



Coping Skills That Stick

Why skills fail, and how to make them automatic · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Everyone in treatment has heard of coping skills. Most people can name a few: breathe, call someone, go for a walk. And most people in this room have also had the other experience: the moment gets bad, and every skill you ever heard of evaporates. You knew what to do. You just couldn't reach it. Clinicians have a name for part of this: **state-dependent learning**. In plain terms, what you learn while calm is hard to find while flooded. A skill that only exists on paper lives in the calm part of your brain, and the calm part of your brain is exactly what goes offline when the alarm fires.

Coping itself is not optional. Every person copes with every hard day somehow; the only question is with what. Some coping builds you up: moving your body, talking it out, finishing one small thing. Some coping costs you: using, isolating, blowing up, numbing out on a screen. All of it "works" for a moment, which is exactly why the costly kind is so easy to keep. In this session we look at why skills fail when you need them most, then we build a small set that won't: practiced in the room, attached to your daily routine, and rehearsed enough times that your hands know them when your head doesn't.

What is in this session?

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

- | | | |
|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| CLASS 1 | 1. Why Skills Fail | 2. The Body Four |
| CLASS 2 | 3. The Mind Three | 4. Making Them Stick |

After this session you will be able to

- Explain why a skill you've only read about won't show up in a crisis
- Use four body-based skills, practiced live in group
- Use three thinking skills for cravings and spiraling thoughts
- Attach two chosen skills to your daily routine so they become automatic

What will be asked of you?

You'll practice skills out loud, in the room, more than once. Some of it will feel silly. Silly is fine; flooded is the problem. The repetitions you do here are the ones that will be waiting for you later.

Part 1: Why Skills Fail

WAIT, REALLY?

Under real stress, the thinking brain measurably goes offline, and what's left runs on habit. In a crisis you don't rise to what you know. **You fall to what you've practiced.**

The practice gap: there are paper skills and body skills. A paper skill is one you understand. A body skill is one you've done enough times that it runs without much thinking, like tying your shoes. The difference between them is nothing but repetitions. Addiction itself was a body skill: nobody had to concentrate to use. Recovery skills have to reach the same level or they lose the race.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. I've known exactly what I should do in a hard moment and still couldn't do it.

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. I can name more coping skills than I have ever actually used. ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. When things get bad enough, I stop thinking and start reacting. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2: MY COPING INVENTORY

Check everything you've used to get through a hard day in the past month, both columns.
Honesty beats a pretty list.

☐ Moving my body

☐ Talking to someone

☐ A meeting

☐ Music

☐ Prayer or quiet time

☐ Finishing one small task

☐ Isolating in my room

☐ Hours of scrolling or TV

☐ Blowing up at somebody

☐ Sleeping the day away

☐ Junk food runs

☐ Using thoughts I entertained a while

☐ Other: _____

The one I reach for FIRST when it's bad: _____

EXERCISE 3

Write about one moment when you knew the right skill and couldn't reach it. What was happening in your body right then?

Part 2: The Body Four

When you're flooded, words don't reach you, so the first skills in any real kit are body skills. These four are simple on purpose. Each one sends the nervous system a signal it can't ignore.

- **1. The long exhale.** In normal, out slow and long. Five times. The out-breath is the body's brake pedal.
- **2. Temperature.** Cold water on the face and wrists. Thirty seconds. It resets the system faster than any sentence.
- **3. The burn-off.** Two minutes of hard movement: fast walk, push-ups, stairs. Stress loads fuel in you; spend it on purpose.
- **4. 5-4-3-2-1 grounding.** Name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. It pulls your mind back into the room.

EXERCISE 4: LIVE PRACTICE, ROUND ONE

The group does each of the four, together, now. Rate your tension 0 to 10 before and after each:

Skill	Before	After	Keep it?
Long exhale (5 breaths)			
Temperature (describe for now)			
Burn-off (2 minutes)			
5-4-3-2-1 grounding			

Tyler

Tyler gets a court letter on a Thursday. His chest locks up and his first thought is the old one. Somebody once told him to "just breathe," and Thursday proves that advice useless: he can't remember how. Two weeks later, after practicing the long exhale every morning with his coffee, another letter comes. His chest locks up the same way. His body starts the slow exhale before he decides anything, because by then it isn't a decision. It's a habit with reps behind it.

EXERCISE 5

1. Why did "just breathe" fail the first Thursday? _____
2. What changed by the second letter? _____
3. What's your "court letter," the thing that reliably floods you?

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- Which of the Body Four actually moved your number, and which did nothing? (Both answers are useful.)
- What's the unhealthy coping you'll have to retire to make room?

Part 3: The Mind Three

Once the body comes down a notch, the thinking skills can reach you. These three are for cravings and for thoughts that spiral.

- **1. Name it to tame it.** Say what's happening, out loud or silently: "That's a craving." "That's panic." "That's the old voice." Naming a feeling hands it from the alarm to the thinking brain, and that measurably calms it down.
- **2. Play the tape forward.** The craving only shows you the first scene: the relief. Make yourself watch the whole movie, through tomorrow morning. Where does it actually end? Play it all the way to the end, every time.
- **3. The ten-minute delay.** You don't have to refuse the thought forever. Just not for ten minutes, and do something with your hands while you wait. Cravings crest and fall; delay is how you let one pass.

EXERCISE 6

Answer yes or no:

1. My cravings usually show me the relief and skip the consequences. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I have talked myself into something in less than ten minutes that cost me months.
☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Saying a feeling out loud has ever made it smaller. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 7: PLAY YOUR TAPE

Pick a real craving moment from your past. Write the whole movie, not just scene one:

Scene one, the part the craving shows me: _____

An hour later: _____

That night: _____

Tomorrow morning: _____

Alex

Alex is at the gas station, nine weeks sober, and the guy at pump three is someone from the old life. The wave hits before the door even closes. Alex names it in the car: "that's a craving, it's a wave, it peaks and it passes." Then the tape: the first hour, sure. Then the hiding, the money gone, the call to the sponsor that doesn't happen, the morning. Alex sets a phone timer for ten minutes and drives to the car wash, hands busy. At minute eight the wave is already smaller. The guy at pump three never knew any of it happened.

EXERCISE 8

1. Which of the Mind Three did Alex use, in order? _____

2. What would scene one have shown Alex, and what did the full tape show?

3. Where are your pump-three moments, the places a craving is most likely to find you?

Part 4: Making Them Stick

Skills become automatic the same way using became automatic: repetition in real life. Three rules make that happen fast:

- **Pick two, not seven.** One body skill, one mind skill. A short kit you actually run beats a long list you admire.
- **Attach them to a daily anchor.** Practice is easiest when it rides on something you already do: with morning coffee, at red lights, before you walk into the house. Clinicians call this habit stacking; in plain terms, new habits stick best glued to old ones.
- **Teach it to someone.** Explaining a skill to another person doubles how well you keep it. Teach your person, your kid, anybody.

EXERCISE 9: MY TWO

My body skill: _____

My mind skill: _____

Why these two fit ME: _____

EXERCISE 10: THE ANCHORS

I'll practice my body skill every day when I: _____

I'll practice my mind skill every day when I: _____

The person I'll teach one skill to this week: _____

EXERCISE 11: THE REP TRACKER

One mark per practice. Bring this page back next group.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

SKILL OF THE DAY: TEN REPS BEFORE YOU NEED THEM

Run your two skills once a day at their anchors, needed or not. You're not treating a crisis; you're training for one. Ten calm reps is what makes a skill show up flooded.

Take it to the group

- What does your current coping actually cost you?
- Which skill moved your number today, and which one are you going to fake liking? (Be honest; pick ones that work for YOU.)
- Who are you going to teach your skill to, and what will you say?
- What will you do on the day you skip your reps?

Session summary

Skills fail when they only exist on paper, because the thinking brain goes offline right when you need it. This session you practiced four body skills and three mind skills live, rated what actually works for you, picked two, and glued them to your daily routine. In a crisis you fall to what you've practiced. Now you have a practice.

Words used in this session

- **State-dependent learning:** what you learn while calm is hard to reach while flooded. The fix is practicing until the skill lives in the body.
- **Grounding:** any skill that pulls attention out of the spiral and back into the present room.
- **Play the tape forward:** following a craving past scene one, all the way to tomorrow morning.
- **Habit stacking:** attaching a new habit to one you already have, so the old habit carries the new one.

Takeaway: You don't rise to what you know. You fall to what you've practiced. Pick two skills, give them ten calm reps, and they'll be standing there on your worst day.
