



Hard Emotions

Depression, guilt & fear in recovery · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

For a lot of people, substances had one job above all the others: turning feelings off. It worked, for a while, on everything: sadness, guilt, fear, grief, even joy, because the switch doesn't pick and choose. Then sobriety arrives and the feelings come back, sometimes all at once, sometimes years' worth. Counselors sometimes call this the thaw. It is one of the least-warned-about parts of early recovery: you did the right thing, and you feel worse. That is not a sign recovery is failing. It is a sign the switch is off.

This session is about the three heaviest ones. **Depression**, which is more than sadness and has a clinical meaning worth knowing, because about half of people with a substance use disorder will deal with a mental health condition too, and the combination is so common clinicians have a name for it: **co-occurring. Guilt and shame**, which sound alike but work very differently, and one of them is far more dangerous to your sobriety than the other. And **fear**, including the quiet kind that never says its name. We'll look at how each one connects to using, how to tell normal weather from a real storm, and what to do with feelings now that turning them off is no longer the plan.

What is in this session?

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

CLASS 1 1. The Thaw 2. Sadness vs. Depression

CLASS 2 3. Guilt and Shame 4. Fear and the Daily Report

After this session you will be able to

- Explain why feelings get bigger in early recovery, and why that's expected
- Tell the difference between sadness and depression, and know when to ask for more help
- Tell guilt from shame, and use guilt's exit: repair
- Name feelings daily instead of storing them, starting with a one-line weather report

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to name feelings out loud, which may be newer and harder than it sounds. Go at your own pace. One thing is not optional: if the dark thoughts in this packet ever stop being about the past and start being about today, tell staff before you leave. That's not a group exercise. That's the deal.

Part 1: The Thaw

WAIT, REALLY?

Roughly **half** of people with a substance use disorder will also experience a mental health condition like depression or anxiety. It's so common there's a word for it: co-occurring. If that's you, you are not the exception in this room. You might be the majority.

Why the feelings got loud: the switch was never selective. Years of numbing means years of feelings that got postponed, not canceled. In sobriety they come due, and they arrive in a body that's out of practice at holding them. On top of that, early recovery brains are still rebalancing their own chemistry, which can flatten mood all by itself for a while. Expect moods that are loud, uneven, and sometimes out of nowhere. The skill is not stopping them. The skill is learning to tell a passing mood (think of it as weather) from a lasting pattern (think of it as climate), and that is exactly what Part 2 teaches.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. Since getting sober, some feelings have come back louder than I expected. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. I've felt worse emotionally in sobriety than I did while using, at least some days.
☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There are feelings I honestly don't have names for yet. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2: WHAT CAME BACK

Check the feelings that have shown up, or shown up louder, since you stopped using:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Sadness | ☐ Grief for people or years |
| ☐ Guilt about the past | ☐ Loneliness |
| ☐ Fear or worry | ☐ Boredom or flatness |
| ☐ Anger | ☐ Joy (yes, that one can be scary too) |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

The one that's hardest for me to sit with: _____

Part 2: Sadness vs. Depression

Sadness is weather. It follows losses, it moves through in hours or days, and life keeps working underneath it. **Depression** is climate. Clinicians use the word for something specific: most of the day, nearly every day, for two weeks or more, with things like no energy, no interest in what you used to enjoy, sleep gone wrong in either direction, trouble thinking, feeling worthless. Depression is not weakness and not an attitude problem. It's a treatable condition, and treating it supports sobriety rather than threatening it. That includes antidepressant medication, which is not mood-altering in the way substances are. Taking it as prescribed is not a relapse. It never was.

EXERCISE 3: WEATHER OR CLIMATE?

Check any that have been true for you for two weeks or longer at a stretch:

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Down or empty most of the day, most days | ☐ No energy for basics (shower, dishes, mail) |
| ☐ Nothing I used to enjoy sounds good | ☐ Trouble concentrating or deciding |
| ☐ Sleeping way too little or way too much | ☐ Feeling worthless or like a burden |
| | ☐ Dark thoughts that scare me |

Several checks is not a diagnosis; it's a conversation to have with your counselor this week. Checking the last one means having that conversation today, before you leave.

READ THIS ONE STRAIGHT

If thoughts of not wanting to be here ever move from the past tense to the present, tell staff today, tell your person tonight, or call or text **988** any hour. Dark thoughts are a symptom, not a verdict, and they pass with help. In this program, asking is never the wrong move.

Jess

Jess has been sober four months and can't point to anything wrong. That's what confuses her. She's stopped going to the gym, then stopped texting back, then stopped cooking. Showering feels like a project. In group she says she's "fine, just tired." Driving home she thinks, what's the point of all this work if I feel like nothing. And right behind that thought, for the first time in months: at least using felt like something.

EXERCISE 4

1. Weather or climate? What gives it away? _____
2. What did "fine, just tired" cost Jess? _____
3. Follow the chain: flatness, "what's the point," craving. Why does depression lead there?

4. What would you want Jess to say in group instead of "fine"? Write her the sentence.

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What has the thaw been like for you so far, and which feeling came back first?
- What's your honest version of "fine, just tired"?

Part 3: Guilt and Shame

WAIT, REALLY?

Guilt and shame are not the same feeling, and researchers find they push in opposite directions.

Guilt says "I did a bad thing." Shame says "I am a bad thing." Guilt tends to push people toward repair. Shame pushes people toward hiding, and hiding is where relapse lives.

Guilt has an exit. Guilt is pain about something you did, which means it points at something fixable: an amends, a repair, a changed behavior. Used right, guilt gets repairs made. **Shame has no exit, only hiding places.** Shame says the problem is you, so there's nothing to repair and no point trying. People drink and use over shame constantly, because the substance is the fastest hiding place ever built. The move that saves people is converting shame back into guilt: from "I am garbage" to "I did specific things, and specific things can be repaired."

EXERCISE 5

Answer yes or no:

1. I've used over a feeling that was really shame, when I look at it now. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. There are things I did in addiction I haven't told anyone. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. It's easier for me to believe "I'm a bad person" than "I did bad things I can repair."
☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 6: THE CONVERSION

Take one shame sentence and convert it:

The shame version ("I am..."): _____

The guilt version ("I did..."): _____

One repair that version points to: _____

Vic

Vic slipped on a Saturday, once, after seven clean months. By Monday he hasn't told his sponsor. By Thursday he's skipped two meetings, because walking in means saying it. The slip took one night. The hiding is taking the whole week, and the longer he hides, the more the voice says see, you never changed. Friday he finally texts his sponsor one sentence: "I messed up Saturday and I've been hiding." His sponsor replies in a minute: "Thanks for telling me. Coffee before the 7:00?" The voice goes quiet for the first time all week.

EXERCISE 7

1. Which hurt Vic's recovery more, the slip or the hiding?

2. What was the shame sentence in Vic's head? _____

3. Why did one honest text do what a week of white-knuckling couldn't?

Part 4: Fear and the Daily Report

Fear wears disguises. Some fear is loud and obvious. But a lot of recovery fear runs quiet and constant: fear of failing again, fear people will never trust you, fear of feelings themselves, fear of being truly seen. Quiet fear does not announce itself; it shows up looking like procrastination, isolation, controlling behavior, or "I'm fine." The treatment for every kind of fear starts the same way: the fear has to get named. A named fear shrinks; researchers have found that putting feelings into words measurably turns down the brain's alarm. An unnamed fear keeps steering your decisions without you ever seeing it.

EXERCISE 8: THE FEAR LIST

Check yours, add your own:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Failing at recovery again | ☐ Money and the future |
| ☐ Never being trusted again | ☐ Being alone |
| ☐ Feelings themselves | ☐ Health consequences catching up |
| ☐ Being really known | ☐ Other: _____ |

The fear that steers the most of my life without being named:

EXERCISE 9: THE WEATHER REPORT

The daily skill for all of it, depression, guilt, shame, fear, is one honest sentence a day, said to one human: "Today I feel ___ because ___." Practice three right now, about today:

Today I feel _____ because _____

Today I also feel _____ because _____

Under all of it, I think I feel _____ because _____

EXERCISE 10: THE PLAN

My daily weather report goes to (person): _____

If climate sets in (two heavy weeks), I will tell: _____

One repair my guilt is pointing at: _____

If dark thoughts turn present-tense, I will (staff / my person / 988):

SKILL OF THE DAY: THE WEATHER REPORT

One sentence, once a day, to one person: "Today I feel ___ because ___." Not a conversation, not a therapy session, one sentence. Feelings that get named daily don't have to get numbed monthly. Report back next group.

Take it to the group

- What did the substance's off-switch cost you, along with what it gave you?
- Guilt or shame: which one visits you more, and what does it say in your voice?
- Which hurt Vic more, the slip or the hiding, and what does that mean for your own worst day?
- What would change if the people closest to you got one honest weather report a day?

Session summary

Sobriety turns the feelings back on, and that thaw is expected, not a malfunction. This session you learned to tell weather from climate and when to ask for more help, to convert shame ("I am bad") back into guilt ("I did things I can repair"), to name the quiet fears that have been steering without permission, and to practice the one-sentence daily weather report that keeps feelings from piling up unnamed.

Words used in this session

- **The thaw:** feelings returning, sometimes loudly, after years of being numbed. Expected in early recovery.
- **Co-occurring:** having a substance use disorder and a mental health condition at the same time. Extremely common, and both get treated.
- **Depression:** more than sadness: most of the day, most days, two weeks or more, with energy, sleep, interest, and self-worth affected. Treatable.

- **Guilt vs. shame:** guilt says "I did a bad thing" and points to repair. Shame says "I am a bad thing" and points to hiding.
 - **988:** the national crisis line. Call or text, any hour, no cost.
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Takeaway: Feelings came back because you did the right thing. Name the weather daily, report the climate, convert shame into guilt and guilt into repair. And if it ever gets dark in the present tense, say so the same day. Asking is never the wrong move.
