



Rules of the Road for Relationships

Goal of the Handout: To describe relationship guidelines for food addiction recovery groups.

Application of the Handout: Members of food addiction recovery groups can use these guidelines to keep their groups safe. 'Safe' means that members can participate without fear of criticism, questions, or hurtful comments. Members can also beneficially apply these guidelines to their own negative self-talk.

Background: Food addicts often come into recovery with a condition known as relationship sensitivity. The condition stems from years of being criticized and judged unfairly by others and by the self. This unjust treatment is traumatic. To be not only misunderstood, but blamed severely for uncontrolled eating is very painful for many food addicts. This profoundly unfair treatment for many years leaves food addicts very sensitive to criticism, or anything that even looks or feels like criticism, including questions and comments. The most seemingly benign thought can be felt as very painful to someone who's been heavily subjected to ridicule, derision, taunting, or bullying.

At the same time, processed foods cause changes in the brain that make it difficult to be positive. The 'positive' pathways in the brain have been diminished. So we get used to seeing the world through the lens of anger, depression, anxiety, and shame. See also the *Hand-out: Living with Imperfect People*.

So the challenge in a group of newly-recovering food addicts is to heal the depression, irritability, anxiety, and shame without it triggering another member. These 'Rules of the Road' are designed to do just that.

Normal strong emotions. So food addicts may have very strong emotions, especially in the early months of recovery. In early stage recovery, addicts can have bouts of depression, anger, anxiety, and shame. These are the result of changes in neurotransmitter function in the brain, hormone function, blood glucose levels, and even gut bacteria. This is normal in recovery. Even though the feelings are driven by body chemistry, the feelings are experienced as being very real. It's hard to believe that these feelings are the result of chemistry and not the result of life experiences. It is easier to believe that the feelings are the result of an event or an interchange with another person. This is why it's important to check out negative feelings with a facilitator.

Emotions are associated with relapse. It's also important to bear in mind that negative feelings are a primary cause of relapse. Negative feelings that occur as the result of relationships are

particularly potent in promoting relapse. So a twofold approach is used: group members are careful not to trigger another person, and group members are careful to transform negative feelings to positive feelings inside before the negativity can lead to relapse.

Emotion management skills. For many food addicts, the group may be the first time in their lives that they've been 'sober.' Since food addiction starts in toddlerhood, adult food addicts may never have had the opportunity to learn to manage and enjoy emotions. Since processed foods have numbing qualities, food addicts may have learned to numb feelings rather than just let them process with healthy comforting. In the Intensives, we have a safe place in which to try out our relationship skills.

Practicing relationships. Finally, the recovery group may be the first time that food addicts form nourishing relationships. Food addiction is a disease of isolation so sometimes the addict does not have meaningful relationships even if family members are present in the household.

These three rules will help keep both the group and members' own self-talk safe for all.

Rule of the Road 1. Never respond to a member with criticism, question, judgement, or correction. Regardless of great motivation and best of intentions, such responses are very likely to be hurtful to a food addict. This is a good rule for how we talk to ourselves as well. Replace self-judgement with education about why we do things and how to become optimistic.

Rule of the Road 2. If a negative feeling comes up in response to something that a member posts or says in a conference call, turn to the facilitator. Negative feelings are normal. We are supposed to have negative feelings. It would be weird if we didn't feel angry, sad, afraid, ashamed, guilty, or lonely at times. Your group may teach members to use the Eight Healing Questions or another technique to understand negative emotions. It's important to work through negative emotions so that negative emotions don't put recovery at risk for the member or for people around the member. Negative emotions are a primary cause of relapse. This applies if you experience a negative emotion towards yourself too.

Rule of the Road 3. Don't try to handle another member's negative emotions. If another member corresponds that they're in a negative emotion, please let that member know that you'll notify the facilitator on their behalf. And as a corollary, if you get into a negative place, please don't turn to another member for help. Go to your facilitator.

The goal of recovery groups is to create a safe place where members can rest and slowly construct the life they always wanted. The goals of the recovery group are to be in a peaceful relationship with food, to care and be cared for, and to enjoy the pursuit of happiness in relationships. The group can do this together.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the negative self-talk messages that appear in your thoughts?
2. What would you like to replace them with?
3. What are examples of positive things you could say in response to a member's post?

4. What is an example of a situation that you would turn to a facilitator for help with?