

Cognitive Chaos in Recovery

Relapse Prevention · The Recovery Files

When Your Own Mind Becomes the Problem

From Chaos to Clarity — The Recovery Files

Your progress 0 of 6 parts done · Chaos · Racing, blank, reactive · Clarity · Clear, present, regulated

In this workbook

- Part 1 · What Is Cognitive Chaos? When Your Own Mind Becomes the Problem
 - Check-in: Self-Trust & Reality Testing
 - Exercise: The Cognitive Snapshot
 - Exercise: The "Am I Going Crazy?" Reality Check
- Part 2 · The Dual Storm: Racing Mind and Blank Mind
 - Check-in: Cognitive Disruption
 - Exercise: Racing Mind / Blank Mind Log
 - Exercise: Sleep & Escape Pattern Tracker
- Part 3 · The Emotional Hurricane: Reactivity, Numbness, and the Spectrum Between
 - Check-in: Emotional Dysregulation
 - Check-in: Restlessness & Discontentment
 - Exercise: The Irritability Map
 - Exercise: Restlessness & Urge-to-Change Inventory
- Part 4 · The Neuroscience: Why Your Brain Does This in Recovery
 - Check-in: Decision-Making & Judgment Impairment
 - Exercise: Decision Audit — Chaos vs. Clarity
- Part 5 · Restoring Order: Working With Your Brain Instead of Against It
 - Exercise: Cognitive Grounding Toolkit
 - Exercise: Daily Cognitive-Emotional Check-In (7 Days)
 - Exercise: Cognitive Recovery Action Plan

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 5 · READING

What Is Cognitive Chaos? When Your Own Mind Becomes the Problem

There is a particular kind of suffering in recovery that is difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced it. It is the experience of your own mind becoming unreliable — a once-familiar instrument that suddenly produces distorted sounds, skips notes, plays the wrong key, or goes silent without warning. It is not madness, though it can feel terrifyingly close to it. It is cognitive chaos — a state of profound mental and emotional disruption in which your ability to think clearly, regulate emotions, make decisions, and trust your own perceptions becomes severely impaired.

Cognitive chaos manifests through a constellation of symptoms that can feel random and disconnected but are actually deeply interconnected expressions of a brain in recovery trying to recalibrate itself after prolonged substance exposure. You find yourself unable to solve simple problems that would have been effortless before. Your mind races at three in the morning, generating an unstoppable torrent of thoughts — and then goes utterly blank in the middle of a conversation, leaving you staring at the person across from you with no idea what you were just saying. You read a page four times and absorb nothing.

The emotional dimension is equally devastating. You oscillate between explosive reactivity and profound numbness. You are restless, irritable, and discontented — a constant, low-grade agitation that makes every chair uncomfortable, every room too small, every conversation either too demanding or too shallow. You want to change everything — your appearance, your location, your relationships, your job — without any clear understanding of what you actually want or why changing anything would help.

And beneath all of it runs a current of escalating self-doubt. You start to question your own sanity. You stop trusting your feelings and try to ignore them because they feel like broken instruments producing unreliable data. You make decisions that you know are poor even as you are making them — and that self-aware helplessness is perhaps the most disturbing dimension of cognitive chaos.

Here is what you need to understand first and most fundamentally: this is a recognized, predictable, neurologically explainable phenomenon. You are not going crazy. Your brain is healing. And a brain in the process of healing from substance use disorder produces exactly the kinds of cognitive and emotional disruption you are experiencing. This does not make it less painful or less frightening. But it does make it understandable — and understanding is the first step toward managing what feels unmanageable.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the description of cognitive chaos land for you? Which specific symptoms from this reading do you recognize most clearly in your own current experience?

2. Describe a recent moment when your mind felt genuinely unreliable — when you could not trust your own thinking, memory, or perception. What happened and how did it feel?

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how frightening is the experience of not being able to trust your own mind? What is the scariest part?

4. Have you told anyone about the full extent of what you are experiencing cognitively and emotionally? If not, what has stopped you?

5. How does the statement "you are not going crazy — your brain is healing" land for you? Can you hold that possibility, even if the experience feels like something worse?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

Self-Trust & Reality Testing

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

1. I start to think that I might be going crazy

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I no longer trust my own perceptions of what is happening around me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I question whether my memory of events is accurate or if I am distorting things
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I feel disconnected from my own thoughts as if they belong to someone else
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I have moments where I do not recognize myself in my own behavior
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I wonder if what I am experiencing is normal recovery or if something is seriously wrong with me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I have lost confidence in my ability to accurately assess my own emotional state
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I feel like I am watching myself from outside my body — present but not really here
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The Cognitive Snapshot

Documenting Your Current Mental and Emotional State

Why Document?

Cognitive chaos feels like one undifferentiated fog. This exercise cuts through the fog by documenting exactly what you are experiencing right now — in specific, concrete terms. Naming the symptoms precisely reduces their power and creates a baseline against which you can measure progress as your brain heals.

Thinking & Concentration

1. Describe your ability to think clearly right now. Can you hold a thought? Follow a logical sequence? Solve a simple problem?

2. How is your concentration? Can you read a full page and absorb it? Follow a conversation without drifting?

3. Describe your memory right now. What are you forgetting? Is it short-term memory, long-term memory, or both?

4. How often do you lose your train of thought mid-sentence? What does that experience feel like — from the inside?

Emotional State

1. Describe your emotional state right now. Are you reactive, numb, oscillating, or something else entirely?

2. What emotion has been most dominant in the last week? What has triggered it most frequently?

3. How predictable are your emotional reactions? Can you anticipate how you will respond to things, or do your responses surprise you?

4. Who has been most affected by your emotional dysregulation? What has the impact looked like?

Your Baseline Statement

Write a comprehensive baseline statement documenting where you are right now. This is not for judgment — it is for measurement. You will return to this statement periodically to observe how things change as your brain continues to heal.

Today, [date], my cognitive and emotional state is... [describe thinking, emotions, behavior, and what daily life looks like right now]

YOUR EXERCISE

The "Am I Going Crazy?" Reality Check

Separating the Fear from the Facts

The Fear vs. The Reality

The fear that you are losing your mind is one of the most terrifying features of cognitive chaos — and one of the most common. The irony is that the very ability to worry about going crazy is evidence that you are not. People who are genuinely disconnected from reality do not typically question their own sanity.

Name the Fears

1. What specifically makes you think you might be "going crazy"? List every thought, symptom, or experience that contributes to this fear.

2. When is the "going crazy" fear strongest? Time of day? After certain experiences? When you are alone?

3. What does "going crazy" mean to you specifically? What is the feared outcome?

4. Have you told anyone about this fear? If not, what stops you?

The Evidence Review

For each fear you listed, apply this evidence review:

REALITY CHECK: Can you distinguish between your thoughts and external reality? Can you recognize when you are having a thought versus when something is actually happening? (If yes, your reality-testing is intact.)

REALITY CHECK: Are you able to function — even poorly — in daily life? Go to work, have conversations, manage basic self-care? (Even impaired functioning is not "crazy" — it is a brain under stress.)

REALITY CHECK: Are the symptoms you are experiencing consistent with the known effects of post-acute withdrawal and neurological healing from substance use?

REALITY CHECK: Would you apply the label "going crazy" to another person in recovery who described these exact symptoms? Or would you tell them this is normal?

REALITY CHECK: Are your symptoms improving over time — even slowly, even inconsistently?
(Even small improvement indicates healing, not deterioration.)

PART 2 OF 5 · READING

The Dual Storm: Racing Mind and Blank Mind

One of the most disorienting features of cognitive chaos is that it presents as two apparently opposite states — and you can experience both within the same hour, sometimes within the same conversation.

THE RACING MIND. When your mind races, it feels like a radio tuned to every station simultaneously. Thoughts arrive faster than you can process them. They layer on top of each other, compete for attention, and refuse to organize themselves into any coherent sequence. The racing mind often intensifies at night when external stimulation decreases and the brain, accustomed to the sedating or stimulating effects of substances, does not know how to downshift.

The neurological basis of the racing mind involves the brain's excitatory neurotransmitter systems — particularly glutamate and norepinephrine — overcompensating after prolonged suppression by depressant substances. The brain's "braking system" — the GABAergic circuits that slow neural activity — has been compromised by substance use and has not yet fully restored itself.

THE BLANK MIND. The opposite state — the blank mind — is equally disturbing but in a different way. This is the experience of reaching for a thought and finding nothing. You are mid-sentence and the next word evaporates. You walk into a room and the purpose of your journey simply ceases to exist. The blank mind reflects impaired prefrontal cortex function — specifically, compromised working memory and attention regulation. The prefrontal cortex is one of the last brain regions to heal from substance damage.

THE ALTERNATION. What makes cognitive chaos particularly disorienting is the alternation between these states. This alternation is not random — it reflects a brain that has lost its regulatory balance and swings between hyperactivation and hypoactivation. Think of it as a thermostat that has been damaged: instead of maintaining a steady temperature, it swings between too hot and too cold because the calibration mechanism is impaired.

The critical reassurance embedded in this understanding is that both states — the racing and the blank — are symptoms of a healing process, not signs of permanent damage. The brain is attempting to recalibrate. Over time, with sustained recovery, the swings decrease in amplitude and frequency, and the brain begins to find its new equilibrium.

Reflection Questions

1. Which state do you experience more frequently — racing mind or blank mind? Or do you experience both in roughly equal measure?

2. Describe a recent episode of racing mind. What time of day was it? What was the content? Were you able to stop it, or did it stop on its own?

3. Describe a recent episode of blank mind. Were you in conversation? Trying to complete a task? What happened when the thought disappeared?

4. How does the thermostat metaphor — a damaged calibration system swinging between extremes — map onto your experience? Does it help to understand the alternation as a healing process?

5. What strategies, if any, have you tried for the racing mind and the blank mind? Have you tried different strategies for each, or have you been treating them as the same problem?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

Cognitive Disruption

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

1. I have trouble thinking clearly and solving usually simple problems

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Sometimes my mind races and I cannot shut it off no matter what I try

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. Other times my mind goes completely blank and I cannot concentrate on anything

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I have trouble remembering things — conversations, commitments, what I was just doing

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. Mid-sentence I completely lose my train of thought and cannot remember what I was saying or thinking

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I have difficulty following movies, TV shows, or books because I cannot track storylines or character development

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I struggle to hold multiple pieces of information in my mind at the same time

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. I read the same page or paragraph multiple times and still cannot absorb what it says

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Racing Mind / Blank Mind Log

Tracking the Two Poles of Cognitive Disruption

Pattern Recognition

By logging episodes of racing mind and blank mind separately, you begin to identify patterns — triggers, timing, duration, and what helps. This information transforms the chaos from an unpredictable storm into a weather system with recognizable patterns you can learn to anticipate and manage.

Racing Mind Episode #1

When did it happen? (time of day, what you were doing)

What triggered it? (event, thought, situation, time of day, or unknown)

What was the content? (What was your mind racing about?)

How long did it last? What eventually slowed it down or stopped it?

Racing Mind Episode #2

When did it happen? (time of day, what you were doing)

What triggered it? (event, thought, situation, time of day, or unknown)

What was the content? (What was your mind racing about?)

How long did it last? What eventually slowed it down or stopped it?

Racing Mind Episode #3

When did it happen? (time of day, what you were doing)

What triggered it? (event, thought, situation, time of day, or unknown)

What was the content? (What was your mind racing about?)

How long did it last? What eventually slowed it down or stopped it?

Racing Mind Episode #4

When did it happen? (time of day, what you were doing)

What triggered it? (event, thought, situation, time of day, or unknown)

What was the content? (What was your mind racing about?)

How long did it last? What eventually slowed it down or stopped it?

Racing Mind Episode #5

When did it happen? (time of day, what you were doing)

What triggered it? (event, thought, situation, time of day, or unknown)

What was the content? (What was your mind racing about?)

How long did it last? What eventually slowed it down or stopped it?

Blank Mind Episode #1

When did it happen? (in conversation, reading, working, driving)

What disappeared? (a word, a thought, what you were doing)

What did you do? (cover it up, ask someone to repeat, admit it)

How did it feel? (frightening, frustrating, embarrassing, normal)

Blank Mind Episode #2

When did it happen? (in conversation, reading, working, driving)

What disappeared? (a word, a thought, what you were doing)

What did you do? (cover it up, ask someone to repeat, admit it)

How did it feel? (frightening, frustrating, embarrassing, normal)

Blank Mind Episode #3

When did it happen? (in conversation, reading, working, driving)

What disappeared? (a word, a thought, what you were doing)

What did you do? (cover it up, ask someone to repeat, admit it)

How did it feel? (frightening, frustrating, embarrassing, normal)

Blank Mind Episode #4

When did it happen? (in conversation, reading, working, driving)

What disappeared? (a word, a thought, what you were doing)

What did you do? (cover it up, ask someone to repeat, admit it)

How did it feel? (frightening, frustrating, embarrassing, normal)

Blank Mind Episode #5

When did it happen? (in conversation, reading, working, driving)

What disappeared? (a word, a thought, what you were doing)

What did you do? (cover it up, ask someone to repeat, admit it)

How did it feel? (frightening, frustrating, embarrassing, normal)

YOUR EXERCISE

Sleep & Escape Pattern Tracker

Healing Sleep vs. Escape Sleep

Two Kinds of Sleep

Healing sleep restores cognitive function, consolidates memory, and supports emotional regulation. Escape sleep avoids reality, deepens isolation, and disrupts the circadian rhythm that supports brain healing. This tracker helps you distinguish between the two.

Day 1

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 2

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 3

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 4

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 5

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 6

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 7

What time did you go to bed? What time did you get up?

Was this healing sleep or escape sleep (avoiding reality)?

Did your mind race when you tried to sleep? How long did it take to fall asleep?

Cognitive clarity upon waking (1 = complete fog, 10 = clear and sharp)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

PART 3 OF 5 · READING

The Emotional Hurricane: Reactivity, Numbness, and the Spectrum Between

Cognitive chaos does not confine itself to thinking. It fundamentally disrupts your emotional system — producing a state of emotional dysregulation that can be even more distressing than the cognitive symptoms because it directly damages your relationships, your self-image, and your faith in your own character.

The hallmark of emotional dysregulation in recovery is the irritability trifecta: irritable with others because they do not understand you, irritable with yourself because you do not understand yourself, and a pervasive, free-floating irritability that attaches itself to everything and nothing simultaneously. This is a state of neurological hyperreactivity in which your brain's threat detection system — the amygdala — is running at elevated sensitivity, interpreting neutral stimuli as threatening and minor provocations as major attacks.

You get angry and take it out on the people closest to you — your immediate family, your partner, your closest friends. Not because they deserve it. Not because you want to. But because the emotional pressure has to go somewhere. Then comes the guilt, the shame, the apology, the promise to do better — followed by the next eruption, which arrives despite the promise, confirming the growing fear that you cannot control yourself.

On the other end of the spectrum sits emotional numbness — the flat, gray, affect-less state where nothing registers. Not joy. Not sadness. Not anger. Nothing. This is not peace. This is the emotional equivalent of the blank mind: a system that has temporarily shut down because the oscillation between extremes has exhausted its capacity to feel. Numbness is the brain's circuit breaker tripping to prevent emotional overload.

The oscillation between these extremes creates a particular kind of self-distrust. You cannot predict your own reactions. This unpredictability is profoundly destabilizing because it undermines the most basic sense of knowing who you are.

Understanding this distinction — between who you ARE and what your brain is DOING — is arguably the most important insight in cognitive chaos work. Your character has not changed. Your values have not evaporated. The chaos is neurological weather. It is not your identity.

Reflection Questions

1. Describe a recent moment when your emotional reaction was completely out of proportion to the situation. What happened, what did you feel, and what was the aftermath?

2. Have you experienced the irritability trifecta — irritable with others, irritable with yourself, and free-floating irritability? Which dimension is strongest right now?

3. How has emotional numbness shown up in your recovery? What does it feel like when the circuit breaker trips and you cannot feel anything?

4. When you react in ways that contradict your values, what story does your mind tell about what that means about you as a person?

5. How does the distinction between "who you are" and "what your brain is doing" land for you? Can you locate the witness — the part of you that sees the chaos and is distressed by it?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5

Emotional Dysregulation

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

1. I easily get angry and I take it out on those closest to me such as my immediate family and friends

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I get irritated with other people because they do not understand me and cannot seem to help me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I get irritated and angry with myself because I do not understand myself or my own emotions

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I switch from overreacting to the smallest of things to feeling emotionally numb

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I stop trusting my feelings and try to ignore them or do my best to forget about them
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. My emotional reactions feel completely out of proportion to the situations that trigger them
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I feel like I am on an emotional roller coaster with no ability to get off or slow it down
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I experience sudden waves of emotion — sadness, rage, panic — that seem to come from nowhere
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5**Restlessness & Discontentment**

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

1. I am restless, irritable, and discontented much of the time
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I have a constant urge to change something — my appearance, my location, my relationships, my job — without any clear reason
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. Sleep becomes an escape from reality for me with increasing hours spent in bed avoiding life
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I feel that time is moving too slowly or too quickly but never at the right pace
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I cannot sit still with myself — silence and stillness feel unbearable
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I constantly feel like I should be somewhere else, doing something else, being someone else
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I start projects, conversations, or activities and abandon them almost immediately
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I feel a pervasive sense that something is wrong but I cannot identify what it is
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE**The Irritability Map**

Who, When, Why — And What's Really Underneath

Beneath the Irritability

Irritability in cognitive chaos is about a brain with a hyperactive alarm system and an impaired regulation system. The irritability is real, the damage it causes is real, but the CAUSE is

neurological, not personal. This map helps you see the pattern so you can begin to interrupt it before it reaches the people you care about.

Irritability with Others

For each person you have been most irritable with recently, map the pattern:

Person #1

Who? (relationship to you)

What triggers your irritability with them?

What is underneath the irritability? (fear, hurt, exhaustion, frustration with yourself?)

What happens afterward? (guilt, more anger, withdrawal, repair attempt?)

Person #2

Who? (relationship to you)

What triggers your irritability with them?

What is underneath the irritability? (fear, hurt, exhaustion, frustration with yourself?)

What happens afterward? (guilt, more anger, withdrawal, repair attempt?)

Person #3

Who? (relationship to you)

What triggers your irritability with them?

What is underneath the irritability? (fear, hurt, exhaustion, frustration with yourself?)

What happens afterward? (guilt, more anger, withdrawal, repair attempt?)

Person #4

Who? (relationship to you)

What triggers your irritability with them?

What is underneath the irritability? (fear, hurt, exhaustion, frustration with yourself?)

What happens afterward? (guilt, more anger, withdrawal, repair attempt?)

Irritability with Yourself

1. What specifically are you most irritable with yourself about?

2. What do you say to yourself during these moments of self-directed anger? Write the actual internal dialogue.

3. Is the self-irritability about things within your control, or about neurological symptoms you cannot directly control?

4. If your best friend was experiencing the exact same cognitive symptoms, would you be irritable with them — or would you show compassion? What makes you different?

YOUR EXERCISE

Restlessness & Urge-to-Change Inventory

Mapping the Constant Need to Be Somewhere Else

The Geographic Cure

The urge to change everything — location, appearance, relationships, career — without clear reasons is one of the most recognizable features of cognitive chaos. In recovery, it is sometimes called the 'geographic cure': the belief that if you could just change your external circumstances, the internal experience would change too. But the restlessness travels with you because it is neurological, not situational.

Location / Living Situation

Do you want to move, travel, or just be somewhere — anywhere — other than where you are?

What do you want to change and why?

Is this urge based on a genuine problem, or is it the restlessness looking for an outlet?

Urgency of the urge to change (1 = mild thought, 10 = about to act on it)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Appearance / Physical Self

Have you had urges to drastically change your appearance — haircut, tattoos, wardrobe, body modifications?

What do you want to change and why?

Is this urge based on a genuine problem, or is it the restlessness looking for an outlet?

Urgency of the urge to change (1 = mild thought, 10 = about to act on it)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Relationships

Do you want to end relationships, start new ones, or completely restructure your social world?

What do you want to change and why?

Is this urge based on a genuine problem, or is it the restlessness looking for an outlet?

Urgency of the urge to change (1 = mild thought, 10 = about to act on it)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Career / Employment

Do you want to quit your job, change careers, or abandon professional commitments?

What do you want to change and why?

Is this urge based on a genuine problem, or is it the restlessness looking for an outlet?

Urgency of the urge to change (1 = mild thought, 10 = about to act on it)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Recovery Program / Treatment

Do you want to change your recovery approach — different meetings, different therapist, different method?

What do you want to change and why?

Is this urge based on a genuine problem, or is it the restlessness looking for an outlet?

Urgency of the urge to change (1 = mild thought, 10 = about to act on it)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

PART 4 OF 5 · READING

The Neuroscience: Why Your Brain Does This in Recovery

Understanding why your brain produces cognitive chaos is not academic trivia — it is the difference between interpreting your experience as "I am losing my mind" and understanding it as "my brain is healing, and healing is messy."

THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX: YOUR EXECUTIVE CENTER. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functions: planning, decision-making, impulse control, working memory, attention regulation, and emotional modulation. It is one of the most sensitive to the effects of substance use. Chronic substance exposure directly impairs prefrontal function through multiple mechanisms: neurotoxicity, reduced blood flow, disrupted neurotransmitter balance. When you are unable to think clearly, when you make poor decisions you know are poor, when you cannot hold information in working memory — you are experiencing the consequences of a prefrontal cortex that has been compromised and is in the process of repair. Brain imaging studies consistently show measurable improvement in prefrontal structure and function with sustained recovery. But significant prefrontal recovery often requires 12 to 24 months of sustained abstinence.

THE AMYGDALA: YOUR ALARM SYSTEM. The amygdala is your brain's threat detection center. In recovery, the amygdala is characteristically hyperactive — sensitized to fire at lower thresholds. This hyperactivity is the neurological basis of the irritability, anger, emotional reactivity, and hypervigilance that characterize cognitive chaos. Additionally, in healthy functioning, the prefrontal cortex exerts top-down regulation over the amygdala. In recovery, this regulatory circuit is impaired. The result is a double problem: an alarm system that fires too easily AND a regulatory system that cannot turn it off. This is why you feel the anger rising, you know it is disproportionate, and you still cannot stop it.

NEUROTRANSMITTER RECALIBRATION. Every psychoactive substance works by disrupting neurotransmitter systems. When the substance is removed, these systems must recalibrate. Dopamine systems are adjusting, producing mood instability and motivation fluctuation. Serotonin systems are recalibrating, affecting mood regulation and sleep. GABA and glutamate are rebalancing, producing the alternation between racing mind and blank mind.

THE TIMELINE. Cognitive chaos is temporary, but it lasts longer than most people are told. The acute phase — the most intense disruption — typically peaks in the first 1 to 3 months of recovery. The post-acute phase can persist for 6 to 24 months. Some cognitive functions may take 18 months or longer to fully normalize. This is not a death sentence. It is a timeline.

Reflection Questions

1. How does understanding the neuroscience of what you are experiencing change how you relate to the symptoms? Does knowing it is neurological make any difference in how you feel about yourself?

2. The reading describes a double problem: an alarm system that fires too easily AND a regulatory system that cannot turn it off. How does this explain moments when you saw the anger coming but could not stop it?

3. Where do you think you are on the healing timeline? Are you in the acute phase (1-3 months), the post-acute phase (3-24 months), or longer-term recovery?

4. If you knew with certainty that your brain would fully heal but it would take 18 months, how would that knowledge change your relationship with the cognitive chaos you are experiencing right now?

5. What is one thing you have been blaming yourself for — as a character defect — that might actually be a neurological healing symptom? How does reclassifying it change how you treat yourself?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

Decision-Making & Judgment Impairment

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

1. I start making really poor decisions that I would not have made if I was thinking clearly — and I know it
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I feel that my decisions are driven by impulse rather than thought
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I avoid making decisions altogether because I no longer trust my own judgment
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I commit to things and then cannot understand why I agreed to them
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I oscillate between reckless impulsivity and complete indecision
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. Everyday choices — what to eat, what to wear, how to respond — feel impossibly complex
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I recognize that my judgment is impaired but I cannot seem to correct it even when I am aware of it
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. The gap between what I know is right and what I actually do has widened significantly
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Decision Audit: Chaos vs. Clarity

Examining Decisions Made With an Impaired Mind

The Self-Aware Helplessness

One of the most disturbing features of cognitive chaos is making decisions you KNOW are poor while you are making them. This self-aware helplessness is not a character defect. It is the gap between a prefrontal cortex that can evaluate and an impulse system that has not yet learned to wait for the evaluation.

Decision #1

What was the decision you made?

What was your cognitive and emotional state when you made it?

Did you know it was a poor decision while making it? What did the "knowing" part of your brain say?

Why did you make it anyway? What overrode your better judgment?

What were the consequences?

If you had been in a clear cognitive state, what would you have done instead?

Decision #2

What was the decision you made?

What was your cognitive and emotional state when you made it?

Did you know it was a poor decision while making it? What did the "knowing" part of your brain say?

Why did you make it anyway? What overrode your better judgment?

What were the consequences?

If you had been in a clear cognitive state, what would you have done instead?

Decision #3

What was the decision you made?

What was your cognitive and emotional state when you made it?

Did you know it was a poor decision while making it? What did the "knowing" part of your brain say?

Why did you make it anyway? What overrode your better judgment?

What were the consequences?

If you had been in a clear cognitive state, what would you have done instead?

Decision #4

What was the decision you made?

What was your cognitive and emotional state when you made it?

Did you know it was a poor decision while making it? What did the "knowing" part of your brain say?

Why did you make it anyway? What overrode your better judgment?

What were the consequences?

If you had been in a clear cognitive state, what would you have done instead?

Decision #5

What was the decision you made?

What was your cognitive and emotional state when you made it?

Did you know it was a poor decision while making it? What did the "knowing" part of your brain say?

Why did you make it anyway? What overrode your better judgment?

What were the consequences?

If you had been in a clear cognitive state, what would you have done instead?

PART 5 OF 5 · READING

Restoring Order: Working With Your Brain Instead of Against It

The natural response to cognitive chaos is to fight it — to try harder to think clearly, to force yourself to concentrate, to white-knuckle your way through emotional dysregulation by sheer willpower. This approach is understandable but neurologically counterproductive.

PRINCIPLE ONE: COGNITIVE CONSERVATION. Your brain in recovery has limited cognitive and emotional bandwidth. Cognitive conservation means deliberately managing your mental load — simplifying your daily routine so that fewer decisions are required, writing things down rather than trying to hold them in impaired working memory, breaking tasks into smaller steps. This is strategic resource management, not laziness.

PRINCIPLE TWO: STRUCTURED EXTERNALIZATION. When your internal cognitive systems are unreliable, you compensate by moving cognitive functions outside your head. Lists, schedules, timers, reminders, notes, and routines are cognitive prosthetics that support a healing system. The person who writes everything down because their memory is impaired is being intelligent.

PRINCIPLE THREE: EMOTIONAL REGULATION THROUGH THE BODY. When the prefrontal cortex cannot regulate the amygdala from the top down, you can regulate the nervous system from the bottom up — through the body. Deep breathing, particularly extended exhale breathing (inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 8 counts), directly activates the vagus nerve and shifts the nervous system from fight-or-flight to rest-and-digest. Physical exercise metabolizes the stress hormones that fuel emotional reactivity.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: PACE YOUR DECISIONS. Impaired decision-making is a neurological reality, not a character flaw. Create a personal rule: no significant decisions without a 24-hour pause. Where possible, delegate decisions to trusted people while your judgment is recovering.

PRINCIPLE FIVE: NORMALIZE AND COMMUNICATE. Cognitive chaos thrives in secrecy and shame. Communicating your experience to trusted people — "I am having a hard time concentrating," "I know my reactions have been intense and I want you to know I am aware of it" — reduces the shame and creates a support framework.

PRINCIPLE SIX: PROTECT SLEEP. Sleep is medicine during cognitive chaos — it is when the brain consolidates memory, clears metabolic waste, and performs essential neural repair. However, sleep can also become an escape mechanism. The goal is adequate, structured sleep: consistent bedtime and wake time, 7-9 hours, with a wind-down routine that signals the brain to shift from hyperactivation to sleep-readiness.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the six principles feels most immediately applicable to your situation? Which feels most difficult to implement?

2. How has "trying harder" to think clearly or control your emotions worked for you? Has forcing produced results, or has it made things worse?

3. What cognitive conservation strategies could you implement this week? What unnecessary cognitive demands could you reduce or eliminate?

4. What is your current relationship with sleep? Are you using it to heal or to escape? How would you know the difference?

5. If you communicated honestly about your cognitive and emotional state to the people in your life, what would you say? What has stopped you from saying it?

YOUR EXERCISE

Cognitive Grounding Toolkit

Your Personalized Menu for Managing the Chaos

Build Your Kit

Different symptoms need different tools. Select the strategies that resonate with you for each type of cognitive chaos. The goal is to have specific, pre-planned responses for each state so that when the chaos hits, you do not have to figure out what to do — you already know.

For the Racing Mind

- Extended exhale breathing (4 in, 8 out)
- Write the racing thoughts on paper to externalize them
- Hold a warm mug in both hands and feel the warmth
- Name 5 things you can see right now
- Body scan from head to feet
- Count backwards from 100 by 7s
- Walk slowly and name each step

Add your own tools for this state:

For the Blank Mind

- Write down what you were just doing before the blank
- Use lists and notes for everything
- Set phone reminders and timers
- Ask the person to repeat — it is okay
- Take a break and return to the task in 5 minutes
- Move your body to stimulate the brain
- Say out loud what you are trying to remember
- Accept the blank without panic — it will pass

Add your own tools for this state:

For Irritability & Reactivity

- Leave the room for 60 seconds before responding
- Name the emotion: "I notice I am feeling irritable"
- Physical exercise — even 10 minutes
- Tell the person: "I need a moment, this is not about you"
- Squeeze and release fists 10 times
- Write the angry words instead of saying them
- Step outside for one minute and name what you notice

Add your own tools for this state:

For Restlessness & Discontentment

- Sit still for 2 minutes — just breathe
- Do one productive task to channel the energy
- Walk or exercise to metabolize the agitation
- Journal about what the restlessness wants
- Call someone and talk it through
- Repeat: "This feeling will pass. I do not need to act on it."
- Practice progressive muscle relaxation

Add your own tools for this state:

For Emotional Numbness

- ☐ Press your feet flat into the floor and notice the pressure (physical sensation)
- ☐ Look at meaningful photos
- ☐ Describe aloud what you see/hear/feel physically
- ☐ Gentle movement — stretching, yoga, walking
- ☐ Connect with one person — even briefly

Add your own tools for this state:

YOUR EXERCISE

Daily Cognitive-Emotional Check-In

7 Days of Tracking the Chaos and the Clarity

Why Track?

Cognitive chaos feels constant and unchanging. Daily tracking reveals what your impaired perception cannot see: that the chaos fluctuates, that some days are better than others, that certain conditions improve or worsen the symptoms, and — most importantly — that there IS progress, even when it does not feel like it.

Day 1

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 2

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 3

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 4

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 5

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 6

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

Day 7

Thinking clarity today — could I concentrate, remember, follow conversations? (1 = total fog, 10 = sharp and clear)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Emotional state today: (reactive, numb, irritable, stable, oscillating)

Did I experience racing mind, blank mind, or both today? What triggered them?

What grounding tool did I use today? Did it help?

YOUR EXERCISE

Cognitive Recovery Action Plan

A Practical Framework for Supporting Your Brain's Healing

The Approach

You cannot force your brain to heal faster. But you can create the conditions that support and accelerate the healing process while managing the symptoms that the healing produces. Choose the strategies that feel most urgent and most achievable, and build from there.

Cognitive Conservation

Reducing unnecessary mental load to preserve limited cognitive resources

- ☐ Simplify daily routine ☐ Write everything down ☐ Break tasks into small steps ☐ Reduce decision-making demands ☐ Use timers and reminders

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

Emotional Regulation

Managing the irritability-numbness spectrum through body-based strategies

- ☐ Daily extended-exhale breathing (2 min)
- ☐ Physical exercise (minimum 20 min)
- ☐ Name emotions as they arise
- ☐ Use the "leave the room" rule before reacting
- ☐ Practice one calming technique daily

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

Sleep Hygiene

Optimizing sleep for brain healing without using it as escape

- ☐ Consistent bedtime and wake time
- ☐ No screens 30 min before bed
- ☐ Limit bed to sleep only
- ☐ Wind-down routine
- ☐ Address racing mind before bed with journaling

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

Decision Safeguards

Protecting yourself from chaos-driven decisions

- ☐ 24-hour pause on significant decisions
- ☐ Consult trusted person before acting
- ☐ Write pros/cons before deciding
- ☐ Recognize impulsive urges without acting
- ☐ Review decisions at end of each week

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

Communication

Letting others know what you are going through so they can help

- ☐ Tell one person about cognitive symptoms
- ☐ Ask for patience from family/friends
- ☐ Be honest in recovery meetings/sessions
- ☐ Ask for help with memory-dependent tasks

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

Brain Health Support

Activities that directly support neurological healing

- ☐ Regular physical exercise ☐ Balanced nutrition (especially omega-3s, protein) ☐ Adequate hydration ☐ Stress reduction practices ☐ Social connection (brain-healing activity)

Which strategy will you implement FIRST in this area? When will you start?

My Cognitive Recovery Commitment

1. From all six areas, select your TOP 5 strategies — the ones you will commit to starting this week. List them as specific actions with specific start dates.

2. Who will you share this plan with? Accountability does not mean perfection — it means having someone who knows what you are trying to do.

3. How will you track progress? (This check-in, a journal, a conversation with your sponsor/therapist, or something else?)

4. Write a statement to your future self — the version of you three months from now whose brain has continued to heal. What do you want that person to know about where you are today?
