Session 18: Emotional Triggers

Goals of Session

■ Help clients understand how certain emotions can act as triggers.
■ Help clients examine and understand their emotions.
■ Help clients identify tools that will help them avoid emotions that can act as triggers.

Handout

■ RP 18—Emotional Triggers

Presentation of Topic (15 minutes)

1. Learning To Look Out for Dangerous Emotional Triggers

Each client probably has emotional triggers that are unique to him or her. Feelings that might lead to relapse for one client may not cause the same response in others. For example, some clients are at greater risk of relapse when things are going well than when negative emotions arise. But some emotions are dangerous triggers for most clients: loneliness, anger, and feeling deprived. If clients are feeling these emotions, they should be aware that they are at a higher risk of relapse. Loneliness arises because clients often feel isolated—they cannot hang out with using friends, and other friends and family may not be ready to trust them again. Anger is a consequence of the frustrating struggle to remain abstinent. Clients may begin to feel deprived because the life of partying with friends that they left behind for abstinence and recovery begins to look appealing. These feelings of deprivation are a signal that clients are very vulnerable to relapse.

2. Ensuring That Certain Emotions, if Encountered, Do Not Lead to Relapse

Like relapse justifications, some emotions may seem to lead automatically to substance abuse. Clients need to understand their emotional responses and know which ones put them at increased risk of relapse. As was discussed in Early Recovery Skills session 7, it is important for clients to be able to separate emotions from behavior. The goal is for clients to examine their emotions in the abstract so that they can experience a negative feeling without having it result in substance abuse. In this way, clients’ rational minds, not their emotions, control their behavior.

3. Using Strategies for Understanding Emotions and Avoiding Relapse

One of the best ways for clients to gain a better understanding of their emotions and how they respond to them is by writing about their feelings. Some clients already may be keeping a journal or writing in a diary. Others may be new to the practice. For both groups, the process of writing about a problem to understand it better can be beneficial. This is focused writing; clients should write with a specific emotional question or issue in mind. The writing process itself, though, should be fluid. This often is called free writing; the writer does not let punctuation, penmanship, or spelling stop the flow of ideas. Clients do not need to write for a long time; they just need to write honestly and focus on the question they decided to address. When they have finished writing, they should go back and read what they have written, returning to it several more times in subsequent days.
Handout and Focused Discussion (45 minutes)

Clients should be given time to complete the handout before the discussion begins. Clients should not be forced to comply if they find it difficult or uncomfortable to complete the handout in the group. The handout is primarily a tool for discussion. The counselor steers clients away from reading their responses and encourages them to converse about the issues the handout raises. The counselor ensures that all clients have an opportunity to participate.

- Go over handout RP 18—Emotional Triggers.
- Ask clients which emotions make them feel most vulnerable to relapse.
- Ask clients to recall times when one of these emotions seems to have caused a relapse.
- Ask clients whether they have experienced loneliness and anger and felt deprived since they have been in treatment.
- Ask clients whether emotions have acted as triggers. If so, how did they respond?
- Have the recovering co-leader share how he or she became more aware of these “red flag” emotions (e.g., loneliness, anger, feeling deprived). How did that awareness help the co-leader avoid relapse?
- Ask clients whether they have kept a diary or a journal or written about their problems.
- Ask clients how this process has helped them.
- Ask the recovering co-leader to share his or her experience with writing about emotional problems as a way to avoid relapse.
- Ask clients what other strategies they have used to try to understand their emotions better.

Open Discussion (30 minutes)

The counselor should carry over from the previous discussion any important issues that have not been addressed fully. Although it is important for clients to be able to speak about what is on their minds, the counselor should make sure that the session’s topic has been explored completely.

Five minutes before the end of open discussion, the counselor should ask clients to share briefly their experience of doing the homework from the previous session. The counselor can decide how detailed the followup on homework should be. The goal of asking is not to discover which clients have not done the homework but to encourage clients to work on their recovery between sessions and to share that work with the group.

Homework

Have clients set aside 15 minutes to write about an emotional problem that has been troubling them.
For many people certain emotional states are directly connected to substance use, almost as if the emotion causes the substance use. It seems to people in recovery that if they could avoid ever feeling those emotions (for example, loneliness, anger, feeling deprived), they would never relapse. These emotional triggers should act as warnings or “red flags” for clients.

The most common negative emotional triggers are the following:

**Loneliness:** It is difficult to give up friends and activities that are part of a substance-using lifestyle. Being separated from friends and family leaves people feeling lonely. Often friends and family members who do not use are not ready to risk getting back into a relationship that didn’t work earlier. The person in recovery is stranded between groups of friends. The feeling of loneliness can drive the person back toward using.

**Anger:** The intense irritability experienced in the early stages of recovery can result in floods of anger that act as instant triggers. A person in that frame of mind is only a few steps from substance use. Once a person uses, it can be a long trip back to a rational state of mind.

**Feeling Deprived:** Maintaining abstinence is a real accomplishment. Usually people in recovery feel justifiably good and proud about what they have been able to achieve. Sometimes people in recovery feel as if they have to give up good times and good things. Recovery seems like a jail sentence, something to be endured. This reverses the actual state of recovery: substance use begins to look good and recovery seems bad. This upside-down situation quickly leads to relapse.

It is important to be aware of these red flag emotions. Allowing yourself to be flooded with these powerful negative emotions is allowing yourself to be swept rapidly toward relapse. **Have some of these emotional states been a trigger for you in the past? Which ones?**
Are there other negative emotional states that are dangerous for you? What are they?

One of the goals during the recovery process is learning to separate thoughts, behaviors, and emotions so that you can control what you think and how you behave. It is important to recognize and understand your emotions so that your actions are not always dictated by your feelings.

Many people find that writing about their feelings is a good way to recognize and understand their emotions. You don’t need to be a good writer to use this tool. People who do not like to write and who have never written much in the past still can learn valuable things about themselves by putting their feelings into words. Follow the simple instructions, and try a new way of getting to know yourself:

1. Find a private, comfortable, quiet place and a time just for writing. Try to write each day, even if you can write only for a few minutes.
2. Begin by taking several deep breaths and relaxing.
3. Write in a response to a question that you have asked yourself about your feelings (for example, “What am I feeling right now?” “Why am I angry?” “Why am I sad?”).
4. Forget spelling and punctuation; just let the words flow.

Writing about your feelings makes them clearer to you. It also can help you avoid the emotional buildup that often leads to relapse.