

SMART Recovery Facilitator FAQ: Harm Reduction, Abstinence, and Moderation

Introduction

Change is part of recovery, and part of recovery programs too. SMART Recovery is evolving to better support the diverse goals and experiences of our participants. This FAQ is here to help clarify what's new, what hasn't changed, and why.

General Questions

Does SMART support Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)?

Yes! SMART has long supported Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT), which involves using FDA-approved medications alongside behavioral therapies to treat substance use disorders. MAT is an evidence-based approach that can help people reduce cravings, manage withdrawal symptoms, and support long-term recovery. Like harm reduction and other recovery strategies, MAT is about empowering individuals to make informed choices that support their well-being. These approaches align with SMART's commitment to accessibility, reducing stigma, and offering practical, science-backed tools for behavior change.

Why is SMART evolving its stance on abstinence at this point in time?

This shift aligns with our core values and position statements by making SMART more inclusive and accessible. Not all behaviors of concern can be approached with abstinence. For example, someone experiencing issues with food must still eat. And not everyone is ready or interested in quitting their substance of concern. By framing recovery as reducing or resolving addictive behaviors rather than requiring abstinence, we ensure that our approach works for more people. This change helps lower traditional barriers to recovery while remaining true to SMART's evidence-based principles.

With updates underway to our Participant Handbooks and Facilitator Manuals, this was the perfect opportunity to fully align our materials with this important shift.

Wasn't SMART always welcoming people with different goals?

Yes! In many ways, SMART Recovery is not changing—it has always welcomed people who were not interested in or ready to abstain. What's changing is the language we use to ensure that everyone feels equally valued, regardless of their goals. We want to make it clear that no participant's recovery path is considered "less than" another's. Our approach has always been about making recovery accessible by not requiring participants to label

themselves, focusing on the present rather than past behaviors, avoiding religious requirements, recognizing relapses as a normal part of the process, and reducing stigma in recovery conversations. These principles ensure that SMART remains an inclusive and supportive space for all, and this refinement simply reaffirms that commitment.

Does SMART Recovery require abstinence?

No. SMART Recovery does not require abstinence. We focus on providing tools to help people make positive changes in their lives, whether that's reducing or resolving addictive behavior. All recovery goals are valid.

Will participants be learning how to moderate their drinking at SMART Recovery?

SMART Recovery does not teach moderation. We also don't teach abstinence or harm reduction. We teach self-management, behavior change, and cognitive tools. Some people may choose to apply these tools toward moderation, but SMART does not prescribe or advocate for any specific recovery goal.

Why is SMART broadening its approach?

Many people seeking support are not interested in or do not feel ready for abstinence but still want to change their behaviors. By welcoming people wherever they are in their journey, we increase the chances that they will engage with evidence-based tools and work toward meaningful change.

Will SMART still be a safe space for people who choose abstinence?

Yes. Meetings remain focused on **self-directed recovery**, and no one is required to change their personal approach. If a participant expresses discomfort about discussing harm reduction, remind them that their recovery is their own and that SMART meetings remain judgment-free zones.

What should I do if a participant is triggered by harm reduction discussions?

Let them share that and help them explore how to fight an urge that comes up at the meeting. Encourage participants to use SMART tools like the ABCs or challenging unhelpful beliefs. If necessary, acknowledge their feelings, validate their concerns, and encourage them to focus on their own goals rather than others' paths.

Can someone who is actively using substances participate in SMART meetings?

This has always been our approach, anyone seeking support is welcome, as long as they are not disruptive. If participants are disruptive, it will be pointed out. If the disruption continues, they will be asked to leave. See your facilitator manual for more details.

Should we consider abstinence-only SMART meetings?

SMART's approach does not support separating meetings by recovery goal. The strength of SMART lies in its ability to serve anyone seeking change regardless of their behavior of concern.

Why should abstinence-focused participants continue attending SMART?

Recovery is contagious—by modeling abstinence, participants who abstain may positively influence others who are still experiencing ambivalence about which path to take. Their strength and commitment to their goal is something to be proud of, and sharing their journey can inspire others while respecting that each person has their own path. Additionally, they can benefit from SMART tools, and offer valuable feedback and their own experience in group discussions.

How do I explain SMART's stance to someone who asks if SMART is an “abstinence based” program?

Use this response: *“SMART Recovery welcomes everyone, regardless of their personal goals or behavior of concern. We provide evidence-based tools for change, and participants set their own recovery goals. That may mean total abstinence or something else. Our focus is on self-empowerment, and that has not changed.”*

How will a facilitator handle a participant who insists moderation does not work and should not be discussed?

Redirect and encourage respectful discussion. They might say:

“Different people have different experiences. It sounds like abstaining is what's working for you. SMART focuses on what works for each individual. Let's focus on the tools that help us move forward.” And encourage the participant to use I-statements and remind that group that we should avoid giving hard and fast advice, but they should feel welcome to share what works for them.

How might facilitators manage discussions that become polarized between abstinence-focused and harm reduction-focused participants?

Facilitators who are now using the new meeting opening and meeting guidelines are not reporting debates or arguments about individual goals. When you follow the meeting guidelines you and read them at each meeting, you'll reduce the chances of a debate like this taking place. However, if it does, consider the following.

- **Redirect the conversation to SMART tools.** Example: “Let’s focus on how we can apply SMART strategies to our own goals. I believe we have more in common than we realize.”
- **Encourage perspective-taking.** Example: “It’s okay to have different views. What’s important is that we support each other in making progress.”
- **Use the meeting guidelines.** Example: “Let’s remember our guideline of respecting different paths.”

What if I, as a facilitator, don’t agree with this approach?

We encourage facilitators to try using this guidance in their meetings before making up their minds. Facilitators who have implemented the new meeting opening and guidelines report positive experiences, with meetings running smoothly and participants supporting each other, regardless of their individual recovery goals. Meetings with mixed goals have been successful, with attendees engaging in meaningful discussions and mutual support.

If, after trying this approach, you are certain that you do not want to continue facilitating under these guidelines, we understand. We will work with you to either close your meeting or help find another facilitator to take your place.

Practical Meeting Strategies

Can I direct participants to the Participant Manual’s chapter on Abstinence, Moderation, and Harm Reduction?

Yes, you can reference this chapter in meetings and encourage participants to read it for additional insight. You can also discuss it in the meeting, making it clear that SMART does not dictate any single path—each person is empowered to make their own choices. Participants are welcome in SMART regardless of whether they have made up their minds about their personal recovery goals.

Can facilitators share personal opinions on abstinence or harm reduction?

Facilitators should **model neutrality** and keep the focus on SMART tools. Personal stories can be helpful, but they should be framed as **one perspective among many** rather than a directive. Always be clear when sharing your own opinion and ensure that it does not override the core principles of SMART Recovery. The SMART Volunteer Code of Conduct requires facilitators to accurately represent SMART’s approach, emphasizing choice, self-empowerment, and science-based recovery. Maintaining neutrality helps create a supportive space where all recovery paths are respected.

How do I balance discussions so abstinent participants do not feel alienated?

- Reinforce that **SMART tools support all paths and behaviors of concern.**
- Encourage participants to share their own experiences **without imposing their approach on others.**
- Keep the focus on the tools and recent successes and challenges.
- Remind participants that abstinence is a form of harm reduction.

What if a participant asks for advice on whether they should pursue harm reduction, moderation, or abstinence?

Remind them: *“SMART Recovery doesn’t make that decision for you. What we do is provide tools to help you evaluate your goals and determine what works best for your life.”*

Final Thoughts

Change can be challenging, and different perspectives will arise. Our role as facilitators is not to dictate what recovery should look like but to provide a supportive space where people can develop self-empowerment and confidence in their decisions. By focusing on **SMART’s core principles—choice, science-based tools, and self-management, we can keep meetings constructive and inclusive for all.**

Was your question not answered here? Have feedback for us? We want to hear from you! Please [use this form](#) to provide your comments.