



Hooked by Design

Dopamine, Phones & Rage · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Think about what a craving actually is. Before your hands ever moved, something in your brain had already started hunting. That something has a name: dopamine. Scientists call it the reward neurotransmitter. In plain terms, it is the chemical of wanting. It doesn't deliver the pleasure itself. It delivers the pull: the restless push to go get the thing. People in recovery know that pull better than anyone, because addiction is what happens when it gets trained onto a substance.

The wanting system is not the enemy. It is an old survival instinct. It made our ancestors hunt when they were hungry, build shelter before winter, and stay close to other people. It still drives the healthy parts of life: a good meal, a workout, finishing a job, music, winning a game, someone you love walking into the room. All of that feeds dopamine, and all of it leaves you better off. A substance feeds the same system differently: harder, faster, and without anything being earned. Fed that way over and over, the system gets trained to chase the fast version. That training is the engine of addiction.

Here is the part that matters for this group: getting sober does not shut the system down. The wanting system keeps running every day, still trained, still hunting. That is part of why early recovery can feel restless and flat at the same time. A system that got used to big, fast rewards does not go quiet. It goes looking.

And the modern world is glad to feed it. Some of the largest industries on earth now make their money handing the wanting system small, fast hits all day long. This session studies two of them that almost everyone carries through the day. If it sounds strange at first that a recovery group would spend time on phones and anger, that reaction is fair. Stay with it. By the end of the first hour, the connection to cravings, triggers, and relapse will be hard to unsee. We're going to look at how these loops work, what they have to do with staying sober, and what to feed the system instead.

What is in this session?

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

CLASS 1 1. The Wanting System 2. The Slot Machine in Your Pocket

CLASS 2 3. Rage Is a Drug 4. Feeding the System on Purpose

After this session you will be able to

- Explain in your own words what dopamine does and how addiction trained it
- Spot the pull of the phone before you act on it, and name what's underneath it
- Recognize when anger is working like a drug for you

- Pick healthier ways to feed the wanting system, and commit to one plan for the week

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to look honestly at two habits most of us don't think of as recovery issues: how we use our phones, and how we use our anger. Some of it may hit close to home. That's normal, and it's the point. Nobody here is going to shame you about your phone. Staff are hooked on theirs too.

Part 1: The Wanting System

Wanting and liking are not the same thing

Dopamine fires *before* a reward, not after. It's the chemical of wanting, and it drives the hunt. Here's the part that matters for recovery: wanting and liking run on different brain systems. Wanting can stay strong, or even grow, while the actual enjoyment fades. Most people in recovery know this feeling personally. Near the end, a lot of people weren't even enjoying the substance anymore. They just wanted it.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. Near the end of my use, I kept using even when I wasn't really enjoying it anymore.
☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I have wanted something so strongly that I went after it even though I knew I wouldn't feel good afterward. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There are things in my life right now that I want a lot more than I actually like.
☐ Yes ☐ No

Two kinds of hits

Not every dopamine hit is a problem. The slower, earned kind (exercise, cooking a real meal, finishing something, learning a skill, real connection) raises your baseline and leaves you better than it found you. The fast, unearned kind (substances, gambling, endless scrolling, rage-bait, sugar binges) spikes the system and then drops it, leaving you more restless than before. Clinicians call the pattern behind the fast kind reinforcement; in plain terms, the hit teaches your brain to come back for more. The goal in recovery is not to kill the wanting instinct. The goal is to feed it on purpose, from the slow column instead of the fast one.

The wanting system is still running

Addiction trained the wanting system hard, and that training doesn't disappear with sobriety. The system keeps looking for places to get its hits. For a lot of people it lands on things that seem harmless: the phone, sugar, energy drinks, gambling, shopping, drama.

EXERCISE 2

Check everywhere you feel "the pull" these days. Be honest, nobody grades this. Then go back through your checks: circle the ones that leave you better off, and underline the ones that quietly cost you.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ My phone | ☐ Shopping / online ordering |
| ☐ Social media | ☐ Porn |
| ☐ Video games | ☐ Gossip or drama |
| ☐ Sugar / junk food | ☐ Arguments / getting worked up |
| ☐ Energy drinks / caffeine | ☐ Work / staying busy |
| ☐ Gambling / lottery / scratchers | ☐ The gym |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

Which one is strongest right now? _____

EXERCISE 3

Write about one time, in addiction or in recovery, when you wanted something much more than you actually enjoyed it. What was that like?

Part 2: The Slot Machine in Your Pocket

WAIT, REALLY?

Studies that tracked real phone users found most people check their phones somewhere between **100 and 200 times a day**. Most of us guess way lower than our real number.

EXERCISE 4

Without checking your phone, write your honest guess:

I think I look at my phone about _____ times a day.

Now double it. Does the doubled number feel closer to the truth? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Why phones feel like that: Apps are built around the same trick a slot machine uses. Maybe there's a like. Maybe there's a message. Maybe there's something new. A "maybe" pulls on the brain harder than a sure thing. None of this is a weakness in you. Companies design it this way on purpose, and a brain that has been through addiction tends to respond to these loops more strongly, not less.

There's a second problem. The phone isn't just a dopamine machine. It also carries a lot of old triggers around in your pocket.

EXERCISE 5

Check any of these that live on YOUR phone:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Contacts or threads connected to using | ☐ Payment or money apps tied to old habits |
| ☐ Group chats where people still use | ☐ Payday or bank alerts that hit like a bell |
| ☐ Old photos from using days | ☐ Music or playlists tied to using |
| ☐ Feeds or accounts that glamorize using | ☐ Late-night scrolling when I can't sleep |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

Which one would be hardest to give up or change? _____

EXERCISE 6: BEFORE / AFTER MAP

Fill in your top three "reach for the phone" moments.

My top "reach for the phone" moments	Feeling right BEFORE	Feeling right AFTER	What ELSE have I used to change that same feeling?
1.			
2.			
3.			

Marcus

Marcus is six weeks sober. He's lying in bed, bored, and opens his phone. An old photo comes up from a party two summers ago. He thinks, "that was a good night." His chest gets tight. His heart speeds up. He starts wondering if his old contact still has the same number. He opens the thread.

EXERCISE 7

Answer about Marcus, then about yourself:

1. What was the trigger? _____

2. What was the first thought? _____

3. Where was the easiest place for Marcus to step out of this?

4. What would you tell Marcus to do the next time he's bored in bed with his phone?

5. What's your version of this story?

SKILL: SURF THE CHECK

When you feel the urge to check your phone, wait 10 seconds. Name the feeling underneath it (bored? anxious? lonely?). Then decide. You're not giving up your phone. You're putting a half second of choice into a habit that has been automatic. It's the same muscle you use to ride out a craving, and your phone gives you about a hundred chances a day to practice.

EXERCISE 8

My commitment for this week:

The phone habit I'm going to practice on is: _____

When the pull hits, my 10-second move is: _____

One phone change I'm willing to make this week (delete, mute, unfollow, move an app, phone out of the bedroom): _____

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What surprised you about your own answers today?
- Who else in this room struggles with the same pull you checked in Exercise 3?

Part 3: Rage Is a Drug (and the Algorithm Is the Dealer)

GROUP RULE FOR THIS PART

We don't debate what anyone is mad *about*. We look at what the anger *does to us*. **We study the slot machine, not the jackpot.**

WAIT, REALLY?

Advertising used to run on the old saying "sex sells." Researchers who study what spreads online found that **outrage spreads even better**. Angry posts travel further and get more clicks. The feeds we scroll are tuned to keep us worked up, because worked up means we keep scrolling.

The honest part: some anger feels good. Getting fired up comes with a rush of adrenaline and dopamine, especially when you feel like you're in the right. Anger is free, it's legal, it's always available, and nobody calls it a relapse. But it changes how you feel on demand, and that used to be the substance's job. A habit like that can run on the same wiring as addiction. Some people call it a cross-addiction. The feed makes it worse, because the algorithm learns what gets a rise out of you and keeps serving more of it.

One thing to be clear about: some anger is about real harm, and it deserves respect. The problem isn't having anger. The problem is letting a feed farm it from you all day for clicks.

EXERCISE 9

Anger shows up in the body. Check what happens in yours:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Jaw tightens | ☐ Can't sit still |
| ☐ Fists clench | ☐ Can't sleep |
| ☐ Face gets hot | ☐ Replay arguments in my head for hours |
| ☐ Chest gets tight | ☐ Snap at people who had nothing to do with it |
| ☐ Heart races | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Stomach knots up | |

EXERCISE 10

Answer yes or no:

1. I have re-read a message or post that made me mad, more than once, on purpose.

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. I have gone looking for content I knew would make me mad. ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. I have stayed up too late because I was worked up about something on my phone.

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. I have felt a little flat or restless on days when nothing made me mad. ☐ Yes

☐ No

5. Arguing with strangers online has cost me time or sleep. ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes to two or more, that's worth talking about in group. Not because you're broken. Because that's the loop working exactly as designed.

EXERCISE 11: MY RAGE DIET

Where I get my anger hits (feeds, accounts, people, topics)	What I honestly GET out of it	What it COSTS me
1.		
2.		
3.		

One item I'm willing to cut or cap this week: _____

Dawn

Dawn is four months sober. Most nights after work she ends up in the comments on her town's community page. Somebody is always wrong. She tells herself she's just keeping up with local news, but by 11 p.m. she's typing replies with her heart pounding, and at 1 a.m. she's still awake, wired and annoyed. The next day she's exhausted and short with everyone. On the drive home, for the first time in a couple of months, the old craving shows up.

EXERCISE 12

1. Where does Dawn get her anger hits? _____
2. What is it costing her? _____
3. What's the connection between her nights and the craving on the drive home?

4. What part of Dawn's story is familiar to you?

Part 4: Feeding the System on Purpose

You can't starve the wanting system. It's going to get fed one way or another, so the practical question is where. Fast hits (the phone, the feed, the argument, the sugar) spike the system and drop it, and leave you restless. Slower rewards (moving your body, finishing something, real connection) feed the same system without the drop. One more thing worth knowing: late-night scrolling wrecks sleep, and bad sleep raises relapse risk all by itself.

EXERCISE 13

Check the things you would actually do. Not the ones that sound good. The ones you'd actually do.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Walk | ☐ Clean or fix one thing |
| ☐ Gym / lift / run | ☐ Help somebody with something |
| ☐ Cold shower or cold water on your face | ☐ A hobby you dropped: _____ |
| ☐ Put on music | ☐ Play cards or a game with a real person |
| ☐ Call or text a sober friend | ☐ Sit outside |
| ☐ Go to a meeting | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Cook something | |

EXERCISE 14: MY PLAN FOR THE WEEK

One phone change I'm making: _____

One thing coming off or getting capped in my rage diet:

One thing from Exercise 13 I'm adding, and when: _____

One person who will know about this plan: _____

SKILL OF THE DAY: "NAME THE HIT"

Once a day this week, catch yourself in one of these loops (checking the phone, or scrolling something that makes you mad) and name it to yourself: "That's a dopamine hit." That's the whole assignment. Noticing the loop is the first step to having a say in it. Be ready to share one example next group.

Take it to the group

- How do you feel right before you check your phone? What about right after?
- Is there a kind of anger you actually kind of enjoy? Where do you get it?
- Where else in your life have you felt that same before-and-after pattern?
- What's on your plan for the week, and what might get in the way of it?

Session summary

Addiction trained your brain's wanting system, and that system is still running. The phone feeds it with slot-machine tricks and carries your old triggers. The feed can farm your anger the same way, and anger has a payoff just real enough to work like a drug. This session you mapped where the pull shows up for you, practiced putting a half second of choice into the loop, and made a plan for where your wanting system gets fed this week.

Words used in this session

- **Dopamine:** the brain chemical of wanting and seeking. It fires before a reward and drives the hunt.
- **Trigger:** anything your brain has linked to using, so that running into it pulls your mind toward the substance.
- **Variable reward:** a "maybe" reward, like a slot machine. Sometimes you get something, sometimes nothing. It hooks the brain harder than a sure thing.
- **Algorithm:** the software behind a feed that learns what keeps you watching and serves you more of it.
- **Cross-addiction:** a new compulsive habit that runs on the same brain wiring the addiction used.

Takeaway: You can't turn your dopamine system off, but you can learn its loops, slow them down, and pick where it gets fed. That is part of protecting your recovery.
