



Stress & the Nervous System

What stress does to a body in recovery · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Your body comes with an alarm system. Clinicians call it the **stress response**, or fight-or-flight. In plain terms, it is the body's way of getting you ready for danger: heart faster, breath shorter, muscles tight, mind racing. The alarm is old equipment and it works fast, firing before the thinking part of your brain gets a vote. That speed saved our ancestors from animals and falling rocks. It still saves lives today when a car swerves at you.

The alarm itself is healthy. A hard workout, a cold shower, a deadline you care about: these stress the body on purpose, and in small doses they make you stronger. The problem is an alarm that never fully shuts off. Bills, court dates, family conflict, a phone that buzzes all day: modern life can keep the alarm humming for weeks, and a body stuck on alert gets worn down, irritable, and desperate for relief.

Here is why this matters in this room: for years, substances were the off-switch. Alcohol and drugs shut the alarm up fast, every time, and your nervous system learned that lesson deeply. Getting sober takes away the off-switch but not the alarm. That's why stress is one of the most common reasons people return to use, and it's why learning to work with your own alarm system is not a side project in recovery. It is the project. In this session we look at how the alarm works, what sets yours off, how stress turns into craving, and the skills that calm a body down without a substance.

What is in this session?

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

CLASS 1 1. Your Alarm System 2. What Sets It Off

CLASS 2 3. Stress and Relapse 4. Working With the Alarm

After this session you will be able to

- Describe the stress response in your own words and spot it in your body early
- Name your main stressors and sort them into ones you can change and ones you can't
- Explain how stress turns into craving, and map your own stress-to-craving chain
- Use at least two body-based skills that calm the alarm without a substance

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to notice what stress does in your own body and to be honest about what sets you off. You will also practice the calming skills in session, out loud, with the group. That can feel awkward the first time. Do it anyway; a skill you've only read about won't be there when you need it.

Part 1: Your Alarm System

WAIT, REALLY?

Your alarm fires in **under a second**, before the thinking part of your brain gets a vote. By the time you notice you're stressed, your body has already been reacting for a while.

How it works: deep in the brain sits an alarm center (the amygdala). When it senses trouble, it dumps two chemicals into your system: **adrenaline**, which speeds everything up, and **cortisol**, which keeps you on alert. The alarm is fast, but it is not smart. It can't tell the difference between a real threat and an angry text, a court date, or a memory. It just fires.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. I've reacted to something before I had time to think about it. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Small things set me off more now than they used to. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There are days my body feels on alert even when nothing is wrong. ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. I can feel stress somewhere specific in my body. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2

Where does the alarm show up in YOUR body? Check what's true for you:

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Tight chest or shoulders | ☐ Headaches |
| ☐ Racing heart | ☐ Can't sit still |
| ☐ Short, shallow breathing | ☐ Can't sleep, or sleep all day |
| ☐ Clenched jaw or grinding teeth | ☐ Snapping at people |
| ☐ Stomach knots or no appetite | ☐ Going quiet and disappearing |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

My earliest warning sign, the first one that shows up:

EXERCISE 3

Write about the last time your alarm went off loud. What happened, and what did your body do before your mind caught up?

Part 2: What Sets It Off

A **stressor** is anything that makes a demand on you; stress is your body's reaction to it. Stressors come in three classic kinds, plus a modern fourth:

- **Frustrations:** something blocks your path. A lost job, a car that won't start, a denied application.
- **Pressures:** something pushes you to perform. Deadlines, probation terms, a family counting on you.
- **Conflicts:** you're pulled two directions. Two obligations at once, or a choice where both options cost you.
- **The drip:** small, constant hits all day. Notifications, news, money-app alerts, group texts. None of them big, all of them adding up. The drip keeps the alarm humming in the background, so the next real stressor lands on a body that's already tense.

EXERCISE 4: SORT YOUR STRESSORS

My three biggest stressors right now	Kind (frustration, pressure, conflict, drip)	Can I change it? (yes / no / partly)
1.		
2.		
3.		

EXERCISE 5

The drip. Check what pings at you through a normal day:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Phone notifications | ☐ Work messages after hours |
| ☐ News or feeds | ☐ Court dates or paperwork hanging over me |
| ☐ Money or banking alerts | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Group texts or family threads | |

One drip I could turn down this week: _____

Ray

Ray is two months sober. Tuesday his boss writes him up over something that wasn't his fault. On the drive home his phone keeps buzzing: his sister needs money again, and his probation officer moved his appointment. None of it is an emergency. All of it lands at once. At the store for bread, he finds himself standing in the beer aisle without remembering deciding to walk there.

EXERCISE 6

1. Name Ray's stressors and their kinds: _____
2. What was his body probably doing on that drive?

3. Ray didn't decide to walk to the beer aisle. What does that tell you about how stress works?

4. What's your version of the beer aisle?

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What's your earliest body warning sign, the one that shows up first?
- Which of your stressors surprised you when you sorted it as "can't change"?

Part 3: Stress and Relapse

WAIT, REALLY?

Researchers who study relapse keep finding the same thing: **stress is one of the strongest predictors of return to use**, right alongside being around the substance itself. Your body already knows why.

The chain: stress chemicals don't just make you tense. Cortisol primes the wanting system, so a stressed brain craves relief harder than a calm one. And your brain keeps records. For years, the fastest off-switch it ever found was the substance. So the chain runs: stressor, alarm, tension builds, the brain reaches for its best-known off-switch, craving. The old recovery shorthand H.A.L.T. points at the same truth: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired are all states that keep the alarm up and the guard down.

EXERCISE 7

When I'm stressed for days at a time, check what starts happening:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ I skip meetings or isolate | ☐ Using thoughts show up more |
| ☐ I eat junk or stop eating | ☐ "Forget it" thinking shows up |
| ☐ I stop sleeping right | ☐ I stop doing the recovery basics |
| ☐ I get short with everyone | ☐ Other: _____ |

EXERCISE 8: MY STRESS-TO-CRAVING CHAIN

Think of a recent stressful day that ended with using thoughts (or, earlier in your life, with using). Fill in the chain:

The stressor: _____

What my body did: _____

What I told myself: _____

Where the chain was weakest, the easiest place I could have stepped out:

Monica

Monica is six months sober. Her landlord threatens an eviction notice over a late fee she already paid. The call takes four minutes; she replays it for nine hours. By evening her shoulders ache, she's snapped at her son twice, and she can't eat. At 10 p.m., scrolling in bed with her chest still tight, the thought arrives, calm as a friend: one drink would turn this off.

EXERCISE 9

1. The call took four minutes. What kept Monica's alarm on for nine hours?

2. The craving showed up at night, long after the stressor. Why does that timing make sense?

3. Where in her nine hours could a skill have changed the night?

Part 4: Working With the Alarm

You can't argue an alarm quiet. The thinking brain is offline when the alarm is loud, which is why "calm down" has never calmed anyone down. The way in is through the body. These four skills all send the body a message the alarm understands: we're safe enough to stand down.

- **The long exhale.** Breathe in normally, then breathe out slowly, longer than the in-breath. Repeat five times. A long exhale is the body's built-in brake; it works even when you don't believe in it.
- **Cold water.** Cold water on the face and wrists, or a cold shower, gives the nervous system a hard reset.
- **Burn it off.** The alarm loads you with fuel for running or fighting. Spend it on purpose: a fast walk, push-ups, stairs. Ten minutes of movement does what an hour of stewing can't.
- **Ground with 5-4-3-2-1.** Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste. It pulls the mind out of the replay loop and back into the room.

EXERCISE 10: PRACTICE, RIGHT NOW

The group will do the long exhale together, five breaths, then 5-4-3-2-1. Afterward, rate it honestly:

Tension before (0 to 10): _____ Tension after (0 to 10): _____

Which of the four skills fits me best: _____

EXERCISE 11: COPE AHEAD

Pick one stressor you KNOW is coming (a court date, a family visit, a bill due).

The stressor I can see coming: _____

My first body warning sign will probably be: _____

The skill I'll use, and when: _____

The person I'll tell afterward: _____

EXERCISE 12

Stress shrinks in the telling. Who can actually hear about your stress? List two people and one backup:

1. _____ 2. _____

Backup (a meeting, a hotline, this group): _____

SKILL OF THE DAY: THE LONG EXHALE, THREE TIMES A DAY

Three times a day this week, stressed or not, do five long exhales. You're not waiting for an emergency; you're training the brake so it's there when you need it. Be ready to report back next group.

Take it to the group

- What was the substance's job in your stress system, and what is doing that job now?
- Which stressor on your list is really a "can't change," and what would accepting that free up?
- Monica replayed a four-minute call for nine hours. What do you replay?
- Which body skill actually moved your number in Exercise 10?

Session summary

Your body's alarm system is fast, dumb, and not going anywhere. For years a substance was the off-switch, and sobriety removed the switch, not the alarm. This session you mapped where the alarm shows up in your body, sorted what sets it off, traced how stress becomes craving, and practiced body-first skills that stand the alarm down. The brake gets stronger every time you use it.

Words used in this session

- **Stress response (fight-or-flight):** the body's automatic alarm: faster heart, quicker breath, tense muscles, racing mind.
- **Stressor:** anything that makes a demand on you. Stress is the body's reaction to it.
- **Adrenaline and cortisol:** the alarm chemicals. Adrenaline speeds you up now; cortisol keeps you on alert.
- **H.A.L.T.:** Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. Four states that keep the alarm up and the guard down.
- **Grounding:** any skill that pulls your attention out of the replay loop and back into the present room.

Takeaway: You cannot think an alarm quiet, but you can breathe it quiet, move it quiet, and tell somebody. The alarm itself is not the enemy. The danger is having no off-switch for it except a substance.
