Session 16: Relapse Justification I

Goals of Session

- Help clients understand what relapse justification is.
- Help clients identify the justifications to which they are susceptible.
- Help clients formulate plans to counter relapse justifications.

Handout

- RP 16—Relapse Justification I

Presentation of Topic (15 minutes)

1. Understanding the Dangers Posed by Relapse Justifications

Relapse justifications narrow the distance between abstinence and relapse so that it is easier for people in recovery to go back to using. A relapse justification can seem harmless. A client’s addicted brain may be telling him it is OK to hang out at a club where he used to use. The client is not intending to use when he goes out, but he makes relapse much more likely by giving himself permission to go to the club. Another example is a woman who reasons that it is fine to go out with her old using friends because they all know she is in recovery now and say they are supportive. Her addicted brain convinces her she is reconnecting with old friends who say they want to help, but she also is placing herself in a situation that makes relapse a distinct possibility.

2. Understanding Specific Justifications to Which Clients Are Susceptible

Relapses often seem to come out of nowhere. However, the addicted brain of a person who has entered recovery recently is often busy making dangerous behaviors seem reasonable. This happens at a subconscious level. Using a substance as a response to a certain event (e.g., a fight with a spouse, the loss of a job) seems to be an automatic process. But the justification was ready, just waiting for the right set of circumstances to emerge. Clients need to understand and anticipate the situations in which they are vulnerable to relapse justifications. Knowing their weaknesses in advance allows clients to halt the automatic process that leads from event to justification to relapse.

3. Addressing Specific Situations That Might Lead to Relapse

Relapse justifications are hard to avoid. Clients still may feel a physiological craving for the substance until their minds and bodies are fully healed. Addicted brains will try to push clients to respond to situations in ways that put them at risk. Although the justifications may pop into clients’ minds, clients need to use their rational brains to resist relapse justifications and choose behaviors that support recovery. The counselor should encourage clients to recognize the justifications that have worked against them in the past and find safer responses to those dangerous situations. Clients should plan what they will say if, for example, friends they formerly used with call to invite them out. Having a plan allows clients to avoid hesitating, then being cajoled into going along. Clients should consider making a list of potential relapse situations and determining how to avoid them in the future.
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 16—Relapse Justification I.
- Ask whether clients have tried to stop using before and ended up relapsing. How did the relapses occur? Did they seem to come out of the blue?
- Ask clients to discuss the relapse justifications to which they feel especially vulnerable.
- Have the recovering co-leader discuss experiences with relapse justifications, both the times when relapse occurred and the times when anticipating a potential relapse situation helped prevent relapse.
- Have clients discuss specific catastrophic events and negative emotions that make them more likely to use. Are there events and emotions not listed on the worksheet that are troublesome?
- Ask clients whether they are more vulnerable to relapse from positive or negative emotions.
- Have clients discuss specific relapse justifications their addicted brains have used on them.

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 identify a relapse justification, write a description of it, and script a response that will help them avoid relapse.
Once a person decides not to use drugs anymore, how does he or she end up using again? Do relapses happen completely by accident? Or are there warning signs and ways to avoid relapse?

Relapse justification is a process that happens in people’s minds. A person may have decided to stop using, but the person’s brain is still healing and still feels the need for the substances. The addicted brain invents excuses that allow the person in recovery to edge close enough to relapse situations that accidents can happen. You may remember a time when you intended to stay substance free but you invented a justification for using. Then, before you knew it, you had used again.

Use the questions below to help you identify justifications invented by your addicted brain. Identifying and anticipating the justifications will help you interrupt the process.

**Someone Else’s Fault**
Does your addicted brain ever convince you that you have no choice but to use?
Does an unexpected situation catch you off guard? **Have you ever said any of the following to yourself?**

- An old friend called, and we decided to get together.
- I had friends come for dinner, and they brought me some wine.
- I was in a bar, and someone offered me a beer.
- Other:

**Catastrophic Events**
Is there one unlikely, major event that is the only reason you would use?
What might such an event be for you?

- My spouse left me. There’s no reason to stay clean.
- I just got injured. It’s ruined all of my plans. I might as well use.
For a Specific Purpose
Has your addicted brain ever suggested that using drugs or alcohol is the only way to accomplish something?

• I’m gaining weight and need stimulants to control my weight.
• I’m out of energy. I’ll function better if I use.
• I need drugs to meet people more easily.
• I can’t enjoy sex without using.
• Other: ________________________________

Depression, Anger, Loneliness, and Fear
Does feeling depressed, angry, lonely, or afraid make using seem like the answer?

• I’m depressed. What difference does it make whether I use?
• When I get mad enough, I can’t control what I do.
• I’m scared. I know if I use, the feeling will go away.
• If my partner thinks I’ve used, I might as well use.
• Other: ________________________________

What might you do when your addicted brain suggests these excuses to use?