

GDC Session #8: Managing Feelings in Recovery

Objectives of Session

1. Understand the relationship between feelings and substance use.
2. Identify and prioritize feelings that clients have trouble coping with and that represent a possible relapse risk factor.
3. Identify strategies to cope with one problematic feeling.
4. Introduce clients to an eight-step approach that helps manage feelings.

Methods/Points for Discussion

1. Use a discussion format to review the clients' answers to the handouts and the educational material for this session. Write the major points on a chalkboard or flip chart, if desired.
2. Ask group members to share their own experiences related to this material, as it is reviewed.
3. Emphasize the importance of managing feelings in recovery, both to reduce the chances of relapsing and to help clients feel better about themselves and their relationships.
4. Mention that others in recovery have identified common high-risk feeling states (i.e., anxiety, anger, boredom, depression, emptiness, guilt, loneliness, etc.). For some, certain emotions or feelings are a trigger to cocaine or other substance use.
5. Although people associate negative feelings such as anger or depression with relapse, positive feelings can also be a trigger to relapse.
6. Have group members list specific feelings that they view as potential relapse risk factors, especially if they haven't learned new ways of handling them. Following are the more common ones they are likely to report:
 - Anger or worry.
 - Anxiety.
 - Bitterness or resentment.
 - Boredom.
 - Depression.

- Feeling empty, like nothing matters or is important in life.
 - Feeling good, positive, or on top of the world.
 - Guilt.
 - Hopelessness.
 - Loneliness.
 - Sadness.
 - Shame.
7. Ask each group member to identify one feeling and to state a plan to deal with it. Have group members share their plans with everyone in the group.
 8. At the end of the group session, remind members to pay close attention to emotional states and subsequent urges or cravings to use cocaine or other substances.
 9. Ask clients who have previously relapsed to try to identify whether any changes in their feelings were relapse warning signs. Upsetting emotional states have been identified as one of the most common relapse precipitants in a number of studies.
 10. Inform group members of the extra handout to review on their own entitled “An 8-Step Approach for Managing Feelings in Recovery.”

GDC Session #8 Handouts

1. “Managing Feelings.” Adapted from *Group Drug Counseling Participant Recovery Workbook*. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications, Inc., pp. 18-19.
2. “An 8-Step Approach for Managing Feelings in Recovery.”

Suggested Educational Videos

1. Living Sober Video C: *Managing Anger in Recovery*. Gerald T. Rogers Productions, 1000 Skokie Blvd., Suite 575, Wilmette, IL 60091, 1-800-227-9100.
2. Living Sober Video D: *Managing Feelings of Boredom and Emptiness*. Gerald T. Rogers Productions, 1000 Skokie Blvd., Suite 575, Wilmette, IL 60091, 1-800-227-9100.

GDC Session #8, Sample Handout #1

Managing Feelings

One of the common tasks of recovery from cocaine addiction is recognizing and managing your feelings. Managing your feelings reduces your chances of relapsing and improves your physical and mental health. Managing your feelings also is important in making sure that your relationships with other people are healthy and satisfying.

Using drugs, including alcohol, can cover up or exaggerate your feelings or cause you to express them inappropriately. On the other hand, not dealing with your feelings can eventually lead to relapse to substance use. Many people use substances as a way to deal with feelings, particularly painful ones. In such cases, substances provide a temporary escape. Many recovering people identify their difficulty in coping with uncomfortable feelings such as anger, boredom, or depression as a trigger to their use of cocaine or other substances.

Feelings are sometimes referred to as positive or negative. Positive emotions include feeling cheerful, excited, glad, hopeful, loving, or thankful. Negative emotions include feeling angry, bitter, depressed, guilty, disappointed, jealous, or humiliated. These feelings usually make you feel bad or uncomfortable.

However, be careful about labeling feelings as only positive or negative because a particular emotion and how you deal with it can be a negative or a positive experience. Excitement, for example, can be negative if it leads to reckless or impulsive behavior or making poor decisions. However, it can be positive and make you feel energized and invested in what you are doing. Anger can be negative and drag you down, making you feel upset and revengeful because you feel others are treating you unjustly. On the other hand, anger can be a positive experience and empower and motivate you to resolve problems or conflicts or work harder toward a goal that you wish to achieve. Anger is energy that can be used in many positive ways.

To help you better understand the connection between your feelings, how you cope with them, and your use of substances, please answer the following questions.

1. With which of the following feelings do you need to learn new ways to cope to reduce the risk for relapse to drug or alcohol use? Check (✓) all that apply.

Anger

Anxiety and worry

Bitterness and resentment

Boredom (missing the “action” of bars, parties, getting or using drugs, or hanging with other drug users or a fast crowd; missing “living on the edge”)

Depression

Feeling empty, like nothing matters or is important in life

Feeling good, excited, on top of the world

Guilt

Hopelessness

Loneliness

Sadness

Shame

Other feelings (write in) _____

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2. Choose one feeling from the list above that you have to learn to cope with better to improve your chances of staying off alcohol or other drugs. List this feeling and the steps you can take to cope with it **without** using drugs or alcohol. Be as specific as you can be in formulating your plan (for example, don't say "talk to someone when angry"; instead, say "talk to my NA sponsor, my partner," or some other specific person).

Feeling: *Boredom*

Steps I can take to cope with this feeling without using:

Plan my weekends in advance so I keep busy.

Participate in enjoyable activities (sports, movies) every single week.

Challenge my thinking when I'm bored so I don't use this as an excuse to get high.

Maintain regular involvement in my recovery activities.

Call an NA/AA friend when I worry that being alone and bored could trigger a relapse.

GDC Session #8, Sample Handout #2

An 8-Step Approach for Managing Feelings in Recovery

Following are eight steps you can take to help you understand and manage your feelings to reduce your chances of using cocaine or other substances. You can use these steps regardless of the specific feeling that you are dealing with.

■ **Step 1: *Recognize and label your feelings.***

Don't deny your feelings because doing so can cause you difficulty in the long run. Even if you feel what you believe is a negative or bad feeling, remember that it is simply an honest feeling. Feeling an emotion doesn't mean you have to act on it.

You can also look for patterns in regard to your feelings. Do you tend to experience certain feelings much more frequently than others? For example, are you prone to feeling anxious and worried when you are faced with a difficult task in which others put demands on you? Are you prone to feeling sad and depressed after receiving criticism from others? Are you prone to feeling angry whenever you don't get your way with others?

■ **Step 2: *Be aware of how your feelings show.***

Pay attention to how your feelings are reflected in your body language, physical changes, thoughts, and behavior. These are clues you can use to become more aware of your feelings.

For example, pacing and feeling "keyed up" or "tight" may indicate that one person is angry. For another person, this behavior may indicate feeling worried. A person may be prone to headaches or other physical complaints when upset and angry. These or other physical cues may be signs that something is going on that needs your attention.

When feeling upset, rejected, or frustrated, one person may be prone to going on mini-shopping sprees. Another may turn to food and eat too much or turn to cocaine. Another person may withdraw and avoid other people when he or she is upset. The ways in which feelings are expressed through behavior are endless. Your behaviors can also tell you something important about your feelings.

■ **Step 3: *Look for causes of your feelings.***

Feelings aren't usually caused by other people or events, but by how you think about them. Your beliefs about feelings play a big role in how you deal with them. For example, if you believe anger is bad and should not be expressed, you are likely to deny angry feelings or keep them to yourself.

To understand why you feel the way you do, look at the connections among what you believe or think, how you feel, and how you act. Any of these components can affect another.

■ **Step 4: *Evaluate the effects your feelings and your coping style have on both you and other people.***

How is your physical or mental health affected by your feelings? How is your behavior, relationships with others, or self-esteem affected? If your emotions or the ways in which you cope with them cause you distress or problems in your relationships with others, you need to work on changing how you deal with the feelings.

You need to consider how your emotional states and your related behavior affect others as well as yourself. For example, if you are depressed or angry, how does this affect your family? If you get irritated and snap at others when you are depressed, how does this affect them?

Your emotions and the way in which you cope with them may have many positive effects. Most likely, some feelings have, more or less, a positive effect on your life, and some have more of a negative effect on your life. If a feeling or how you deal with it causes problems for you, this is a signal that you should consider making some type of change.

■ **Step 5: *Identify coping strategies to deal with your feelings.***

Continue to use old coping methods if they are effective. However, you can learn new coping methods, if needed. There is no right way to cope with your feelings. How you cope depends on the specific situation at hand. Having a variety of coping strategies puts you in a good position to effectively deal with your feelings without using cocaine or other drugs.

■ **Step 6: *Rehearse or practice new coping strategies.***

Practicing the way in which you might deal with a feeling, especially when another person is involved, can make you feel more prepared and confident about what you will say. Learning to express feelings appropriately is a skill that has to be learned and practiced just like any other skill does.

Sometimes you can practice by yourself by thinking of different things that you can say in certain situations. You can even practice how you might deal with your feelings toward another person in a given situation by rehearsing what you could say out loud.

You also can practice with another person. For example, if you feel very attracted to a person with whom you work and want to ask this person out on a date but feel uncomfortable doing so, you can practice with a friend or family member. If you are upset and angry with a family member, work with your therapist to practice different ways of sharing your feelings directly.

■ **Step 7: *Put your new coping strategies into action.***

You can come up with a plan to deal with feelings, but if you don't put your plan into action, it does you little good. Action is needed for change. You have to translate your desire or need to change into your actual behavior.

Don't worry about making a mistake as this is to be expected when you first change how you cope with your feelings.

■ **Step 8: *Change your coping strategies as needed based on your evaluation of whether these strategies were effective.***

All strategies will not work the same in all situations. The key is having several coping strategies to rely on so that you don't use the same strategy all of the time. Even if a coping strategy works well in one situation, it may not work in another. Make sure you have several strategies to help you cope with your feelings.