Breakout 17 — Healthy Stress Management — Practical Skills for Stress

One sentence for the board: This group practices healthy ways to steady stress — in the body, in the day, and in contact with other people — so stress has somewhere to go besides use.

Purpose	Teach practical, healthy stress-management skills clients can use the same day: steadying the body, steadying the day, and reaching out — practiced in the room, not just described. This is skills practice, not the grounding practice of Coping Skills and not teaching about the brain's stress systems from Brain Science.
Who chooses this group	Curriculum groups meet separately for men and for women. Breakout groups are coed unless otherwise specified. Placement for participants who do not fit a men/women split follows the participant's stated preference, confirmed with staff for safety and privacy. Nothing about a participant's placement is disclosed to the group. Any participant who wants practical ways to steady stress without using. No participant is asked to share what is stressing them. The stated preference stands unless a stated safety reason requires a private conversation. Safety and privacy are the only criteria.
Length	60 minutes
Materials	Paper and pens for every client, whiteboard or flip chart and markers, and the topic resources named in this outline

Time	Segment	What happens
0–5 min	Welcome	Ground rules, confidentiality

		limits, right to pass. State plainly at the start: no one is asked to share what is stressing them.
5–30 min	Teaching	The teaching points below, in order, on the board: stress as a load, steadying the body, steadying the day, reaching out, steadying versus numbing, and the hard day.
30–45 min	Discussion	Prompts below. General answers are always complete answers — no one is asked to name what is stressing them.
45–55 min	Practice — my stress-steadying plan	Clients practice one body skill, shape tomorrow in three steps, and name one person and one sentence. Writing stays with the client.
55–60 min	Close	Takeaways, the same-day path for a medical concern restated, and one steadying step each client will actually do this week.

Teaching points

- **Stress is a load, not a verdict.** Stress is the body's response to a load — too much to carry, too fast, for too long. Feeling stressed does not mean recovery is failing; it means the load needs a way down.
- **Steady the body first.** Stress lives in the body before it lives in words: tight shoulders, shallow breathing, a racing heart. The first skills are physical and small — slow breathing out, unclenching hands and jaw, a short walk, water — and they are practiced in the room until they are familiar.
- **Steady the day next.** Stress grows when a day has no shape. A short list of what must happen today, one thing at a time, in order, with rest built in, keeps a hard day from becoming a formless one. Small, finished steps lower the load more than big plans announced and abandoned.
- **Reach out before the load peaks.** Stress handled alone grows; stress spoken to one trusted person shrinks. Naming the load to a support person, a peer, or staff — early, before the peak — is a skill, not a weakness, and it is practiced here as a sentence clients can actually say.

- **Know the difference between steadying and numbing.** Healthy stress management steadies the load so it can be carried. Numbing — with a substance, with sleep that swallows the day, with shutting everyone out — postpones the load and adds to it. This group practices the steadying kind only.
- **A hard day still counts.** On the hardest days the plan shrinks to its smallest form: one slow breath, one finished step, one honest contact. A hard day is not a failed day when the small steps were kept.

Discussion prompts

- "What does stress feel like in your body first — before you have words for it?"
- "Which of the three — body, day, or reaching out — is hardest for you, and what gets in the way?"
- "What is one healthy way you have already steadied stress, even once, that actually worked?"
- "What sentence could you say to one trusted person when the load is rising — word for word?"

Practice — my stress-steadying plan (10 minutes, your page stays with you)

1. Practice one body skill in the room: three slow breaths out, shoulders down, hands unclenched. Write the one you will use first.
2. Write tomorrow as three steps, in order, each small enough to finish — and one rest built in between them.
3. Write the name of one person you will contact when the load rises, and the sentence you will say: "I am stressed, and I need..."
4. Name one numbing habit you will not use to steady stress this week, and the steadying step that replaces it.
5. Keep your page. It is yours. Nothing written in this practice is collected, copied, or kept by the facilitator or the program.

Facilitator boundaries — Healthy Stress Management

- **Skills practice, not therapy.** Facilitators teach and practice stress-management skills as education. They do not counsel any participant's stress, diagnose anxiety, or advise on any individual's situation.
- **No medical advice.** Stress that comes with chest pain, trouble breathing, or thoughts of harming oneself is a same-day medical concern, not a group skill. Connect the client to medical staff through program procedure immediately; in an emergency, call 911 or call or text 988.
- **No one shares their stress aloud.** No participant is asked to name what is stressing them or to describe a stressful situation in detail. General answers are complete answers.
- **Medication affirmed; decisions referred.** Facilitators affirm clients who use medication exactly as prescribed, never advise a client to start, stop, or change any medication, and refer every medication question to medical staff the same day.

- **Warrior close:** Close with the load steadied: “Stress is a load, and a load can be steadied — one breath, one finished step, one honest word. That is how warriors hold ground: by setting the load down in pieces, not all at once.”

Sources & Evidence

Clinical evidence: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services (TIP 57, 2014) — grounding, self-regulation, and coping-skills education in behavioral health settings. Cognitive behavioral and dialectical behavior therapy skills literatures are the broader clinical background for reframing, grounding, and distress-tolerance skills; named generally here, with no specific outcome claimed for this group.

Recovery-support evidence: Written personal coping plans, in-session guided practice, and peer rehearsal — standard recovery-support practices. SAMHSA National Helpline, 1-800-662-4357, for referrals when a client needs support beyond this group. No outcome is promised for this group.

Note: No outcome is promised for any group in this packet.