



Curveballs (A Setback/Relapse Prevention Activity and Discussion) – [VIDEO INTRO \(Click here\)](#)

Intro: Preventing setbacks and relapse in relation to substance use and mental health requires careful planning. At this point, most people are quite familiar with the idea of identifying triggers and then coping with triggers to prevent relapse. This exercise considers a different angle on this topic. Sometimes life throws us “curveballs” which can come in the form of unexpected events or circumstances that are sudden and challenging to deal with. A person may be doing everything right when it comes to managing substance use and mental health issues when suddenly an unexpected curveball can throw life completely out of whack for a little while or even longer. This exercise is about coping with and preparing for life’s unexpected curveballs. This topic is then followed by a discussion about managing surprise events successfully and also living a life today that helps prevent unexpected life challenges.

Opening Exercise: Swinging at Curveballs

Below is a list of hypothetical situations that could come up in life that may cause trouble for someone working on substance use issues (and mental health issues as well). As a group take turns reviewing this list of curveballs and for each one, discuss the following three points:

1 – How do you think you would feel in this scenario? (Use feelings words, might be a good idea to have a feeling chart handy)

2 – Setback/Relapse Factor: Using the following scale, how seriously do you think the relapse risk would be for you personally (make your best guess)

- 0-** Not at all – no risk
- 1-** Slight relapse risk
- 2-** Possible relapse risk if not careful
- 3-** Significant relapse risk
(Help/support needed)
- 4-** Red alert: Very high risk of relapse

3 – What do you think you would do if you were actually facing this curveball? (Particularly what would you do in order to successfully prevent relapse)

“Changes are inevitable and not always controllable.
What can be controlled is how you manage, react to and work through the change process.”
— Kelly A. Morgan



Curveball List

Note for Group Leader: Use this list in any order, and let anyone answer who wants too, it's up to you.

Relationship Turmoil – You find considerable evidence that your significant other is cheating on you.

Sudden Medical Concern – You go to the ER for something unexpected and get a test result back that indicates that you might have a more serious, life-altering medical concern

Job Loss – You show up at work one day and get an email that the company is bankrupt and everyone, including you, is out of a job in 2 weeks with no severance pay.

Ghosted by Close Friend – Someone you care about is avoiding you, acting weird when you reach out and they won't explain why, but its clear they no longer want you as a friend.

Bored and Depressed – You wake up one day feeling an overwhelming and inescapable sense that you are unsatisfied and bored with life which triggers an unexpected depressive episode.

Confronted by Stuff – Suddenly and unexpectedly you find yourself in a situation where someone offers you your substance of choice in an environment where you could use, and no one would see you (and you didn't see this coming).

Ego Hit – You encounter an unexpected situation where someone gets the best of you mentally and emotionally, triggering some embarrassment and even some shame to the point where you can't stop thinking about it days later.

Natural Disaster – A storm or other weather event upsets your entire life course, and you need to move, you can't work, and you find yourself without your belongings and little to do for an extended period of time.

Sudden Wealth – You are doing well with recovery when suddenly you get a large sum of money which triggers thoughts that you could go back to using and afford it for quite some time even if it got out of hand

Amazing Invite – You get invited to attend an event where there is a chance you can meet a celebrity you have always admired however you know the booze and drugs will be freely flowing at this party.

Dangerous Relationship – You pride yourself on recognizing people who get high however you make an amazing new acquaintance whom you really enjoy spending time with. Suddenly this person offers you a substance that you used to misuse and tells you they enjoy using it, inviting you to join them.

Guilty Mistake – You make an unexpected mistake and it's a bad one. You realize that at least one person in your family whom you care about a great deal is going to be devastated when they find out what you did.

Damaging Disappointment – You suddenly find out that a dream that you have had for a long time that you put a lot of time and effort into will never happen due to an unfair circumstance that is completely out of your control.

Erotic Escapade – Someone whom you find very desirable for quite some time propositions you to sneak away to get a motel room provided you use drugs together as part of this erotic escapade.

Old Times Relived – One of your favorite people from the past resurfaces and they appear to be doing well and they look well too. However, after you reestablish the relationship, you find out they are still using and they want you to join them free of charge.

Other – (If time) Can anyone in the group think of any other interesting life curveballs to discuss?



Seven Strategies for Coping with Curveballs (Unexpected Events) -

1. **Give yourself a break** – Allow yourself to understand that unexpected events are difficult and feeling stressed out or overwhelmed is normal. It is ok to struggle at first with difficult thoughts and feelings when unexpected things come up. However, we can prevent ourselves from making choices that we will later regret when we take the time first to carefully first watch out for our actions and decisions.
2. **Remember you are not alone** – Others have gone through (or are going through) what you are experiencing. There are people out there who can provide empathy, encouragement, love, and support. Other people have faced what you are facing and gotten through it successfully.
3. **Stay strengths based** – When unexpected things happen a person can feel weak and vulnerable which is normal, but it is so important to consider the strengths and supports we have available to help get us through. If you already have coping skills and supports, by all means, use them! (Rather than isolate)
4. **Keep a routine (to the best of your ability)** – When something throws our life of whack there is evidence that keeping a healthy routine can have a huge impact in to avoiding making things worse. Stay focused.
5. **Flex your goals as needed** – If something in life suddenly throws your life goals off course try to refocus your goals in a new way to keep moving in a positive direction, even if that requires modifying our course.
6. **Consider the long game** – It can be tempting to make impulsive or “quick fix” decisions when an event catches us by surprise. However, it is much better to really think through the long-term outcome of decisions made when under stress.
7. **Ask for help** – When faced with challenges we didn’t see coming there may be a need to reach out and possibly get professional help. Avoid letting denial or overconfidence prevent you from getting what you need before things get worse. There is no shame in seeking assistance when times are tough.

Final Section – Living a Life to Minimize Curveballs

Unexpected things can happen to anyone as life is not always fair or predicable. However, all of us can make life choices today to prevent the likelihood of unexpected negative events and also to prepare ourselves to bounce back quickly (aka resilience) should an unexpected event happen. As a group, go through the previous **Curveball List** and discuss some life decisions that can be made in life today, that can be made to reduce the likelihood of experiencing each curveball on the list,

Consider some examples from the Curveball List of things we can do today that help increase stability and prevent future problems:

Relationship Turmoil

- I can try to maintain and promote open and honest communication in my relationship.
- I can try not to choose partners who have a high potential to cheat by being more selective and looking for red flags when dating.

Sudden Medical Concern

- I can try to get regular check ups so I can learn about medical issues early on
- I can quit smoking and try to eat a healthier diet and get more exercise to prevent medical issues.

“Embrace each challenge in your life as an opportunity for self-transformation.”

— Bernie Siegel