



Setback Scenarios

Note for Counselor/Group Leader – A general rule when running group is “know your audience.” With that in mind, before using this exercise, make sure that your group is in a place where they are ready to discuss recovery related issues and setback/relapse prevention strategies. Also, there are four lengthy stories provided here with multiple points for discussion questions. With that in mind, it may not make sense to try to review all four stories but rather pick and choose which story (or stories) are most appropriate for your group. Enjoy the activity and hopefully it can generate some productive discussion and education on the important topic of preventing and managing setbacks in the process of substance use/mental health recovery and positive change.

**Setbacks aren't a sign of failure,
but a signal to adjust your path.
Every step forward, no matter how small,
is progress in building a stronger you**





Anthony's Story

Part 1: The Family Secret

Anthony is 28 and in early recovery from opioid addiction. He's been sober for four months and lives with his mother, Maria, who has supported him throughout his struggles. One evening, Anthony walks into the kitchen and overhears a tense conversation between his mother and his aunt. His aunt is asking Maria for money, and from the little Anthony hears, it sounds like she's in financial trouble due to a gambling problem. Anthony's mother has already helped his aunt several times before, but now Maria seems unsure. Anthony knows that if his mother keeps bailing her out, it could put their own finances at risk. However, Anthony also feels guilty intervening, given all the help his mother has provided him.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What conflicting emotions might Anthony feel as he considers whether or not to intervene in his mother's decision?
2. How does Anthony's own experience of receiving help from his mother affect his perspective on the situation with his aunt?
3. What are the ethical considerations for Anthony when deciding whether to speak up or let his mother handle the situation on her own?
4. Have you ever faced a situation where you felt the need to step in to protect someone, even though it wasn't your place? What did you do?

Part 2: The Tempting Offer

Anthony decides to stay out of the situation with his mother and aunt. A few weeks later, Anthony's old friend, Kevin, shows up at his doorstep. Kevin was one of Anthony's closest friends during his using days, and while Anthony has cut ties with most of his old crowd, he's always had a soft spot for Kevin. Kevin tells Anthony he's in town for the weekend and invites him out to hang, promising they'll "keep it chill." Anthony knows that being around Kevin could be risky, but part of him misses the carefree times they used to share. He's torn between wanting to reconnect with a friend and protecting his recovery.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What internal conflict is Anthony likely feeling about reconnecting with Kevin?
2. How do nostalgia and loneliness sometimes lead to risky decisions in recovery?
3. What boundaries could Anthony set to reconnect with Kevin while still protecting his sobriety?
4. Have you ever been tempted to reconnect with someone from your past, even though it might jeopardize your recovery or mental health? How did you handle it?

Part 3: The New Connection

Anthony ultimately decides not to hang out with Kevin, knowing it's too risky. However, the experience leaves him feeling isolated. That week, he attends a new support group where he meets Laura, a woman around his age who's also in recovery. They hit it off, and over the next few weeks, they start spending time together outside of meetings. Laura tells Anthony she's been thinking about dating again, but she's nervous about getting too close to someone in early recovery. Anthony feels the same, but the connection between them is undeniable. He wonders if pursuing a relationship would be a healthy step forward or a potential setback.



Group Therapy Questions:

1. What are some of the risks and benefits of Anthony and Laura pursuing a relationship while both are in early recovery?
2. How can romantic relationships in early recovery complicate the emotional process of healing and growth?
3. What boundaries could Anthony and Laura establish to protect both their recovery journeys while exploring their connection?
4. Have you ever faced a similar situation where you had to balance personal relationships with your recovery or mental health? What did you learn from it?

Part 4: The Conflict

Anthony and Laura start dating, and for a while, things seem to go well. They support each other through recovery, and Anthony feels hopeful for the first time in a long time. However, one night after a stressful day at work, Laura calls Anthony in tears. She confesses that she's been feeling overwhelmed by anxiety and depression and has thought about drinking again. She says she hasn't relapsed, but it is hard to tell if she is being honest. Anthony feels a wave of panic—he cares deeply for Laura, but he's also afraid that if she relapsed, it could trigger him. He doesn't want to abandon her, but he's not sure how to support her without jeopardizing his own stability.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What conflicting emotions might Anthony be experiencing as he tries to support Laura without endangering his own recovery?
2. How can someone in recovery maintain their boundaries when a loved one is struggling with potential relapse?
3. What ethical considerations come into play when deciding how to balance self-care with supporting someone else in their recovery?
4. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to prioritize your own mental health or sobriety, even when it meant stepping back from someone you cared about? How did you navigate that?

Part 5: The Crossroads

Laura eventually decides to enter a residential treatment program, and Anthony supports her decision. While Laura is in treatment, Anthony receives an unexpected call from his aunt. She tearfully admits that her gambling problem has gotten worse, and she's considering going into treatment herself. However, she's afraid of how the rest of the family will react and asks Anthony to keep it a secret. Anthony knows that keeping the secret could protect his aunt's privacy, but he also wonders if it's better to encourage her to be open with the family about her struggles. The weight of being the keeper of others' secrets is beginning to take a toll on him.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What ethical dilemma is Anthony facing when his aunt asks him to keep her secret about seeking treatment?
2. How might Anthony's experience with his own recovery influence his feelings about his aunt's request for secrecy?
3. What are the potential benefits and consequences of Anthony encouraging his aunt to be open with the family versus keeping her secret?
4. How can carrying the weight of other people's secrets affect someone's mental health and recovery?

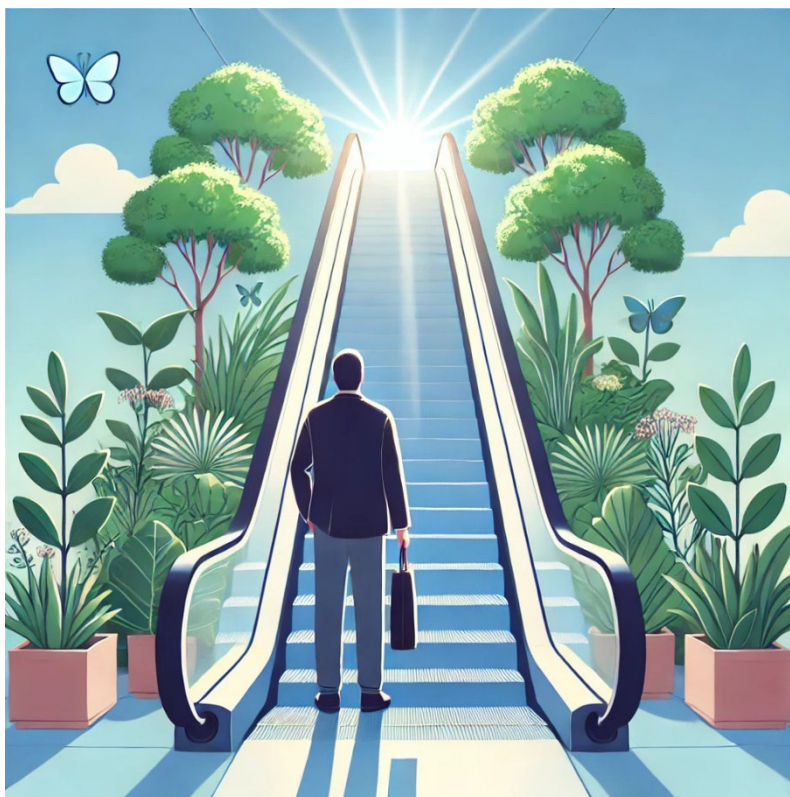


Part 6: The Decision

Anthony decides to keep his aunt's secret for now but encourages her to eventually open up to the family. Meanwhile, Laura returns from treatment, and their relationship picks up again. However, Anthony starts to feel the pressure of being both a supportive partner and a keeper of his aunt's struggles. One evening, he finds himself feeling overwhelmed, tempted to numb the stress with his substance of choice. He pauses, realizing that all the emotional weight he's been carrying might be pushing him toward relapse. Anthony knows he needs to make a decision: either open up about the pressure he's under to someone he trusts or continue carrying the weight alone.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. Why might Anthony be feeling overwhelmed by the role he's taken on as a support system for others, and how could this affect his recovery?
2. What are the dangers of keeping emotional struggles and stress to oneself, especially in early recovery?
3. How might opening up to a trusted support person help Anthony relieve some of the pressure and avoid relapse?
4. Have you ever reached a point where the weight of your responsibilities felt like too much to handle? What helped you find balance and relief?





Mike's Story

Part 1: The First Choice

Daniel, a 32-year-old in early recovery, has been sober for six months. He's been working hard on his mental health, regularly attending meetings and therapy. Things are starting to look up—he recently got a new job at a local mechanic shop. However, one day at work, Daniel overhears his coworker, Mike, making some crude comments about a new female employee, Sarah. It's not the first time Daniel has heard Mike making these types of remarks. Daniel feels uncomfortable but doesn't want to stir the pot at his new job. He knows he could speak up or just keep quiet and avoid conflict. Sarah seems like a nice and innocent person but Mike has also been a helpful coworker so far on the new job.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What might Daniel be feeling as he faces the choice between speaking up or staying silent?
2. What ethical considerations come into play when deciding whether to intervene in someone else's inappropriate behavior?
3. How does Daniel's early recovery and need for stability affect his decision-making in this situation?
4. Have you ever faced a situation where you felt compelled to act but feared the consequences? What did you do?

Part 2: The Favor

Weeks later, Daniel has developed a good relationship with Mike. One day after work, Mike pulls him aside and asks for a favor. He tells Daniel that he's short on cash and asks if he can borrow \$200, promising to pay it back by the end of the month. Daniel knows Mike has a bit of a reputation for partying on weekends, but he also remembers how difficult it was for him when no one trusted him during his own struggles. Daniel doesn't want to jeopardize their friendship or create tension at work, but he's also unsure if loaning money to Mike is a good idea.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What conflicting emotions might Daniel be experiencing as he decides whether to loan Mike the money?
2. How does Daniel's own recovery experience complicate his decision, especially around trust and second chances?
3. What are the potential risks and rewards of Daniel choosing to help Mike, both financially and in terms of their friendship?
4. Have you ever had to make a decision about lending money to someone with a questionable history? What factors influenced your decision?

Part 3: The Confession

Daniel decides to lend Mike the money. A few days later, Mike doesn't show up for work, and rumors begin to swirl that he was arrested over the weekend for a DUI. Later that week, Mike shows up looking disheveled and asks Daniel if they can talk. Mike confesses that he relapsed and that he used the \$200 to fund a drug binge. He apologizes profusely and asks Daniel not to tell anyone at work. Daniel feels betrayed and is unsure whether to report Mike's behavior, which could cost Mike his job, or keep quiet and give Mike another chance. Daniel also knows that if Mike continues down this path, this whole thing could end up jeopardizing his own employment situation, especially if the boss eventually finds out everything that has been going on and Daniel's involvement.



Group Therapy Questions:

1. What ethical dilemma is Daniel facing now that he knows about Mike's relapse and the DUI?
2. How might Daniel's personal recovery journey influence his empathy toward Mike, and how could that empathy complicate the decision?
3. What are the potential consequences of reporting Mike's behavior versus keeping it a secret?
4. How does Daniel balance his own sense of integrity with his desire to give Mike a chance to recover?

Part 4: The Ultimatum

Daniel chooses not to report Mike but instead confronts him privately, telling him he needs to get help. Mike brushes it off, saying it was just a one-time slip. Two weeks later, Daniel notices Mike acting strangely at work, and he suspects that Mike has been using again. Meanwhile, Sarah, the new employee, has noticed something is off and approaches Daniel. She confides that she feels uncomfortable around Mike and is worried about his behavior, especially when they're alone. She tells Daniel that if something isn't done, she's going to report Mike to their boss. Now Daniel faces an even tougher decision: Should he back Sarah and risk losing his friendship with Mike or stay quiet and hope the situation resolves itself?

Group Therapy Questions:

1. How does Sarah's involvement complicate Daniel's ethical dilemma, and what new factors must he consider?
2. What are the potential risks to Daniel's recovery and work environment if he continues to stay silent about Mike's behavior?
3. How does loyalty to a friend factor into decisions when that friend's behavior crosses ethical or legal lines?
4. What might happen if Daniel chooses to support Sarah's decision to report Mike? How could that affect all involved parties, including Daniel?

Part 5: The Breaking Point

Sarah reports Mike to the boss, and an investigation is launched. Daniel is pulled into a meeting and asked whether he knew anything about Mike's recent behavior. He's given the chance to tell the truth or deny knowing anything. Meanwhile, Mike, feeling cornered, confronts Daniel privately and begs him to cover for him, swearing that he'll stop using and fix everything. Daniel knows this is a crucial moment. If he covers for Mike, it could save Mike's job, but it could also damage Daniel's own integrity. On the other hand, telling the truth might cost Mike his job, push him further into his addiction, and make Daniel feel responsible for the fallout. Daniel could also lose his own job if he lies, and the boss finds out.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What ethical and emotional weight does Daniel carry as he decides whether to cover for Mike or tell the truth?
2. How might Daniel's own recovery principles, such as honesty and accountability, be challenged in this situation?
3. What are the possible outcomes of telling the truth, and how could they impact Daniel, Mike, and the work environment?
4. Have you ever faced a situation where someone asked you to protect them, even though it conflicted with your values? How did you handle it?

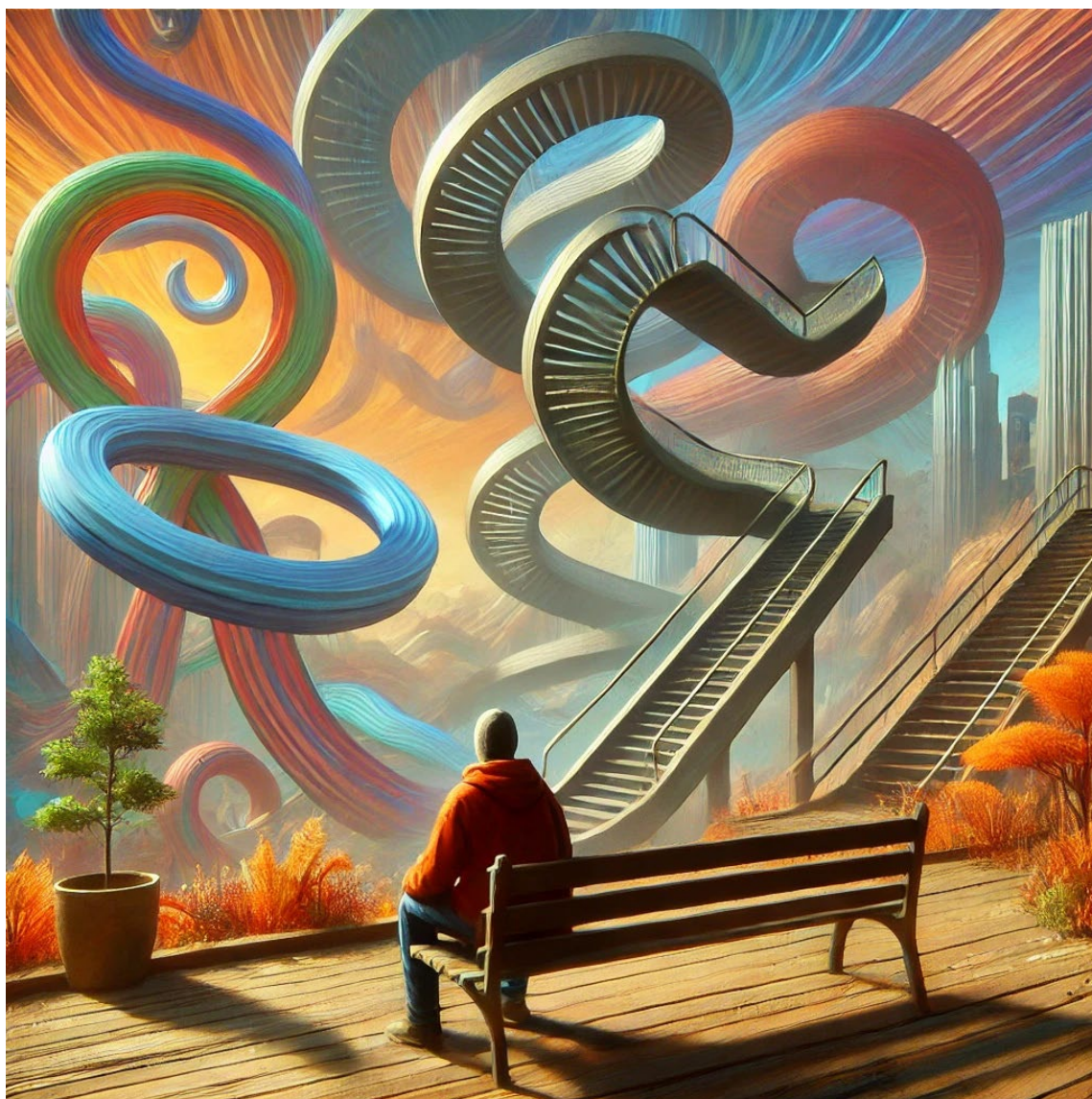


Part 6: The Aftermath

Daniel chooses to tell the truth. Mike loses his job and spirals deeper into his addiction, and word gets out that Daniel was involved in the decision. Some coworkers praise Daniel for his honesty, while others distance themselves from him, seeing him as disloyal. Daniel struggles with guilt, questioning whether he did the right thing. His recovery feels shaken, and he begins to worry about his own stability. One night, he sits alone at a meeting, reflecting on how trying to do the right thing doesn't always feel good.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. Why might Daniel feel conflicted even after making what seems like the “right” decision?
 2. How do ethical dilemmas in real life often lack clear resolutions, and how can we cope with the emotional fallout?
 3. What strategies could Daniel use to manage the guilt and uncertainty he feels after the consequences of his choice?
 4. Have you ever done the “right” thing but felt worse afterward? How did you reconcile those emotions?
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Samantha's Story

Part 1: The New Normal

Samantha has been in recovery for three months. After years of struggling with alcohol and anxiety, she committed to recovery and is doing her best to rebuild her life. However, despite the initial relief of early recovery, Samantha is starting to feel overwhelmed by the emotional weight of her daily routine. Her anxiety flares up whenever she thinks about her job, which she recently returned to after taking time off for treatment. Her coworkers don't know she was in rehab, and she feels like she's living a double life. One day, her boss assigns her a project with a tight deadline, causing her anxiety to spike. That night, she sits alone in her apartment, thinking about how easy it would be to numb the stress with a drink.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What emotions might Samantha be experiencing as she faces her work-related stress, and how could these emotions influence her recovery?
2. How does the pressure to hide her recovery status at work contribute to Samantha's anxiety and temptation to use?
3. What coping strategies could Samantha use to manage her anxiety instead of turning to substances?
4. Have you ever felt like you were living a "double life" in recovery? How did that affect your mental health?

Part 2: The Social Trigger

Samantha's best friend, Emma, invites her to a birthday party at a local bar. Before she got sober, Samantha and Emma would go out drinking together all the time. Emma knows about Samantha's recovery but reassures her that there will be non-alcoholic options at the party. Still, Samantha is unsure if she's ready to face the environment. At the same time, she feels guilty for even considering skipping Emma's birthday. On the day of the party, Samantha experiences a surge of anxiety. She's torn between wanting to stay home to protect her sobriety and the fear of disappointing her friend.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What internal conflict might Samantha be feeling about going to the bar for Emma's party?
2. How can social pressure and guilt act as triggers for relapse, even if the intention is to remain sober?
3. What healthy boundaries could Samantha set to protect her sobriety while still maintaining her relationships?
4. Have you ever had to make a tough decision between your recovery and a social obligation? How did you handle it?

Part 3: The Emotional Low

Samantha chooses to skip the party, explaining to Emma that she's not ready to be in that environment yet. Emma is supportive, but Samantha still feels isolated afterward. The next week, Samantha's mood takes a turn for the worse. Her anxiety gives way to depression, and she begins to question whether her efforts are even worth it. She has trouble getting out of bed and starts missing her regular meetings. Her negative self-talk spirals: "I'll never feel normal again," "I'm always going to be alone in this," "What's the point of all this effort if I'm just going to be miserable?" She feels the familiar urge to escape these feelings with alcohol.



Group Therapy Questions:

1. How does Samantha's decision to protect her sobriety lead to feelings of isolation, and how might that feed into her depression?
2. Why might Samantha be questioning her recovery at this point, despite staying sober?
3. How can negative self-talk and depression create a sense of hopelessness in recovery, and what tools can be used to counter that?
4. What steps could Samantha take to reconnect with her recovery support system when she feels like withdrawing?

Part 4: The Unexpected Encounter

A few days later, Samantha runs into an old drinking buddy, Jake, at the grocery store. Jake has no idea she's sober and immediately invites her to a BBQ happening that weekend. The invitation comes with promises of "good times," and Jake jokes about how "they always had the best parties." Samantha is caught off guard and doesn't know how to respond in the moment. She feels a mix of nostalgia and dread, remembering both the fun and the chaos that came with their drinking days. Later that evening, the thought of the BBQ keeps coming back to her, triggering both anxiety and cravings.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. How might Samantha's chance encounter with Jake trigger feelings of nostalgia and cravings, even though she knows the consequences of her past behavior?
2. What strategies can Samantha use to stay grounded and focused on her recovery in the face of these unexpected triggers?
3. Why might Samantha feel conflicted about turning down the invitation, and how can she assert her boundaries in these situations?
4. Have you ever been unexpectedly triggered by someone or something from your past? How did you handle it?

Part 5: The Turnaround

Samantha chooses to decline the invitation from Jake, knowing that the environment would jeopardize her progress. However, she recognizes that she's been struggling with her mental health and hasn't been attending her meetings. That weekend, instead of isolating herself, Samantha reaches out to her sponsor and agrees to attend a meeting together. During the meeting, Samantha shares her recent struggles with anxiety and depression, and she's surprised at how many people in the group relate to her experience. She feels a sense of relief, realizing that she's not alone in these challenges, and recommits to using healthy coping strategies moving forward.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. How does reaching out to her sponsor and attending the meeting help Samantha break the cycle of isolation and depression?
2. Why is it important for Samantha to share her struggles with others in recovery, even when she feels like pulling away?
3. How can community support help with both addiction recovery and managing mental health challenges like anxiety and depression?
4. What lessons can Samantha take from this experience to apply when she faces future challenges in her recovery?

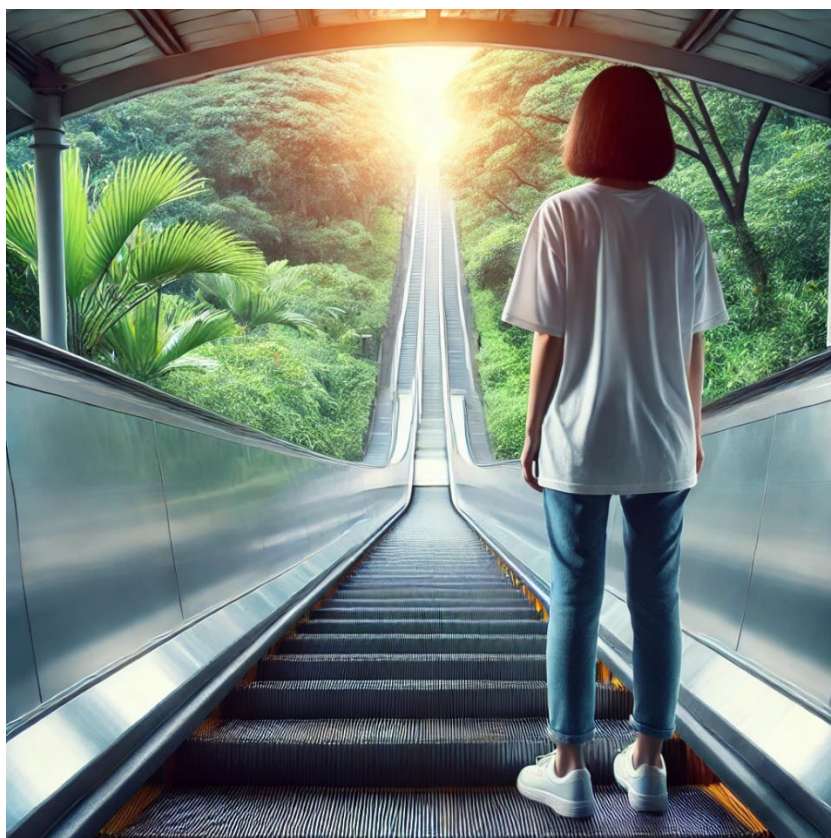


Part 6: The Progress

Weeks later, Samantha is feeling more stable, though the challenges of early recovery haven't disappeared. She's learning to manage her anxiety and depression with healthier coping mechanisms, including exercise, journaling, and regular therapy sessions. One day, she gets a text from Emma, inviting her to a small, sober gathering with a few friends. Samantha feels a wave of gratitude, realizing that her support network is growing, and that she's learning to navigate both her mental health and her sobriety without compromising either. As she looks back on her recent struggles, she feels proud of the progress she's made, even though she knows the journey is ongoing.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. How does Samantha's experience illustrate the ongoing nature of recovery, both from addiction and mental health challenges?
2. Why is it important for Samantha to recognize her progress, even if she still faces struggles along the way?
3. How can Samantha continue to balance her mental health and sobriety moving forward, and what tools or supports will she need to rely on?
4. What lessons from Samantha's journey can be applied to your own experiences with early recovery and mental health challenges?





Jake's Story

Part 1: The Escape

Jake is in his mid-30s and has struggled with alcohol since his early 20s. After a tough breakup and losing his job, Jake's drinking worsened. He's been in and out of treatment but never fully committed to sobriety. One night, after a binge, Jake drives to his favorite bar despite knowing he's on thin ice with a suspended license. As he stumbles out of the bar hours later, he sees flashing police lights. Panicked, he quickly makes a decision: should he stay and face the consequences or try to drive away? His mind races between fear and the pull of his addiction.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. What emotions might Jake be experiencing in this moment, and how do those emotions influence his decision-making?
2. How does addiction play a role in Jake's choice between facing the law and avoiding it?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where fear and addiction pushed you toward a risky decision? What did you do?
4. What could be some of the long-term consequences of Jake's decision, both for himself and others?

Part 2: The Consequences

Jake decides to drive off, narrowly escaping the police. In the following days, the guilt eats at him, but so does his craving. His mind tells him he needs a drink to calm down. The anxiety spirals. He hasn't shown up to his job search for days, and his family has stopped calling, exhausted from trying to help. Jake's mental health declines, and one night, feeling desperate and ashamed, he contemplates calling his sponsor. The shame from his recent actions tells him he's too far gone to get help, but deep down, he knows he needs it.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. Why might Jake hesitate to call his sponsor despite knowing it could help?
2. How do feelings of guilt and shame often feed into the cycle of addiction?
3. What role do mental health struggles, like anxiety, play in Jake's relapse and decisions?
4. Have you ever felt too ashamed to reach out for help? How did you work through that?

Part 3: The Spiral

Unable to reach out for help, Jake sinks deeper. He starts mixing alcohol with prescription medications he found in his roommate's drawer, trying to numb the intense emotions he can't shake. His drinking escalates, and he begins blacking out more frequently. One morning, he wakes up to find his roommate furious because their shared rent money is missing. Jake has no memory of taking it, but the empty liquor bottles scattered around the room paint a picture. His roommate threatens to kick him out. Now homeless, Jake has to decide whether to try detox again or disappear into the streets where his addiction can spiral without anyone watching.



Group Therapy Questions:

1. What pressures might Jake be feeling as he faces homelessness?
2. How does addiction impair our ability to remember and own up to our actions, and how might that feed into feelings of denial?
3. Why might Jake choose to continue drinking rather than seeking detox, even knowing what's at stake?
4. Have you or someone you know ever faced the choice between recovery and self-destruction? What helped you (or them) make the right decision?

Part 4: The Wake-Up Call

Jake chooses the streets. Days turn into weeks, and his drinking gets worse. One night, after taking a combination of alcohol and pills, he wakes up in the hospital, his stomach pumped from an overdose. He's terrified but also numb. The doctor offers him resources for detox, but Jake is hesitant. His family shows up, desperate but wary, reminding him that this is his last chance. Deep inside, Jake knows the next time he might not wake up. He is at a crossroads: either take the help offered or walk out of the hospital, knowing it's only a matter of time before his addiction takes everything.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. Why might someone hesitate to accept help even after a near-death experience?
2. What role does denial play in keeping someone trapped in the cycle of addiction?
3. How do family dynamics shift when someone has faced repeated relapses, and what impact does that have on the person in recovery?
4. How can fear of failure or fear of the unknown keep us from embracing recovery?

Part 5: The Reckoning

Jake chooses detox. He completes the program and begins attending meetings regularly, but he's filled with uncertainty about his future. While the physical withdrawals are behind him, the mental battle has just begun. He struggles with lingering shame, anxiety, and the daunting task of rebuilding trust with those he's hurt. Jake is given the opportunity to enter a long-term sober living program, but part of him wonders if he's ready for the commitment. Every day feels like a battle between the old life he knows and the new one he's trying to build. One night, during a meeting, Jake is confronted by someone he hurt in the past, forcing him to reckon with the weight of his actions.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. Why might Jake feel torn between committing to recovery and slipping back into old habits?
2. How do unresolved guilt and shame continue to haunt people in early recovery, and how can they work through those emotions?
3. What are some of the challenges Jake might face in rebuilding relationships, and how can those challenges affect his recovery?
4. Have you ever had to confront someone you hurt during your addiction? What was that experience like, and how did it affect your recovery journey?



Part 6: The Rebuild

Months pass, and Jake has stayed sober. He's living in the sober house, has a job, and is slowly rebuilding connections with his family. But sobriety isn't a straight path. Jake finds himself tempted during a stressful week at work when a colleague offers him a drink after a hard day. He refuses, but the experience shakes him. Later, he confesses at a meeting that he feels like he's walking a tightrope, always one step away from relapse. He wonders if life will ever feel "normal" again, or if the constant vigilance will define him forever.

Group Therapy Questions:

1. How does Jake's feeling of walking a tightrope mirror the experience of many people in early recovery?
 2. What can help Jake stay grounded when he feels tempted or overwhelmed?
 3. How can community support, such as attending meetings or connecting with others in recovery, help alleviate feelings of isolation?
 4. What tools or strategies have you found helpful in managing the ongoing challenges of recovery?
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