Session 4: The Addiction Cycle

Duration: 60 minutes • Recovery education group. Ensure all participants are seated and ready

Materials: Whiteboard and markers; workbooks; the Session 4 handout (Medication Support (MAT) Facts) — distribute and discuss in this session

Learning objectives — by the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Draw the addiction cycle in their own words — trigger, thought, craving, use, consequence, shame
- Explain, in plain language, how repeated use changes the brain's reward and stress systems
- Place their own most recent use inside the cycle without self-condemnation

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 1 — Foundation. The one idea today is that addiction is a cycle — trigger, thought, craving, use, consequence, shame — and a cycle that can be drawn can be interrupted. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. Today we map the war. Addiction is not a single bad choice repeated; it is a cycle — trigger, thought, craving, use, consequence, shame — and a cycle that can be drawn can be interrupted. We learn where the doors in the cycle are, and we place our own most recent use on the map without self-condemnation.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: “Tell us about a time you sincerely decided you were done — and used anyway. What happened between the decision and the use?” Log every craving score on the roster.

Passing is honored — you may pass any question, prompt, or practice without explanation, step out and rejoin, and choose a partner-only option where one is offered.

Teaching (20 minutes)

Addiction is not a single bad choice repeated; it is a cycle that gains power each time it completes. Something triggers us. A thought offers the substance as the answer. Craving builds in the body — tension, restlessness, a narrowing of attention. Use follows, then short relief, then consequences, then shame — and shame itself becomes the next trigger. Repeated use also trains the brain: cues connected to use gain power, stress systems grow more reactive, and the part of the brain that weighs consequences has to compete against a habit that fires automatically. None of this removes responsibility. It locates it: our work is to interrupt the cycle earlier and earlier, with help, before willpower is asked to do the whole job alone at the worst moment. Distribute the Session 4 handout (Medication Support (MAT) Facts) and discuss it briefly: medication support is a prescriber decision, made with the participant’s medical provider, and this program neither prescribes nor adjusts medication. Medications for alcohol use (naltrexone/acamprosate) are prescriber decisions. For brain science in depth, see Breakout 10.

- **The cycle has doors** Every stage is an interruption point — triggers can be avoided or prepared for, thoughts can be examined (Weeks 2–3), cravings can be ridden out (Session 5), and shame can be answered with support and honesty instead of use (Week 3).
- **The brain heals, and it takes time** Sleep, mood, focus, and craving intensity commonly improve over weeks and months of recovery — one reason stabilization and patience are evidence-based strategies, not just virtues.
- **Knowing the map is power** A craving with a name and a location in a cycle is more manageable than a mysterious 'weakness.'

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

Addiction is described in the federal research literature as a complex but treatable condition affecting brain function and behavior, and recovery as a long-term process that often requires continuing care (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018). Key sources for this session: National Institute on Drug Abuse (2018); Waller et al. (2023), The ASAM Criteria. Evidence strength: Moderate to strong as practice guidance. Spiritual practice: Scripture meditation — correlates with attentional training and honest self-observation; evidence: Moderate (Beck et al., 1993). Full citations: Appendix H. The session's Scripture material is in its optional handout (Appendix I), as theological foundation, quoted from the King James Version.

'Evidence strength' grades the correlated mechanism, not the spiritual practice itself

Pause midway through teaching: ask, "What part of that sounds most like your life right now?" Take two or three answers, connect them to the teaching, and continue. Teach in your own words — the bullets are your map, not a script to read aloud.

Discussion questions (10 minutes)

1. Where in the cycle are you strongest, and where do you usually lose the fight?
2. What role has shame played after use — did it ever lead you back toward use?
3. How does it change things to hear that your brain has been trained, not just that your will is weak?
4. Which interruption point will you build first, with whose help?

Skill practice (12 minutes)

On the whiteboard, the facilitator draws the cycle and the group populates it with (anonymous, general) examples. Then each participant draws their own cycle in their workbook from their most recent use, marking with a star the earliest point they could realistically interrupt next time.

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

Carry your cycle drawing this week. Each evening, note one moment you entered the early stages of the cycle (trigger or thought) and what you did — interrupted it or not. Bring the

notes; there is no penalty for honest data. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave.

Facilitator notes and cautions

Keep the science plain and humble: facilitators teach the model as education, not diagnosis, and never speculate about an individual participant's brain, trauma history, or medication. If someone asks a medical question ('is my medication doing this?'), the answer is always: 'That is a question for your prescriber — let's help you get it asked this week.'

Closing (2 minutes)

A craving with a name and a location is more manageable than a mysterious weakness. Carry your map this week and mark where you entered the cycle. Next session: triggers — people, places, things, and feelings.

Fidelity check for this session: objectives named at the start ☐ craving scores logged ☐ skill practice completed in full ☐ homework written down by participants ☐ session note filed today ☐