Session 16: Pain and Use: Understanding the Connection Safely

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

Materials: Printed 5-4-3-2-1 grounding card for each participant; the Session 16 handout (Grounding Card: 5-4-3-2-1)

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

- Explain, at headline level, how trauma and chronic stress can drive substance use as self-medication
- State the group's trauma-informed ground rules and why detail stays out of this room
- Identify one present-day stress response they can work on with present-day tools

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 2 — Healing. The one idea today is that pain and use are connected at headline level, and present-day tools turn the volume down without excavating stories. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. Today, consider the connection between pain and use — at the level of understanding, never at the level of stories. Nobody will be asked what happened to them. That is a promise that holds, and it is how this work stays safe. We name how substances became a volume knob, and we practice turning the volume down in present-day ways.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: “Without telling any story: on a scale of 1–10, how much of your using do you now believe was about numbing or escaping something?” 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)

Many people in recovery carry experiences — violence, loss, neglect, combat, accidents, betrayal — after which their nervous system learned that substances turn the volume down. Clinicians call one version of this self-medication: the substance was solving a problem, badly and at terrible cost, but solving it — sleep, quiet, courage, numbness. Understanding this connection changes the plan: recovery must offer other ways to turn the volume down, and Week 4 builds those (structured honest expression, grounding, grief work, boundaries). It also changes the self-story: a person who used to cope is not excused, but they are comprehensible to themselves, and comprehension is where compassion and strategy both start. What group does not do is excavate: trauma processing belongs with a trained clinician, one-to-one, paced — which is why this program refers out and why facilitators guard the headline-level rule without apology.

- **Understanding is not excavating** Knowing that pain and use are connected guides today's choices. Re-living the pain among peers risks harm to the teller and the listeners, and helps neither.

- **The body keeps the score in the present** What we can work on here is today's responses — startle, shutdown, rage spikes, numbness — with grounding, structure, and support. Clinical treatment for the roots is available by referral, and taking it is strength.
- **Safety is a treatment ingredient** Predictability, choice, no forced disclosure, and facilitators who do what they said they would do — this room's design is itself part of the healing.

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

Pain and use are taught at headline level only in this session: how trauma and chronic stress can drive substance use as self-medication, the group's trauma-informed ground rules, and one present-day stress response worked on with present-day tools (SAMHSA, 2014a; Najavits, 2002). Key sources for this session: SAMHSA (2014a), TIP 57; SAMHSA (2014b); Najavits (2002); SAMHSA (2020), TIP 42. Evidence strength: Moderate; strong as a practice framework. Spiritual practice: Lament, held without processing trauma memories in group — correlates with trauma-informed emotional processing, with cautions; evidence: Emerging to moderate (SAMHSA, 2014a; Najavits, 2002). 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. Informed by Seeking Safety principles; Seeking Safety itself is not delivered.

'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. How does it change your self-story to hear use described as coping — without removing responsibility?
2. What are your present-day volume knobs besides substances — what actually turns your stress down, even a little?
3. What makes a room or a person feel safe to you? How can this group protect that?
4. Is there a referral — counseling, medical, veterans' services — you have been avoiding that this session brings to mind? (Naming the category only is enough.)

Skill practice (12 minutes)

Grounding practice, taught as a tool for any overwhelmed moment: 5-4-3-2-1 senses exercise led slowly by the facilitator (five things seen, four heard, three felt, two smelled, one tasted), followed by a round where each participant names their most reliable present-day 'volume knob' — walk, cold water, music, a person — and writes it into their Crisis Plan as a step-two strategy. Change any step only with your counselor.

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

Add your volume knob to your Safety Plan this week. Change any step only with your counselor. Practice 5-4-3-2-1 once on a calm day so it is familiar before you need it. If this session stirred

anything heavy, tell your coach or counselor this week — that conversation is the homework's most important form. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave.

Facilitator notes and cautions

This session carries the guide's strictest facilitation rules. Enforce headline-level sharing kindly and immediately ('I'm going to pause you there — not because it doesn't matter, but because it matters too much for this room; let's get you to your counselor today'). Watch the room for dissociation or distress; offer water, the grounding exercise, and a staff escort to a quieter space. Any disclosure suggesting current danger or abuse follows program reporting policy and the Crisis Protocol the same day.

Closing (2 minutes)

Understanding is not excavating. Add your volume knob to your safety plan, practice the grounding once on a calm day, Change any step only with your counselor. and if today stirred anything heavy, tell your coach this week — that conversation is the homework. Next session: putting pain into words — honestly, in a structure that holds it.

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 ☐