

Identity Loss & Reconstruction

Deep Dives · The Recovery Files

Rebuilding Who You Are After Addiction Took Everything

4 Readings

1 Assessment · 10 Exercises

In this workbook

- Part 1 · The Slow Erasure: How Addiction Dismantles Who You Are
- Part 2 · Moral Injury: When Addiction Made You Someone You Despise
- Part 3 · The Great Migration: How Addiction Rebuilt Your Social World
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Each reading is followed by its check-in questions and exercises, in the same order as the app. Your scored results are shown in the app.

PART 1 OF 4 · READING

The Slow Erasure: How Addiction Dismantles Who You Are

Identity loss in addiction does not happen in a single dramatic moment. Instead, the erasure is gradual — so gradual that you do not notice it is happening until the person you once were has been largely replaced by a person organized entirely around a substance.

Think of your identity as a house with many rooms. Before addiction, you lived in many rooms — the room where you were a musician, or an athlete, or a devoted parent. The room where you held strong values about honesty, loyalty, and responsibility.

Addiction begins by occupying one room. At first, it seems to fit alongside everything else. But addiction is not content to share. It is an occupying force, and it expands. Slowly, methodically, it pushes into adjacent rooms.

The hobbies get displaced first — they cannot compete with the neurochemical intensity of substance use. Then the relationships start to shrink. Then the values begin to erode. Room by room, the house empties.

Eventually, you find yourself living in a house with only one room left — the addiction room — and it has become so familiar that you can barely remember what the other rooms looked like.

This is identity loss. It is not that you chose to become someone different. It is that your identity was progressively displaced by a disease that consumes everything in its path — your activities, your values, your relationships, your roles, your self-concept.

Understanding this process is the essential first step in identity reconstruction. You cannot rebuild what you do not acknowledge was lost.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the metaphor of a "house with many rooms" land for you? Which rooms did addiction occupy first?

2. Can you identify the moment when your identity shifted from "a person who uses substances" to "a person whose life is organized around substances"?

3. Which aspect of your identity loss is most painful to acknowledge?

4. When you look in the mirror now, in early recovery, who do you see?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 6

Activity & Interest Abandonment

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I stopped doing hobbies and activities that used to be important parts of who I was

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Things I once loved were gradually replaced by my substance use

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I can barely remember what I used to enjoy before addiction consumed my time and energy

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. The activities that once gave me a sense of identity and purpose fell away one by one

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I went from being a person with many interests to a person whose life revolved around one thing

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 6

Self-Concept & Disconnection

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I looked in the mirror during my addiction and did not recognize the person looking back

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I felt like a shell of myself — like the real me had disappeared

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I lost connection with my own emotions, preferences, beliefs, and desires outside of substance use

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I experienced a profound sense of emptiness

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. The question "Who are you?" feels genuinely difficult to answer honestly right now

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The House of Many Rooms

The Hobbies & Passions Room

Activities, interests, creative pursuits

What was in this room before addiction?

How did addiction empty this room?

What is in this room right now?

What do you want to put in this room going forward?

The Values & Character Room

Principles, moral code, integrity, ethics

What was in this room before addiction?

How did addiction empty this room?

What is in this room right now?

What do you want to put in this room going forward?

The Relationships Room

Family, friendships, partnerships, community

What was in this room before addiction?

How did addiction empty this room?

What is in this room right now?

What do you want to put in this room going forward?

The Career & Purpose Room

Professional identity, ambitions, skills

What was in this room before addiction?

How did addiction empty this room?

What is in this room right now?

What do you want to put in this room going forward?

YOUR EXERCISE

Three Self-Portraits

Before, During & Becoming

Integration, Not Erasure

Recovery is not a return to the person in the first portrait — that person no longer exists, because life has moved on. It is also not a matter of pretending the second portrait never happened. The goal is a third portrait that tells the whole truth and still points forward. Paint each one with the same six brushes so you can lay them side by side.

Portrait 1: Before

Who you were before addiction took hold. If use started young, go back as far as you can remember a self that was not organized around it.

How I spent my days

What mattered most to me

How I treated the people closest to me

How I saw myself when I was alone

What someone who knew me well would have said about me

What I was proud of — and what I hid

Portrait 2: During

Who you became at the height of active addiction. Describe, do not prosecute.

How I spent my days

What mattered most to me

How I treated the people closest to me

How I saw myself when I was alone

What someone who knew me well would have said about me

What I was proud of — and what I hid

Portrait 3: Becoming

Who you are becoming in recovery — some of it already true, some of it still intention.

How I spent my days

What mattered most to me

How I treated the people closest to me

How I saw myself when I was alone

What someone who knew me well would have said about me

What I was proud of — and what I hid

Side by Side

1. What survived all three portraits? Name the qualities that were still there, even buried, during active addiction.

2. What from the first portrait do you want back?

3. What from the first portrait do you not want back — something that was already feeding the addiction?

4. What is in the third portrait that never existed in either of the first two?

5. Write a paragraph that introduces the person in the third portrait, including honestly where they have been.

PART 2 OF 4 · READING

Moral Injury: When Addiction Made You Someone You Despise

Of all the forms of identity loss that addiction inflicts, the erosion of values may be the most agonizing. This is because value compromise creates a specific form of psychological wound called moral injury.

Moral injury occurs when you act in ways that fundamentally violate your own moral code, and it produces a shame that is qualitatively different from other forms of regret. It is the shame of having betrayed not just others, but yourself.

Every person who enters recovery carries some degree of moral injury. The specifics vary — lying to a spouse, stealing from a parent, neglecting a child, betraying a friend. But the underlying experience is remarkably consistent: "I did things that the person I believe myself to be would never do. And yet I did them."

Value compromise in addiction follows a recognizable pattern:

****First comes the minor compromise**** — a small lie, a minor deception. It produces discomfort, but the discomfort is manageable.

****Then comes the normalization**** — The minor compromise establishes a new baseline. The next compromise is slightly larger but feels proportionate to the new baseline.

****Finally comes the dissociation**** — The gap between values and behavior becomes so large that conscious awareness of it is psychologically unbearable. The mind protects itself by disconnecting.

For recovery, this understanding has critical implications. First, the values are almost certainly still there. They were not destroyed — they were disconnected. The shame you feel is itself evidence that your values survived.

Second, identity reconstruction requires identifying what your values actually are, confronting the specific ways they were compromised, and making amends where possible — not just to others, but to yourself.

Reflection Questions

1. What specific values did addiction cause you to compromise? Name them explicitly.

2. Can you trace the progression from minor compromise to normalization to dissociation in your own experience?

3. What is the most painful moral injury you carry from your addiction?

4. How does understanding that shame itself is evidence your values survived change your relationship to the shame you carry?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 6

Value & Moral Erosion

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I did things during my addiction that directly violated my own moral code and personal values

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I lied to people I love — repeatedly, habitually

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I compromised my integrity in ways that the person I was before addiction would have found unthinkable

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. Over time, my boundaries for acceptable behavior kept moving

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I carry shame about specific things I did that feel impossible to reconcile with the person I want to be

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Values Excavation & Reconnection

Honesty

How important is this value to you? (1-10)

How did addiction cause you to violate this value?

What would living this value look like in your recovery today?

Loyalty

How important is this value to you? (1-10)

How did addiction cause you to violate this value?

What would living this value look like in your recovery today?

Responsibility

How important is this value to you? (1-10)

How did addiction cause you to violate this value?

What would living this value look like in your recovery today?

Compassion

How important is this value to you? (1-10)

How did addiction cause you to violate this value?

What would living this value look like in your recovery today?

Integrity

How important is this value to you? (1-10)

How did addiction cause you to violate this value?

What would living this value look like in your recovery today?

YOUR EXERCISE

Moral Injury Inventory

Naming the Wound So It Can Heal

Before You Begin

This inventory can bring up heavy material. Go at your own pace, stop when you need to, and do not do it alone — bring it to a counselor, sponsor, or someone trained to hold it. You do not need to write details here. Shorthand only you understand is enough, and it protects your privacy. If writing this brings up thoughts of harming yourself, stop and call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or reach out to someone right away.

The Pain Is Evidence Your Values Survived

Moral injury only happens to people with values. The guilt and grief you feel looking at this list are proof that your moral code survived the addiction — it was disconnected, not destroyed. This inventory is about reconnecting it, not about punishing yourself.

What I Did

Acts that went against my own code — lying, stealing, betraying, harming, using people.

Entry #1

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #2

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #3

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

What I Failed to Do

Where I was absent, did not protect, did not show up, did not keep my word.

Entry #1

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #2

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #3

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

What I Went Along With

Things I saw, allowed, or took part in because it was the price of belonging or getting what I needed.

Entry #1

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #2

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #3

What happened (shorthand is fine):

Which of my values did this violate? (See Exercise 3.)

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

How I Was Betrayed

Moral injury also comes from people or systems you trusted who violated what was right.

Entry #1

What happened (shorthand is fine):

What did I need or deserve that I did not get?

Safety, honesty, protection...

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #2

What happened (shorthand is fine):

What did I need or deserve that I did not get?

Safety, honesty, protection...

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Entry #3

What happened (shorthand is fine):

What did I need or deserve that I did not get?

Safety, honesty, protection...

How it lives in me now — guilt, shame, anger, numbness, avoidance:

Guilt or Shame?

Guilt says "I did a bad thing." It points at behavior, and behavior can be repaired. Shame says "I am bad." It points at identity, and it tends to drive people back to using. Look at your entries.

1. Which entries carry guilt — a specific thing I did that I can take responsibility for?

2. Which entries carry shame — a verdict on who I am? Rewrite one of them as a statement about behavior instead of identity.

3. Which entries are grief rather than guilt — losses I suffered or could not have prevented?

A Path Toward Repair

1. Which entries belong in your Step work (inventory, sharing, amends) with a sponsor? Entries under "How I Was Betrayed" are harms done to you, not amends you owe — those belong with a counselor.

2. Which entries need a counselor or therapist rather than — or before — a sponsor?

3. Some amends cannot be made directly. What would a living amends look like — how will you live the violated value, starting this week?

4. What would it take to extend to yourself the same understanding you would offer another person in recovery with this history?

PART 3 OF 4 · READING

The Great Migration: How Addiction Rebuilt Your Social World

Human beings are fundamentally social creatures, and a significant portion of our identity comes from the people around us. We define ourselves partly through our relationships — who we spend time with, who we belong to, who claims us as one of their own.

This is why the social dimension of identity loss in addiction is so devastating: addiction does not just change what you do. It changes who you belong to.

The social migration follows a predictable pattern. In the early stages, your social world is diverse. As addiction progresses, the migration begins. The using relationships intensify — these are the people who understand you, who do not judge you.

Meanwhile, the non-using relationships begin to strain. Friends express concern, and their concern feels like judgment. Family members set boundaries, and their boundaries feel like rejection. You pull away from these people not because you do not care about them but because being around them forces you to confront the gap between who you are and who they expect you to be.

Over time, the migration becomes a full relocation. Your primary social identity is now defined by the using community. You belong somewhere — which is not nothing. Belonging is a fundamental human need.

This is why leaving that community in recovery feels not just socially uncomfortable but existentially threatening. You are not just giving up a social group. You are giving up your only remaining source of identity and belonging.

This reality explains one of the most common and dangerous experiences in early recovery: the identity vacuum. You have left the using world, but you do not yet belong to the recovery world. You feel alone in a way that is not just loneliness but something deeper.

The antidote is deliberately, intentionally rebuilding the social dimension of your identity. This means seeking out communities organized around who you are becoming rather than who you were. Recovery fellowships, volunteer organizations, faith communities — these are identity-building environments where new social mirrors reflect back to you a version of yourself that is not defined by addiction.

Reflection Questions

1. Map the social migration of your addiction. Who was in your life before? Who remained? Who did you lose?

2. How much of your identity during active addiction was defined by the using community?

3. Are you currently experiencing the "identity vacuum" — not belonging to either world?

4. What communities or social groups could serve as new identity-building environments in your recovery?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 6

Social Identity & Belonging Shift

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. My social circle gradually shifted to people who used substances like I did

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I lost close friendships with people who did not use

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. My primary sense of belonging came from the using community

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I felt more comfortable around other users than around people who represented my pre-addiction life

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I do not know who my social group is now that I am not using

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 6

Life Role Disruption

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I failed as a parent, partner, child, sibling, friend, or colleague because addiction consumed my capacity

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I lost jobs, educational opportunities, or professional standing
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. People who depended on me learned they could not count on me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. Roles that once gave me pride became sources of shame
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. Important life roles were damaged or destroyed by my addiction
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Social Migration Map

Who I Belonged To — Then, During, and Now

Addiction Changes Who You Belong To

Addiction does not only change what you do. It relocates you, one relationship at a time, until your belonging lives almost entirely in the using world. Leaving that world creates an identity vacuum — no longer there, not yet here. This map shows the migration so the rebuild can be deliberate.

Family

Who was here before addiction?

Who drifted, pulled back, or was pushed away — and why?

Who is here now?

Long-Time Friends

Who was here before addiction?

Who drifted, pulled back, or was pushed away — and why?

Who is here now?

Work or School

Who was here before addiction?

Who drifted, pulled back, or was pushed away — and why?

Who is here now?

Community, Faith, Teams, Groups

Who was here before addiction?

Who drifted, pulled back, or was pushed away — and why?

Who is here now?

Using Friends and Connections

Who was here before addiction?

Who drifted, pulled back, or was pushed away — and why?

Who is here now?

The Using Network, Honestly

Some of these people you care about. Caring about them and staying close to them are two separate decisions.

Person #1

Who (initials) and what they meant to me:

What contact with them does to my recovery:

My decision — distance, a firm boundary, or a clean break — and what that looks like:

Person #2

Who (initials) and what they meant to me:

What contact with them does to my recovery:

My decision — distance, a firm boundary, or a clean break — and what that looks like:

Person #3

Who (initials) and what they meant to me:

What contact with them does to my recovery:

My decision — distance, a firm boundary, or a clean break — and what that looks like:

Person #4

Who (initials) and what they meant to me:

What contact with them does to my recovery:

My decision — distance, a firm boundary, or a clean break — and what that looks like:

The Gaps in My New Map

A recovery identity needs more than one kind of relationship. For each role, write who fills it now — or "nobody yet."

Someone I can call at 2 a.m.:

Someone further along who can guide me:

A peer at the same stage who gets it:

Someone to have sober fun with:

Someone outside recovery circles who knows the real me:

Someone I am helping:

Rebuilding Belonging

1. Which relationship from before is worth trying to repair, and what is the first small step?

2. Which community organized around who you are becoming will you show up to this month — and when?

3. What is the hardest part of feeling in-between right now, and who will you tell about it?

PART 4 OF 4 · READING

Rebuilding From the Foundation: The Architecture of Identity Reconstruction

Rebuilding From the Foundation

Identity reconstruction in recovery is not a return to who you were before addiction. That person no longer exists — not because addiction destroyed them, but because life has moved forward and you have been changed by your experiences.

The goal is not restoration. The goal is construction — building a new identity that integrates the whole truth of who you have been with a clear, intentional vision of who you are becoming.

Effective identity reconstruction operates on five principles:

****1. Integration rather than erasure**** — Your addiction is part of your story. Identity reconstruction requires integrating the addiction experience into a larger narrative.

****2. Multiple domains**** — A healthy identity is not built on a single pillar. Build identity across many domains simultaneously: values, activities, relationships, professional roles, spiritual life, creative expression.

****3. Action before clarity**** — Identity emerges from action. You do not wait until you feel like a musician to start playing music. You start playing music, and the identity gradually forms.

****4. Patience with the process**** — Identity reconstruction does not happen in the first month of recovery. It is a gradual emergence that builds one action, one choice, one relationship at a time.

****5. Community**** — Identity is not constructed in isolation. It requires other people — mirrors who reflect back to you a version of yourself that you cannot see on your own.

The person you are becoming has not existed before. You are not going back. You are going deeper. And the self that emerges from this process may turn out to be the most authentic version of you that has ever existed.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the distinction between "restoration" and "construction" change the way you think about your recovery identity work?

2. Which of the five principles resonates most strongly with you?

3. Where are you in the "liminal space" — the space between identities?

4. What actions are you currently taking that are building your new identity?

5. Who in your life is serving as an identity mirror?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 6 OF 6

Identity Reconstruction Capacity

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I am beginning to rediscover parts of myself that existed before my addiction took over

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I have a growing sense of the kind of person I want to become in recovery

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I am taking concrete steps to reconnect with activities, values, and relationships

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I can identify values, interests, and qualities that define who I am beyond "person in recovery"

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I believe that my identity can be rebuilt — that the authentic self is still in there

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Activity & Interest Reclamation

Taking Back the Rooms Addiction Emptied

Do It Before You Feel Like It

In early recovery, things you used to love can feel flat. That is expected — a brain that relied on a substance for reward takes time to respond to ordinary pleasures again, and it does improve with time. So the rule for this exercise is backward from normal: schedule the activity first, and let the enjoyment catch up later. Rate it honestly afterward, and keep going even when the rating is low.

What Addiction Crowded Out

Activity #1

Something I used to love doing:

What it gave me:

How addiction pushed it out:

Activity #2

Something I used to love doing:

What it gave me:

How addiction pushed it out:

Activity #3

Something I used to love doing:

What it gave me:

How addiction pushed it out:

Activity #4

Something I used to love doing:

What it gave me:

How addiction pushed it out:

Activity #5

Something I used to love doing:

What it gave me:

How addiction pushed it out:

What Filled the Space

1. List the ways time was spent in active addiction — getting, using, recovering, hiding.

2. Roughly how many hours a week did that take? Those hours are now open. What is filling them?

3. Which empty times of day or week are most dangerous for you now?

Things I Have Never Tried

Reclamation is not only going back. Name things you were curious about but never tried — maybe because using took all the room.

Something I have always wanted to try:

Something that would put me around sober people:

Something that uses my body:

Something that uses my hands or creativity:

My Three-Week Reclamation Plan

Week 1

The activity, the day, the time, and who with:

Saturday 10 a.m., ...

Afterward: what it was actually like (enjoyment 1-10, and anything unexpected):

Honestly it was...

Week 2

The activity, the day, the time, and who with:

Saturday 10 a.m., ...

Afterward: what it was actually like (enjoyment 1-10, and anything unexpected):

Honestly it was...

Week 3

The activity, the day, the time, and who with:

Saturday 10 a.m., ...

Afterward: what it was actually like (enjoyment 1-10, and anything unexpected):

Honestly it was...

1. After three weeks: which activity do I want to keep, and what will make it a regular part of my life?

2. Which part of me — from the first portrait or a new one — did these activities bring back?
