



RECOVERY IN FOCUS · GROUP CURRICULUM · FACILITATOR GUIDE

Sex, Intimacy & Relationships

Relationship triggers, early-recovery romance risk, and rebuilding intimacy. Four parts, two group classes.

Topic category (billing anchor)	Relapse Prevention / Trigger Management, with Relationship and Communication Skills
Clinical focus	Substance-sexuality/relationship linkage; early-recovery romance as relapse risk; high-risk contacts from the using network; relationship skills supporting recovery
Evidence base	Relapse Prevention (high-risk situations) · CBT · MI (autonomy on timelines; no rule-enforcement stance)
Format	One participant packet · two group classes of about 2 hours each · Class 1 = Parts 1–2 · Class 2 = Parts 3–4
Group rules	2 to 12 clients, same time · at least 1 active Medi-Cal beneficiary · no minors mixed with adults

This file: facilitator guide

class agendas, disclosure/trauma guardrails, FIRP

Companion file: participant packet (print one 4 parts · 8 exercises · 1 vignette · three columns · per member)

readiness test

FACILITATOR GUIDE

How to run this session

- **SET THE GROUND RULE FIRST AND FROM THE FRONT:** patterns, never performances. No explicit content, no partners' names, no war stories. State it in the opening and re-state it the moment anything drifts; the session lives or dies on the room feeling safe from both over-disclosure and judgment.
- **ADVICE, NOT ENFORCEMENT:** the first-year guidance is presented as a risk the group can see, not a rule the group polices. Members currently in new relationships must not get piled on; Marcus's sponsor models the stance (one good question, no lecture).
- **LINK:** the 11 p.m. text is universal; the breakup-relapse pattern is nearly so. Let the recognition do the teaching.
- **MIXED ROOM, MIXED HISTORIES:** ages, orientations, and relationship histories vary widely. Keep every example orientation-neutral and let members supply their own particulars privately on paper.

Mixed-functioning group adjustments

- Read everything aloud; the written exercises are private by design and need no sharing to work.
- Lower-functioning rooms: run the session on three things: the handoff concept (new love as supply swap), the three columns, and the column check. The readiness test can wait for individual sessions.

CLINICAL GUARDRAILS

Trauma routing, non-negotiable: Part 1 deliberately touches "using to not feel anything in situations that weren't chosen" and routes it to individual care in the same sentence. If a member starts disclosing sexual trauma or coerced sex in group, protect them: affirm the courage, stop the disclosure gently, and connect them to their counselor the same day. The group is not equipped for it and the member will regret the overshare. **Current relationships:** never adjudicate a member's existing relationship in group; the packet assesses patterns, not partners. A member whose partner still uses gets individual follow-up, not a group verdict. **Domestic violence:** if contact with a "person from before" involves fear or control, that's a safety issue, not a column exercise; route to individual, follow facility DV protocol. **In-group romance:** this session can surface attraction inside the room; know your facility's policy and restate boundaries if needed, lightly and generally. **Sexual health questions** (STIs, contraception, medication effects on sexual function): route to medical staff; counselors stay in scope.

HOOK SOURCE NOTE: the romance-reward-circuit findings come from fMRI studies of early-stage passionate love (Helen Fisher, Lucy Brown, Arthur Aron and colleagues); activation in dopamine-rich regions (VTA, caudate) overlapping reward pathways implicated in substance use, with the researchers themselves describing early love in addiction-like terms (craving, obsession, withdrawal-like distress after rejection). Present as "brain imaging studies of people newly in love"; keep it directional. The first-year guidance is treatment-culture consensus, not a statute; present it that way.

CLASS 1**Parts 1 and 2 (about 2 hours)****Opening (10 min)**

Frame: *"Tonight's topic is the one treatment usually mumbles about: sex, love, and relationships, and how they sit inside relapse. We'll talk patterns, never performances: no names, no details, nothing you'd regret Monday."* Icebreaker: "True or false, out loud or just in your head: somebody warned me about relationships in early recovery." Hands are enough; it seeds Part 2.

Part 1: The Tangle (40 to 50 min)

Teach (5 min or less): the tangle's common shapes (liquid confidence, relationships organized around using, the scoring economy), the trauma routing line delivered verbatim, and the thesis: sobriety doesn't auto-rewire this; untangling is skill work.

PLAIN "Without details: did the substance have a seat in your relationships? What seat?"

DEEPER "If confidence and the substance became the same thing, what happens to confidence in sobriety until you rebuild it separately?"

- **Exercise 1** (yes/no, private): framed as private reflection; invite hands only on item 3 (wondered how this works sober), which is the safest and most universal.
- **Exercise 2** (my tangle, mapped): written privately; go around ONLY on the abstract level ("which strand takes the most untangling, one word") for those willing.

Part 2: New Love, Old Circuitry (50 to 60 min)

Teach (5 min or less): the hook (same reward circuitry), then the handoff mechanism: relationship becomes the program, structure thins, first conflict hits a nervous system with young skills.

- **Marcus vignette + Exercise 3:** read aloud. Board the sponsor's question ("What's your plan for the first bad week?"). Question 3 (your plan) is the clinical payload; go around for those willing.
- **Exercise 4** (yes/no): items 1 and 2 (watched it happen / breakup in a relapse story) normalize through hands; item 3 (would my structure survive) stays private.

Close Class 1 with the talk-it-out questions, advice-not-enforcement stance explicit. Assign: notice this week which relationships feed your recovery and which draw from it; just notice.

CLASS 2**Parts 3 and 4 (about 2 hours)**

Opening (10 min)

Check in on the noticing assignment, one observation per willing member, pattern level only.

Part 3: The People From Before (50 to 60 min)

Teach (5 min or less): the rebound pattern, the three columns, and the three plan questions. Name the 11 p.m. mechanic: the text comes when the asker is in a H.A.L.T. state too.

- **Exercise 5** (the three columns): initials only, written privately. The share-able layer is the plan questions; go around on "what state am I usually in when I reach for them" generically.
- **Exercise 6** (yes/no): item 1 (a text could bend my week) will get the most hands of the night; let the room see it. Watch for DV indicators per the guardrail and route individually.

Part 4: Building What Holds (45 to 55 min)

Teach (5 min or less): order of operations (week first, then love), the four materials (honesty, repair, respect for the recovery, a self with its own architecture), sober dating as a learning curve, and the readiness test: joining versus substituting.

- **Exercise 7** (what holds): the last line (one intimacy skill practicable NOW in non-romantic relationships) is the exercise that makes the session billable skill-building rather than advice; every member names one out loud.
- **Exercise 8** (yes/no): item 3 (partner versus rescue) is the deepest cut; offer it to volunteers only.
- **Skill of the day:** the column check, three questions before contact. Rehearse it once in the room against a hypothetical 11 p.m. text. Promise the check-in.

Close with the group questions and the summary read aloud. End on the takeaway's order of operations, not on warnings; the session should leave hope for this part of life, not dread.

FIRP scaffold (one note per member, per class)

Class 1. Focus: member's relapse-prevention objective, plus today's topic: relationship and intimacy-related relapse risks. **Intervention:** *Educated group on learned associations between substance use and intimacy/relationships and on the shared reward-pathway basis of early-romance relapse risk, citing neuroimaging research; facilitated private pattern-mapping of each member's substance-relationship linkages with trauma content routed to individual care; facilitated vignette analysis of relationship-replaces-program dynamics and guided each member's development of a conflict-contingency plan; linked members' patterns and processed responses at the pattern level with group safety norms maintained.* **Response:** individualize. **Plan:** observe relationship effects on recovery during the week; return for Class 2.

Class 2. Focus: same objective, plus today's topic: high-risk contacts and recovery-supportive relationship skills. **Intervention:** *Reviewed observation assignment; educated group on rebound contact with using-network members as a relapse pattern; guided each member through a structured risk-sorting of former contacts with contact-planning questions; taught recovery-supportive relationship components (honesty, conflict repair, boundary skills, independent recovery structure) and the readiness self-assessment; facilitated each member's identification of one relationship skill for current practice in non-romantic contexts; rehearsed a pre-contact self-check skill; assigned its daily use.* **Response:** individualize, including DV or trauma routing where indicated. **Plan:** practice the pre-contact check; timeline discussions referred to individual counseling; individual follow-up where indicated.

COMPLIANCE NOTES: 2 to 12 clients, same time; at least one active Medi-Cal beneficiary; no one 17 or under mixed with adults (outside a certified school site). Facilitator: licensed/registered clinician or certified/registered AOD counselor, in scope. Participant list each class; one note per member per class with attendance plus that member's specific response, provider-signed, finalized within 3 business days (service day counts as day 0), tied to that member's problem list or objective. Sexual trauma, DV, and sexual-health content are routed out of group per the guardrails; group content stays at the pattern and skill level; no member's current relationship is adjudicated in group.