loses to boredom; what time Sunday, with who?" Members with matching hours should plan them together; engineer that where you can.

Part 4: Turning the Volume Back Up (45 to 55 min)

Teach (5 min or less): natural rewards (move, make, finish, learn, real company) bring the volume back faster; they feel underwhelming at first and members should do them anyway; don't keep checking whether things feel good yet (the packet states the watched-pot saying in full, so you can use it); name the fast-reward traps that deepen boredom (scrolling, gambling, all-day gaming) and cross-reference the Hooked by Design and Sports Betting sessions.

- **Exercise 8** (what you used to enjoy): the pre-using years hold the inventory; go around on "the one I could restart this month."
- **Exercise 9** (the restart): smallest-first-step discipline; twenty minutes or less, dated. The "what I'll remind myself when it feels underwhelming" line is the relapse-prevention sentence; collect several aloud.
- **Skill of the day:** one real thing a day, twenty minutes, rate nothing. Promise the check-in.

Close with the group questions and the summary, read aloud, landing on "it does come back."

FIRP scaffold (one note per member, per class)

Class 1. Focus: member's relapse-prevention objective, plus today's topic: reward blunting and boredom as relapse risk in early recovery. **Intervention:** *Educated group on post-acute reward-system blunting and its temporary course, normalizing flat mood in early recovery; facilitated differentiation of transient flatness, restorative rest, and depressive symptoms with individual routing where indicated; facilitated self-inventories of boredom-linked using patterns and identification of each member's highest-risk unstructured time; facilitated vignette analysis of boredom-driven relapse reasoning; linked members' patterns and processed responses.* **Response:** individualize; document any depression-screen routing. **Plan:** track the week's flattest hour; return for Class 2.

Class 2. Focus: same objective, plus today's topic: structuring unstructured time and behavioral activation. **Intervention:** *Reviewed tracking homework; guided each member through mapping weekly empty hours by risk level and writing a specific furnishing plan with start time, involved persons, and a backup; educated group on rebuilding natural reward through scheduled earned-reward activities and avoidance of compensatory fast-reward behaviors; guided a written restart plan for a previously valued activity with a dated first step; assigned daily behavioral-activation practice.* **Response:** individualize, including specificity of plans. **Plan:** execute furnished hour and daily deposit with report-back; peer pairing where arranged; individual follow-up where indicated.

COMPLIANCE NOTES: 2 to 12 clients, same time; at least one active Medi-Cal beneficiary; no one 17 or under mixed with adults (outside a certified school site). Facilitator: licensed/registered clinician or certified/registered AOD counselor, in scope. Participant list each class; one note per member per class with attendance plus that member's specific response, provider-signed, finalized within 3 business days (service day counts as day 0), tied to that member's problem list or objective. Land every segment on the substance-use and relapse link.