Session 28: The Warning-Sign Chain: Relapse Starts Long Before Use

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

Materials: Appendix C handouts; the Session 28 handout (Relapse Warning Signs) and the shared Sessions 28 & 30 handout (My Warning-Sign Chain & Return Plan); workbooks

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

- Name the five stages of the relapse chain — Drift, Setup / denial, High-risk situation, Craving / decision point, Use — and name one interruption for each of the first four stages.
- Name their two earliest, most reliable signs
- Attach an interruption action and a person to each of the first four stages

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 4 — Living Free. The one idea today is that relapse starts long before use, in five stages — Drift, Setup / denial, High-risk situation, Craving / decision point, Use — and the earliest interruption is cheapest. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. Relapse is a process, not an event — it starts days or weeks before any substance appears, which means it can be interrupted days or weeks early. Today everyone builds their personal warning-sign chain and welds an interruption — an action and a person — to every early link.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: “Look back at your last return to use. If we rewound two weeks before it, what had already started changing — sleep, meetings, honesty, mood, people?” 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)

Relapse does not start with use. It starts earlier, in five stages, and each stage has an interruption: 1. Drift — small drifts from the routines that hold recovery, noticed early and corrected with structure. 2. Setup / denial — the story that the drift does not matter, interrupted by naming it plainly to another person. 3. High-risk situation — a place, person, or feeling that raises risk, interrupted with the if–then plan from Session 29. 4. Craving / decision point — the moment of choice, interrupted by delay, contact, and leaving. 5. Use. Interruptions attach to the first four stages; at Use, the Return Card governs. Work the chain backwards from the earliest stage you can name, not forwards from the use.

- **Earliest is cheapest** Interrupting at drift costs a phone call and an honest sentence. Interrupting at the dealer's door costs everything we have built. The whole skill is moving our honesty earlier.
- **Denial wears recovery language** 'I'm just focusing on work,' 'I don't need meetings this week,' 'I've got this' — the chain speaks fluent program. Our people learn our dialect and call it out; that is their job, given in advance.

- **Signs are personal and physical** Sleep collapse, skipped meals, isolation, irritability, romantic pursuit, money secrecy — each person's first two signs are specific enough that a roommate could spot them. Vague chains protect nobody.
- **The chain is a document, not a insight** Appendix C gets completed, shared with coach and accountability people, and revised after every scare. An unshared chain is a secret, and secrets are the chain's favorite habitat.

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

Relapse prevention research treats return to use as a process with identifiable warning signs and high-risk situations that can be planned for in advance (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985). Key sources for this session: Marlatt & Gordon (1985); Gorski & Miller (1986); National Institute on Drug Abuse (2018). Evidence strength: Moderate. Spiritual practice: Evening inventory — correlates with relapse-prevention self-monitoring of warning signs; evidence: Moderate (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985; Gorski & Miller, 1986). 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. What are your two earliest signs — the ones present two weeks out?
2. Which recovery-dialect denial sentence is yours?
3. At the high-risk situation stage, what kind of problem do you characteristically refuse to ask for help with — money, conflict, legal, loneliness?
4. Who, by name, has your permission to read your chain back to you when you are in it?

Skill practice (12 minutes)

Full workshop: participants complete Appendix C stage by stage with facilitator coaching, then exchange chains in accountability pairs — each partner writes, on the other's chain, the sentence they will actually say when they spot stage one ('Your sleep's gone and you skipped Tuesday. I'm reading your own chain to you — call Coach now, or I will sit with you while you do.'). Facilitators collect names of who holds each chain before closing.

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

This week, give a copy of your chain (or walk it through aloud) to your coach and one more person on it. Post your two earliest signs where you will see them daily. Log one daily drift-check (green / yellow / red) in your workbook. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave. The daily drift-check in this session is an entry in the one running daily log in the workbook, not a second log.

Facilitator notes and cautions

Handle any participant who realizes, mid-workshop, that they are currently mid-chain: that is the workshop working. Do not let them leave on a worksheet — connect them to their coach before they leave the building, activate stage-matched interruptions today, and document it. If use has already occurred, Session 30's protocol and a same-day care-team conversation apply, delivered without a trace of shame in your voice or face.

Closing (2 minutes)

Earliest is cheapest: interrupting at drift costs a phone call; interrupting at the last link costs everything. Give your chain to your people this week and post your two earliest signs where you will see them daily. Next session: high-risk situations — your personal prevention plan.

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 ☐