



Your Story, Your Words

How the telling shapes the teller · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Everyone in this room carries a story, and everyone has already been telling it, in meetings, to family, in court, and most of all to themselves, in the private narration that runs all day. Here's what the research on recovery and identity keeps finding: the words of that story are not decoration. The words shape outcomes. In one well-known study, clinicians shown the same case judged the person more harshly and recommended more punishment when the write-up said "substance abuser" instead of "person with a substance use disorder." Same facts, different words, different treatment, and that was trained professionals. Now consider that you describe yourself to yourself hundreds of times a day, and ask what your own description says.

This session is about becoming the editor of your own story. Not rewriting history, the facts stay the facts, but choosing the frame, because every honest life story supports more than one telling. "I wrecked a decade" and "I survived a decade that kills people, and I'm here" are both true; they just build different people going forward. We'll work the self-talk layer (the daily narration), the identity layer (recovering FROM something versus recovering TOWARD something), and the out-loud layer: the versions of your story you'll need for different rooms, the meeting share, the family conversation, the two-sentence version for people who only get the trailer. Your story is yours. This session hands you the pen.

What is in this session?

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

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| CLASS 1 | 1. Words Build People | 2. The Daily Narration |
| CLASS 2 | 3. From and Toward | 4. The Tellings |

After this session you will be able to

- Explain how story framing shapes recovery outcomes, with the evidence
- Catch and edit your daily self-narration, the harshest write-up you own
- Say what you're recovering toward, not just from
- Carry three sized tellings of your story: the share, the conversation, the trailer

What will be asked of you?

Working with your own story at the frame level: no one is required to share their history, and the facts never get bent. Editing a frame isn't spin. Spin lies about the facts; framing chooses which true things lead.

Part 1: Words Build People

WAIT, REALLY?

In a study of trained clinicians, the **same case** got harsher judgments and more punishment recommendations when labeled "substance abuser" versus "person with a substance use disorder." Same facts, different words, different fate. Words aren't decoration. They're treatment decisions.

Why it works on you too: the brain treats repeated self-descriptions as facts to live up to, or down to. "I'm an addict, it's what we do" can quietly become permission. "I'm a person in recovery" sets a different default for the next decision. Recovery communities have known this forever, which is why the rooms are full of language rituals, and researchers keep confirming the mechanism: identity predicts behavior, and words build identity, one repetition at a time. You've been running repetitions your whole life. The question is only who's been writing them.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. I've called myself names I'd never let anyone call a friend. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Someone's label for me (good or bad) once changed how I acted. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. The way I tell my story changes depending on how I'm doing that week. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2: THE CURRENT WRITE-UP

If your private narration about yourself were boiled down to one summary line, what would it say? Write it honestly. Then mark it: does it read like a path (a story still going somewhere) or a verdict (a case already closed)?

My current summary line: _____

Path or verdict: _____

Part 2: The Daily Narration

The loudest storyteller in your life is the one narrating between your ears, and in recovery that narrator usually learned its style during the worst years: harsh, focused on your failures, stating its verdicts about you as if they were facts. You can't mute the narrator, but you can edit it, with the same two moves every editor uses. **Catch the frame:** notice when a fact arrives pre-packaged as a verdict ("I'm 38 and starting over, pathetic") and separate the fact from the packaging (38, starting over: fact; pathetic: packaging). **Re-frame with equal truth:** the replacement has to be TRUE or the brain spits it out; "38 and starting over, which takes more guts than staying down" survives the honesty test. This is the thought-checking skill from the Coping session, aimed at the story you tell about yourself.

EXERCISE 3: EDIT THREE LINES

Take three of your narrator's regular lines and edit them: same facts, truthful re-frame.

Line 1: _____

Edit: _____

Line 2: _____

Edit: _____

Line 3: _____

Edit: _____

EXERCISE 4

Answer yes or no:

1. My narrator's edits pass the honesty test (true, not just nicer). ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. My narrator gets harsher when I'm tired, hungry, or stressed. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I'd talk to a newcomer more kindly than my narrator talks to me. ☐ Yes ☐ No

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- Whose voice does your narrator use? It's usually somebody specific.
- Read one of your edits aloud. Does it survive the honesty test?

Part 3: From and Toward

Early recovery identity is mostly FROM: I'm staying away from the substance, the people, the life. Necessary, and not enough for the long haul, because a life defined only by what it avoids is a life standing still, and the Boredom session explained what standing still costs. The sturdier identity is TOWARD: the person you're building, the work, the people, the kind of man or woman you're becoming. Research on long recoveries finds the same shift: the people who last describe themselves less by the thing they left and more by the life they're in. The question that makes the shift concrete: finish "I'm becoming someone who..." with things that are already partly true, because identity grows from evidence, and you have been collecting evidence since the day you walked in.

EXERCISE 5: THE BECOMING LINES

Finish each with something already partly true (the honesty test applies):

I'm becoming someone who: _____

I'm becoming someone who: _____

I'm becoming someone who: _____

The evidence behind the strongest one: _____

Gail

Gail, a year and a half sober, realizes it at a family barbecue: her whole self-introduction is still built FROM. Somebody's new boyfriend asks what her deal is and she hears herself say "I'm an addict, eighteen months clean" to a stranger holding a hamburger. He blinks. Later her niece asks the same question, and Gail tries the other frame, the one her sponsor's been pushing: "I work at the clinic now, I'm studying for my license, and I garden like it's a competition." Her niece says "that's so cool." Both answers were true. Only one of them introduced the person she actually is now.

EXERCISE 6

1. What did the first introduction lead with, and what did it leave out?

2. Was the second answer spin? Apply the honesty test:

3. Write YOUR toward-introduction, the one the niece gets:

Part 4: The Tellings

Your story will get told in different rooms, and the sized-telling skill is knowing which version belongs where. **The share** (recovery rooms): the full arc, honest about the dark, generous with the climb, because a newcomer might be living on your middle chapters. **The conversation** (family, close friends, the amends table): sized to the relationship, heavy on the now and the repair, light on details that only wound. **The trailer** (coworkers, acquaintances, the barbecue stranger): two sentences, present-tense, yours to deploy or withhold: nobody is owed your history, and "I don't drink" plus a subject change is a complete telling. One more right you own in every room: your story's ending is not written yet, so nobody gets to announce how it ends. Not other people, and not the narrator between your ears either.

EXERCISE 7: MY THREE TELLINGS

The trailer (two sentences, present tense): _____

The conversation's center (what the people close to me most need to hear):

One thing my full share includes that could carry a newcomer:

EXERCISE 8

Answer yes or no:

1. I've given the full share to someone who only needed the trailer. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. There's a room where my story could carry somebody right now. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. My narrator has been announcing how my story ends, as if it already knew. ☐ Yes
☐ No

SKILL OF THE DAY: ONE EDIT, OUT LOUD

Once a day this week, catch one narrator line, edit it with equal truth, and say the edit out loud or write it down. The narrator learned its style through repetition. It re-learns the same way.

Take it to the group

- What did the clinician-label study tell you about your own self-labels?
- Say one becoming-line and its evidence out loud.
- Gail's two true introductions: which one does your mouth reach for first, and why?
- Who might be living on your middle chapters right now?

Session summary

Words shape outcomes, in clinicians' judgments and in the hundreds of self-narrations you run a day. This session you read your current write-up, learned the editor's two moves (catch the frame, re-frame with equal truth), shifted identity from FROM toward TOWARD with evidence attached, and built the three sized tellings: the share, the conversation, and the trailer. The facts stay the facts. The way you tell them is yours.

Words used in this session

- **Framing:** choosing which true things lead. Not spin; spin lies about facts, framing orders them.
- **The honesty test:** every edit must be true or the brain rejects it. Kinder AND true is the standard.
- **From vs toward:** recovering away from a life versus building one. The second carries farther.
- **The three tellings:** the share (full arc), the conversation (sized to the relationship), the trailer (two sentences, yours to withhold).

Takeaway: You cannot change the parts of your story that already happened, and you do not get to skip them. But the narrator works for you now, you choose which true things lead, and the ending is still unwritten. Tell your story toward something.
