



Sex, Intimacy & Relationships

The triggers nobody brings up in group · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Every treatment center has a version of the advice: no new relationships in the first year. Most people hear it as the staff being killjoys, and most people ignore it, and the counselors keep giving it anyway, because they keep watching the same movie: someone three months sober meets someone, the new relationship becomes the program, the relationship hits its first real fight, and the relapse follows the breakup like thunder follows lightning. This session is about why that movie keeps playing. The short answer is chemistry. New romance lights up the same reward circuitry this group has spent weeks learning about, the dopamine of the new and unpredictable, which means a person in early recovery who falls in love is, as far as the brain is concerned, swapping one supply for another. It feels like healing. Often it is really just a trade: the new relationship takes over the job the substance used to do.

That's one corner of a topic treatment mostly mumbles about, and the mumbling is the problem, because sex and relationships sit near the center of most relapse stories. Substances and sex got tangled together for many people (using to feel confident, using as the price of staying in a relationship, sex traded for drugs or money), and untangling them is real clinical work, not locker-room talk. So this session does it straight: how use rewired this part of life, why early-recovery romance is a named relapse risk, what the rebound into old partners costs, and how to build relationships (romantic and not) that actually hold up. Ground rule up front: this room talks patterns, never performances. No war stories, no partners' names, nothing you'd regret Monday.

What is in this session?

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

CLASS 1 1. The Tangle 2. New Love, Old Circuitry

CLASS 2 3. The People From Before 4. Building What Holds

After this session you will be able to

- Describe how substance use and sex/relationships got linked in your own pattern
- Explain why new romance in early recovery is a recognized relapse risk
- Assess the people from your using life honestly: who's a trigger, who's a support
- Name what a recovery-safe relationship requires, and set your own timeline

What will be asked of you?

Honesty at the pattern level. Nobody shares history they don't choose to share, nothing explicit gets aired, and nobody's current relationship gets put on trial by the group. The work is yours; the room is

for the patterns everyone recognizes.

Part 1: The Tangle

WAIT, REALLY?

Brain imaging studies of people newly in love show reward-circuit activity in the **same dopamine pathways** that drugs act on, and researchers studying early passionate love describe craving, obsession, withdrawal-like distress, and relapse-style behavior when it ends. The rooms figured this out decades before the scanners did. That's why the first-year advice exists.

How the tangle forms: for most people the link built quietly over years. Using to quiet the nerves before intimacy, until confidence and the substance became the same thing. Relationships organized around using, where the substance was the third partner in the room. Sex traded, directly or indirectly, for drugs or for money. Or the opposite tangle: using to not feel anything in situations that weren't chosen, which is trauma territory and gets individual care, not group airtime. Whatever the shape, the result is the same: this part of life got wired to the substance, and sobriety does not automatically rewire it. Untangling it is a skill you practice, not something that happens on its own with enough clean time.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no (private reflection; share only what you choose):

1. Confidence in dating or intimacy and my substance got linked somewhere along the way. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. At least one relationship in my life was organized around using. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I've wondered how this part of life works sober. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2: MY TANGLE, MAPPED

Where did the substance sit in this part of your life? Check what applied:

- ☐ Liquid confidence before ☐ Part of the scene where I met people ☐ The thing a partner and I did together
- ☐ How I tolerated a bad relationship ☐ Part of how I attracted or kept partners
- ☐ Other: _____

The strand that will take the most untangling: _____

Part 2: New Love, Old Circuitry

Here is the mechanism behind the first-year advice, stated plainly. New romance delivers exactly what early recovery is starving for: big dopamine, a reason to get up, somebody who thinks you are wonderful, hours that fly instead of crawl. It fills the exact hole the Meaning session described, and it fills it fast. And that's the problem. The relationship becomes the recovery, meetings get skipped for dates, the support network thins because every evening is spoken for, and the whole structure now stands on one person staying. First real conflict, or the breakup, and the nervous system takes a hit indistinguishable from withdrawal while the person's coping skills are three months old. Counselors don't give the first-year advice because romance is bad. They give it because they've watched the handoff: new relationship in, program out, breakup, relapse. The advice isn't a rule this group enforces. It's a risk this group makes sure you can see.

Marcus

Marcus, four months sober, meets Elena in a coffee shop and the world turns technicolor. Within six weeks she's his whole calendar. His sponsor notices the missed meetings; Marcus explains, honestly, that he's never felt this good, that Elena does for him what the program was supposed to. His sponsor asks one question: "What's your plan for the first bad week?" Marcus doesn't have one. The bad week comes in month three, an ordinary fight about nothing, and Marcus sits in his car outside a liquor store for forty minutes, four months of skills against six weeks of chemistry. He calls his sponsor from the parking lot, which is the only reason this story gets told in the past tense.

EXERCISE 3

1. What did Elena replace in Marcus's week, concretely?

2. "Four months of skills against six weeks of chemistry": what tipped it to the phone call instead of the store? _____
3. What would YOUR plan for the first bad week need to include?

EXERCISE 4

Answer yes or no:

1. I've watched a new relationship become someone's whole program (mine or someone else's). ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. A breakup has been part of a relapse story I know (mine or someone else's).
☐ Yes ☐ No
3. If romance showed up next month, my current recovery structure would survive the distraction. ☐ Yes ☐ No

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- The first-year advice: who's heard it, who's ignored it, what happened? Patterns, not performances.
- Why does new romance work so well on the early-recovery hole specifically?
- What's the honest difference between a relationship that joins a recovery and one that replaces it?

Part 3: The People From Before

Then there's the other direction: not the new person but the old one. The ex who still uses. The partner you scored with, fought with, got sober away from, who texts "I miss you" at 11 p.m. on a lonely Tuesday. Rebound into the people from before is its own named relapse pattern, and it runs on the same loneliness this series keeps finding under everything. The honest framework: a person from your using life belongs in one of three columns. **Still using, still in the life:** contact is a trigger with a heartbeat, whatever the history, whatever the love. **In recovery too:** possible, with care, and best built slowly in daylight, not rekindled at 11 p.m. **Complicated:** most people, and complicated means the relationship gets a plan, not a free pass. The plan questions are always the same: What state am I usually in when I reach for this person? What happens to my recovery in the week after contact? Would I introduce them to my sponsor, my counselor, this group? The 11 p.m. text cannot answer any of those questions. That is exactly why it arrives at 11 p.m., when you are lonely and your guard is down.

EXERCISE 5: THE THREE COLUMNS

Initials only. Sort the people from your using life who still pull at you:

Still in the life (contact = trigger): _____

In recovery too (possible, slowly, in daylight): _____

Complicated (needs a plan): _____

For one complicated person: what state am I in when I reach for them?

EXERCISE 6

Answer yes or no:

1. There's a person from before whose text could still bend my week. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. The pull toward them is strongest when I'm lonely, bored, or stressed (the H.A.L.T. states). ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I know, honestly, which column they belong in. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Part 4: Building What Holds

None of this session says be alone forever. It says build in the right order. Intimacy that holds weight in recovery runs on the unglamorous materials: honesty that survives bad news, conflict that gets repaired with words instead of exits, a partner who knows about your recovery and treats it as structure to respect rather than competition to win against, and a self that has a week (meetings, people, purpose, the whole architecture this series has been building) that doesn't collapse when one person leaves it. Sober sex and sober dating are also skills with a learning curve; awkward is normal and temporary, and nobody owes anyone their history on a first date ("I don't drink" is a complete sentence; the fuller story is earned). Your timeline is yours, set with your counselor or sponsor, not by this packet and not by loneliness. The test for whether you're ready isn't a date on a calendar. It's a question: would the relationship be joining a life, or substituting for one?

EXERCISE 7: WHAT HOLDS

A relationship would be JOINING my life when (what has to be true of my week first):

My non-negotiables for a partner, sober-eyes version:

My timeline conversation happens with (counselor, sponsor, who):

One intimacy skill (honesty, repair, boundary) I can practice NOW, in non-romantic relationships: _____

EXERCISE 8

Answer yes or no:

1. My week could currently survive a breakup without the wheels coming off. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. The intimacy skills (honesty, repair, boundaries) have places to grow in my life right now, romance or not. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I know the difference, for me, between wanting a partner and wanting a rescue.
☐ Yes ☐ No

SKILL OF THE DAY: THE COLUMN CHECK

Before any contact with a person from before, run the three questions: What state am I in right now? What happened to my recovery after the last contact? Which column are they honestly in? Three questions, thirty seconds, before the thumb hits send.

Take it to the group

- What makes the 11 p.m. text so much stronger than the 11 a.m. version of the same thought?
- Marcus's sponsor asked one question. What's the question somebody should ask YOU?
- Which intimacy skill (honesty, repair, boundaries) is your weakest, and where could it get reps now?
- Joining a life versus substituting for one: how would you tell the difference from the inside?

Session summary

Substance use and sex/relationships got tangled for most people, and sobriety doesn't untangle them automatically. New romance runs on the same reward circuitry as substances, which is why early-recovery relationships that replace the program are a named relapse risk, and why the first-year advice exists. People from the using life get sorted honestly into three columns, and the complicated ones get a plan. What lasts is built in order: a week that stands on its own, then intimacy that joins it. The skills grow in every relationship you already have.

Words used in this session

- **The tangle:** the learned link between the substance and confidence, intimacy, or partnership. Untangling is skill work, not time served.
- **The handoff:** swapping the substance's dopamine for new-romance dopamine. Feels like healing, functions like supply.
- **The three columns:** still in the life / in recovery too / complicated. Contact plans follow the column, not the feelings.
- **Joining vs. substituting:** the readiness test. A relationship should join a week that already works.

Takeaway: Build the week first. Love that joins a working life makes the life stronger. Love that substitutes for a life ends up carrying weight no relationship can hold. You get to have this part of life back. In order.
