

Running From Emotion

Intensive · The Recovery Files

From Running Emotionally... to Running Physically... to Running Chemically

The Recovery Files — Interactive Reading, Self-Assessment & Worksheet

My immediate response is always to shut down and walk away, or escape. I think when I was a really tiny kid, I learned to run... I was crying and I was feeling bad, and I learned that whatever I was feeling, and how I was expressing it was wrong. So, I stuffed that... You learn to run from your emotions... Then as you grow a little older you learn to run physically to get away from people... Eventually you learn how to run chemically... It's taken a long time for me to understand that when I want to get away, shut down, or run away, that's a part of my disease.

— Griffin, 2009

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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 7 · READING

The Progression: How We Learn to Run

There is a progression to emotional avoidance that, once you see it, you cannot unsee. It begins so early and so quietly that most people never trace the thread back to its origin. But the thread is there, and understanding it is one of the most important pieces of recovery work you will ever do.

The progression works like this: First, you learn to run emotionally. As a very young child — perhaps before you could even form the words to describe what was happening — you experienced a feeling, you expressed that feeling, and something in your environment told you the feeling was wrong, the expression was unacceptable, or both. Maybe you cried and were told to stop. Maybe you were scared and were told there was nothing to be scared of. Maybe you were angry and were punished for it. Whatever the specific experience, the lesson was clear: what you are feeling is not okay. So you stuffed it. You learned to push the feeling down, to disconnect from it, to pretend it wasn't there. This is the first form of running — running internally, away from your own emotional experience. You didn't go anywhere physically. You just left yourself.

Then, as you grew a little older, you learned to run physically. When the feelings became too big to stuff, when the conflict at home or the pain inside became too intense, you literally left. You went to your room and closed the door. You left the house. You stayed away as long as possible. You learned that physical distance was a tool for emotional management — if I can't see it, hear it, or be near it, maybe I won't have to feel it.

Eventually, you learned to run chemically. You discovered that substances could do what emotional suppression and physical distance could not: they could actually make the feelings stop. Not manage them, not push them to the side, but seemingly eliminate them entirely. The first time a substance silenced the noise inside your head, you found what felt like the answer to a question you had been asking your entire life: "How do I make this feeling go away?"

This progression — emotional running to physical running to chemical running — is not a character flaw. It is a survival adaptation. At every stage, you were doing the best you could with the tools you had. But those tools have a cost, and that cost compounds over time until the "solution" becomes the primary problem in your life. Understanding this progression is not about blame — it is about clarity. Because you cannot change what you cannot see, and you cannot heal what you will not name.

Reflection Questions

1. As you read about this progression, which stage resonated most powerfully with you? Why?

2. Can you remember a specific early moment when you learned that your emotions were "wrong" or unwelcome? What happened?

3. At what age did you begin running physically — removing yourself from situations to avoid feelings? What did that look like?

4. When did chemical running begin? What feeling were you trying to escape the first time you used a substance?

5. How does it feel to hear this described as a "survival adaptation" rather than a personal failing?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

Emotional Shutdown & Numbing

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

1. When I start to feel strong emotions, my first instinct is to shut down

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I often feel emotionally "numb" or disconnected from my feelings

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have been told by others that I seem emotionally unavailable

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I would rather feel nothing than feel something painful

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I have difficulty identifying what I am feeling in the moment

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I use distraction (screens, work, busyness) to avoid sitting with feelings

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I feel like emotions are happening behind a wall I cannot get past

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. I sometimes feel like I am watching my life from the outside rather than living it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Your Running Timeline

Mapping the Progression of Your Emotional Avoidance

Create a personal timeline of how your running patterns developed. For each life stage, identify the form of running you used, what triggered it, and what it cost you. This exercise helps you see the through-line from childhood to the present — not to assign blame, but to understand the full arc of the pattern you are working to change.

1. Early Childhood (0-7 years)

What were you taught about emotions? What happened when you expressed them? How did you first learn to "stuff" your feelings?

2. Middle Childhood (8-12 years)

How did emotional suppression show up at school, with peers, at home? Did you start physically removing yourself from situations? When and how?

3. Adolescence (13-17 years)

How did running patterns intensify during the teenage years? Was this when physical escape escalated? When did you first discover that substances could provide emotional relief?

4. Young Adulthood (18-25 years)

How did your running patterns affect relationships, education, and early career? How did substance use become woven into the avoidance pattern?

5. Adulthood (26+ years)

How have these patterns played out in your adult life — in intimate relationships, parenting, career, friendships? What has the cumulative cost been?

6. Present Day

Where are you right now? What form does the running take today? What are you most afraid of feeling? What would change if you could stand still?

YOUR EXERCISE

The Emotions I Run From

Identifying, Naming, and Sitting With Specific Feelings

This exercise asks you to get specific about which emotions are most difficult for you. Many people in recovery have a generalized relationship with emotional discomfort — everything uncomfortable gets lumped into a single category of "bad feeling." This exercise helps you differentiate between emotions, rate your avoidance of each, and begin to understand why certain feelings are more threatening than others.

1. Sadness

How do you typically respond when sadness arises? What does sadness feel like in your body? What beliefs do you hold about being sad (e.g., "sadness is weakness," "if I start crying I'll never stop")? When was the last time you fully allowed yourself to be sad?

2. Fear / Anxiety

What are you most afraid of feeling? How does fear manifest in your body and behavior? How do you avoid situations that trigger anxiety? What would it look like to walk toward something that scares you rather than away from it?

3. Shame

What is your relationship with shame? Can you distinguish between guilt ("I did something bad") and shame ("I am bad")? When shame surfaces, what do you do? How has shame driven your substance use?

4. Loneliness

How do you cope with loneliness? Do you allow yourself to feel it, or do you immediately seek distraction? What is the difference between being alone and being lonely for you? How has isolation perpetuated loneliness?

5. Vulnerability / Tenderness

What happens when you feel tender, open, or vulnerable? Is this more frightening than anger or frustration? When was the last time you let someone see you in a truly vulnerable state? What happened?

6. Grief / Loss

What losses have you never fully grieved — relationships, time, opportunities, versions of yourself? How do you typically handle grief? What would it mean to fully mourn what addiction has taken from you?

7. Joy / Happiness

This may surprise you, but many people in recovery also run from positive emotions. Do you sabotage moments of happiness? Do you distrust joy? Do you feel you don't deserve good feelings? How does this pattern show up?

PART 2 OF 7 · READING

Childhood Roots: Where It All Began

The roots of emotional avoidance almost always grow in childhood soil. Children are not born knowing that emotions are dangerous or shameful. They learn this. And they learn it from the people and environments that surround them during the years when their brains are most plastic, most impressionable, and most vulnerable to imprinting.

Consider what happens in a child's developing brain when emotions are consistently met with punishment, dismissal, or neglect. The child's limbic system — the emotional brain — generates a feeling. This is normal, healthy, biological. The child then expresses that feeling through the only means available: crying, screaming, withdrawing, acting out. And then something happens in the environment. Perhaps a parent yells, "Stop that crying or I'll give you something to cry about." Perhaps the child is sent to their room. Perhaps the emotion is simply ignored, as though it doesn't exist — which, to a child, sends the message that they don't exist when they feel that way.

Over hundreds and thousands of these interactions, the child's brain builds a neural pathway that goes like this: feeling → expression → pain/rejection/abandonment. The brain, being an extraordinary learning machine, develops a shortcut: feeling → suppress. The child learns to intercept the emotion before it reaches expression. This is not a conscious choice. It is a neurological adaptation, as automatic as pulling your hand from a hot stove.

Different family systems produce different patterns of emotional suppression. In families where anger was the only "acceptable" emotion, children may learn to convert all feelings into anger — sadness becomes rage, fear becomes hostility, loneliness becomes resentment. In families where emotional expression was met with violence, children learn hyper-vigilance and emotional invisibility. In families where emotions were simply absent — where no one ever discussed feelings, demonstrated affection, or acknowledged pain — children learn that the emotional dimension of human experience simply doesn't exist.

What is critical to understand in recovery is that these childhood adaptations were appropriate responses to the environments in which they developed. A child who learns to suppress emotions in a volatile household is not weak — they are resourceful. The problem is that these adaptations persist long after the original environment has changed. You are no longer a child in a home where emotions are punished, but your nervous system doesn't know that. It is still running the old program, still intercepting feelings before they can be expressed, still treating emotional vulnerability as a survival threat.

Recovery asks you to do something that every cell in your body has been trained to resist: it asks you to feel. Not just to think about feeling. Not just to talk about feeling. But to actually, in real time, experience the full weight and texture of your emotional life without running, numbing, suppressing, or escaping. This is perhaps the bravest thing recovery asks of anyone, and it begins with understanding where the running started.

Reflection Questions

1. What were the "rules" about emotions in your family growing up? What was acceptable to feel and express? What was not?

2. Can you identify the specific messages you received about emotions as a child — either spoken or unspoken?

3. Which emotions were you most punished or shamed for expressing? How do you handle those same emotions today?

4. How did the adults in your life model emotional expression? Did they express emotions openly, or did they suppress and avoid?

5. What survival adaptations did you develop as a child that you now recognize are harming you as an adult?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

Learned Emotional Suppression

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

1. Growing up, I was taught that certain emotions were unacceptable or wrong

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I was punished, ridiculed, or shamed for expressing emotions as a child

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I learned early that crying or showing vulnerability led to negative consequences
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. In my family, emotions were ignored, minimized, or treated as problems
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I was told things like "stop crying," "toughen up," or "boys/girls don't do that"
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I believe that showing emotion is a sign of weakness
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I judge myself harshly when I feel sad, scared, lonely, or hurt
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I was my own worst critic long before substances became a problem
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Confronting the Inner Critic

Exposing and Challenging the Voice That Judges Your Emotions

The inner critic is the internalized voice that tells you your emotions are wrong, weak, excessive, or undeserved. For many people in recovery, this voice was installed in childhood by caregivers, peers, or cultural norms, and it has been running on autopilot ever since. This exercise makes the critic visible so you can begin to challenge its authority.

1. The Critic's Voice

Write down the specific things your inner critic says when you feel emotional. Be exact — quote the voice as precisely as you can. Examples: "Man up." "Nobody cares about your feelings." "You're being dramatic." "You should be over this by now."

2. The Critic's Origin

Whose voice is the critic actually using? Is it a parent? A coach? A bully? A cultural message? A drill instructor? A former partner? Trace each critical message back to its original source.

3. The Critic's Function

What was the critic originally trying to protect you from? In what environment did this internal voice serve a survival purpose? How did judging your own emotions before others could judge them keep you "safe"?

4. The Critic's Cost

What has the inner critic cost you? How has it prevented you from seeking help, expressing needs, building intimacy, or accessing the full range of your humanity? How has it contributed to your substance use?

5. The Compassionate Response

For each critical message you identified, write a compassionate counter-response. What would a wise, loving mentor say to you in that moment? What did you need to hear as a child that you never heard? Write it now — for yourself.

6. A Letter to Your Younger Self

Write a brief letter to the child you were — the one who first learned that emotions were dangerous. What do you want that child to know? What would you tell them about feeling, about expressing, about their worth?

PART 3 OF 7 · READING

Running Physically: The Geography of Avoidance

Physical running — the literal act of removing yourself from emotional situations — is one of the most common and least examined patterns in addiction. It looks so reasonable on the surface that it often goes unquestioned. "I just needed some space." "I had to get out of there." "I needed to clear my head." These are the narratives we construct to justify what is, at its core, a flight response driven by the same fear that made us stuff our feelings as children.

Physical running takes many forms, and not all of them look like dramatic exits. It includes leaving the room during difficult conversations. Walking out of the house after an argument. Driving around for hours rather than sitting with discomfort. Moving to a new city after a relationship ends. Changing jobs when workplace tensions arise. Ending friendships when they demand emotional depth. Even the constant busyness that many people maintain — the packed schedules, the never-ending to-do lists, the inability to sit still — is a form of physical running. If I am always moving, I never have to be still enough to feel.

The consequences of physical running in relationships are devastating and cumulative. When you leave during a difficult conversation, you send a clear message to the other person: your emotional comfort is more important than their emotional need. You teach the people who love you that they cannot count on you to stay when things get hard. And you reinforce your own brain's belief that emotions are too dangerous to face, that the only safe response is departure.

Many people in recovery have a pattern of geographic cures — moving to new places, starting over, believing that the problem is "out there" rather than "in here." But as the old recovery saying goes, "Wherever you go, there you are." You can change your address, your job, your relationships, and your daily routine, but you cannot outrun the emotional patterns that live inside you. They will follow you to every new city, every new relationship, every fresh start, because they are not features of your environment — they are features of your nervous system.

In recovery, you begin to learn the difference between healthy boundary-setting (choosing to leave a genuinely unsafe situation) and emotional avoidance disguised as boundary-setting (leaving because feelings became uncomfortable). This distinction is crucial, because the addicted brain is extraordinarily skilled at dressing up avoidance in the language of self-care. "I'm taking space" can mean "I am honoring my need for healthy distance," or it can mean "I am terrified of what I'm feeling and I need to escape immediately." Learning to tell the difference is one of the most important skills in recovery.

Reflection Questions

1. What are your most common forms of physical running? Be specific about the patterns.

2. In what ways have you avoided or run from conversations with family or friends? How has this made it worse?

3. Have you ever tried a "geographic cure" — moving, changing jobs, or starting over to escape emotional pain? What happened?

4. How do you tell the difference between healthy boundary-setting and emotional avoidance in your own life?

5. Who in your life has been most affected by your pattern of physical withdrawal? What have they told you about it?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5

Physical Escape & Avoidance

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

1. When conversations become emotional, I physically leave or withdraw

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I avoid people, places, or situations that might trigger strong feelings

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have left important conversations because the emotions became too intense

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I isolate myself when I am feeling overwhelmed or vulnerable

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I have ghosted, disappeared, or gone silent on people who cared about me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I keep myself constantly busy so I never have to be alone with my thoughts

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I have moved, changed jobs, or ended relationships to escape emotional pain

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. When conflict arises, my default is to flee rather than engage

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

PART 4 OF 7 · READING

Running Chemically: When Substances Become the Exit

Chemical running is the final evolution of the emotional avoidance pattern, and it is the one that brings most people to treatment. By the time a person discovers that substances can silence the internal noise, they have usually spent years — sometimes decades — developing the emotional suppression and physical avoidance patterns that made chemical escape seem not just appealing, but necessary.

Substances accomplish what no other form of running can: they chemically alter the brain's ability to generate, process, and experience emotions. Alcohol dampens the prefrontal cortex and enhances GABA activity, literally reducing the brain's capacity for anxiety and emotional processing. Opioids flood the brain with synthetic calm, creating a pharmacological cocoon that no amount of emotional suppression could achieve on its own. Stimulants override the signal with euphoria and energy, making it possible to outrun feelings through sheer chemical momentum.

The first time this works — the first time a substance does for you what you could never do for yourself — something fundamental shifts. The equation changes from "I need to manage my emotions" to "I need this substance." And the substance works. For a while, it works brilliantly. It works so well that it confirms every lesson you ever learned about emotions: they are dangerous, they need to be eliminated, and there is a way to eliminate them.

But the chemical solution creates its own catastrophic problems. First, it prevents the development of genuine emotional coping skills. Every time you use a substance instead of feeling a feeling, you rob yourself of the opportunity to learn that feelings are survivable. You never discover that sadness passes, that anger can be expressed and resolved, that fear can be acknowledged and walked through. The substance becomes a developmental freeze — your emotional age stops advancing the day the chemical running begins.

Second, the substance creates a rebound effect. The emotions you are suppressing don't go away — they accumulate. They pile up behind the chemical dam, and when the substance wears off, they flood back with compound interest. This is why the morning after heavy drinking often brings not just physical hangover but emotional devastation — the feelings you drank to suppress return amplified, accompanied now by shame, regret, and the growing awareness that the "solution" is becoming the primary problem.

There is also the deeply important concept of drinking or using "at" someone — using substances as an emotional weapon, as a way of punishing or communicating with another person through self-destruction. "You hurt me, so I'm going to go get drunk" is one of the most dangerous forms of emotional avoidance because it combines substance use with relational aggression, using your own body as the battlefield in someone else's war.

Recovery means facing the fundamental truth that no substance has ever resolved an emotion. It has only postponed it — and the interest rate on postponed emotions is devastating.

Reflection Questions

1. When did chemical running begin for you? What feeling or situation were you trying to escape?

2. Can you identify the specific emotions that substances helped you avoid? Name them.

3. How has substance use prevented you from developing the emotional skills you need?

4. Have you ever drank or drugged AT someone? What were you really trying to communicate?

5. Play the tape forward: when you drank or used at someone, how did that work out for you?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5

Chemical Escape & Substance Connection

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

1. I used substances specifically to avoid feeling painful emotions

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Drinking or using was my primary strategy for dealing with emotional discomfort

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I learned early in life that substances could make bad feelings go away temporarily

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. Without substances, I feel overwhelmed by emotions I do not know how to handle

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I have used substances not to feel good, but to stop feeling bad

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I drank or used AT someone — meaning my use was a reaction directed at another person

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I have used substances after emotional conversations to "come down" or "reset"

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. The idea of feeling emotions fully without any chemical buffer is frightening to me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

PART 5 OF 7 · READING

The Cost of Running: What Avoidance Takes From You

Every form of running — emotional, physical, chemical — carries a cost, and these costs compound over time in ways that are often invisible until they become catastrophic. Understanding what emotional avoidance has taken from you is not an exercise in self-punishment. It is an inventory — a clear-eyed accounting of the price you have paid for survival strategies that once served you but now imprison you.

The first and most profound cost is the loss of genuine intimacy. Emotional avoidance and deep human connection cannot coexist. Intimacy requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires the willingness to be fully present with whatever emotions arise — yours and the other person's. When you run from your own feelings, you cannot truly meet another human being in theirs. Relationships become performative rather than authentic. You learn to play the role of partner, friend, parent, or colleague without ever truly inhabiting the role. People around you sense this distance even if they cannot name it, and over time, it erodes the trust and closeness that relationships require to survive.

The second cost is the loss of self-knowledge. Emotions are not just experiences to be managed — they are information. Fear tells you something is threatening. Sadness tells you something has been lost. Anger tells you a boundary has been crossed. Joy tells you something is aligned with your values. When you systematically suppress emotional experience, you lose access to this vital information system. You make decisions without crucial data. You stay in situations you should leave and leave situations where you should stay. You become a stranger to yourself, navigating life without an internal compass.

The third cost is physical. Decades of research in psychoneuroimmunology confirm what the body has always known: suppressed emotions don't disappear — they are stored in the body. Chronic emotional suppression is associated with elevated cortisol, inflammatory markers, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain, autoimmune conditions, and compromised immune function. The body keeps the score, and the score gets higher every year that emotions go unprocessed.

The fourth cost is the narrowing of life itself. When you organize your life around avoiding emotion, your world gets smaller and smaller. You stop going to places where you might feel something. You stop seeing people who might provoke honest conversation. You stop doing things that carry the risk of failure, rejection, or disappointment. Eventually, the world you have constructed to keep yourself "safe" becomes a prison — small, gray, and airless. This is the state that many people are in by the time they enter treatment: not just addicted to substances, but addicted to avoidance itself, with a life that has contracted around the core principle of "don't feel, don't engage, don't risk."

Have you ever been able to outrun an emotion? If you are honest, the answer is no. You can postpone it. You can suppress it. You can numb it. You can run from it for years. But you have never, not once, successfully eliminated a feeling by avoiding it. Every emotion you have ever run

from is still inside you, waiting. Recovery is the process of finally turning around and facing what has been chasing you — and discovering that it was never as dangerous as you believed.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever been able to outrun an emotion? If so, how did this work out for you in the end?

2. What has emotional avoidance cost you in your most important relationships?

3. How has running from emotions affected your physical health?

4. Describe how your world has gotten smaller as a result of avoidance patterns.

5. What information have your suppressed emotions been trying to give you that you have refused to receive?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

Relational Impact of Emotional Avoidance

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

1. My emotional avoidance has damaged important relationships in my life

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. People close to me have expressed frustration about my emotional unavailability

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have missed opportunities for deeper connection because I was afraid to be vulnerable
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I avoid difficult conversations even when I know they are necessary
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I have hurt people by shutting down or walking away when they needed me present
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I tend to attract or choose relationships where emotional distance is acceptable
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. My inability to express emotions has caused misunderstandings and conflict
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I fear that if people truly saw my emotions, they would reject or judge me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Playing the Tape Forward

Tracing the Full Consequences of Emotional Avoidance

"Playing the tape forward" means thinking through the full consequences of a behavior — not just the immediate relief it provides, but everything that follows. For each scenario, trace the full arc: the trigger, the urge to run, the running behavior, and everything that happened afterward.

1. Scenario 1: Shutting Down During a Conversation

Recall a time you shut down emotionally during an important conversation. What was being discussed? What feeling were you avoiding? What happened to the conversation and the relationship? What might have happened if you had stayed present?

2. Scenario 2: Physically Leaving

Recall a time you physically left a situation to escape an emotion. Where did you go? How long did you stay away? What happened with the person or situation you left? Did leaving solve the problem or create new ones?

3. Scenario 3: Using Substances to Escape

Recall a specific time you used substances to escape an emotion. What was the feeling? What substance did you use? Describe the next 24 hours in detail — the relief, the aftermath, the consequences, the feelings that came flooding back.

4. Scenario 4: Drinking or Using AT Someone

If you have ever drank or used at someone, walk through the complete story. Who was the person? What happened between you? How did you use substances as a response? What were they actually trying to communicate to you? What was the ultimate cost?

5. Scenario 5: The Alternative

Take any of the scenarios above and reimagine it. If you had stayed present with the emotion instead of running — if you had spoken honestly, felt the feeling, and let it pass — what might have happened differently? What could that relationship or situation look like today?

PART 6 OF 7 · READING

Learning to Stand Still: A New Way Forward

If running from emotion is the disease, then learning to stand still is the recovery. But "standing still" does not mean enduring pain passively or white-knuckling your way through emotional experiences. It means developing an entirely new relationship with your internal world — one built on curiosity instead of fear, presence instead of escape, and compassion instead of judgment.

The first step in learning to stand still is recognizing the urge to run — and naming it in real time. This is harder than it sounds, because the urge to flee is often pre-conscious. By the time you notice it, you may already be physically leaving, emotionally shutting down, or reaching for a substance. The practice is to catch the impulse earlier and earlier: to notice the tightening in your chest, the sudden desire to "get some air," the mental pivot toward distraction. In recovery, you learn to say to yourself, "Right now, I want to run. That means there is something here I need to feel."

The second step is building distress tolerance — the capacity to experience uncomfortable emotions without acting on the impulse to escape. This is not a natural ability for someone who has spent their life in emotional avoidance; it is a skill that must be developed through practice. Distress tolerance doesn't mean the emotion becomes less painful. It means you become more capable of surviving the pain without it destroying you. You learn, through repeated experience, that feelings have a beginning, a middle, and an end — and that you can survive all three.

The third step is developing an emotional vocabulary. Many people in early recovery have what clinicians call "alexithymia" — a difficulty in identifying, describing, and distinguishing between emotional states. After years of suppression, all emotions may feel the same: just a generalized sense of "bad" or "uncomfortable." Recovery work includes learning to differentiate between sadness and loneliness, between anger and fear, between guilt and shame, between anxiety and excitement. The more precisely you can name what you are feeling, the less overwhelming it becomes. A vague sense of dread is terrifying. "I am feeling anxious because I have a difficult conversation tomorrow" is manageable.

The fourth step is developing safe emotional expression. This means finding people and spaces where it is genuinely safe to feel — a therapist's office, a recovery meeting, a trusted friend, a journal, a sponsor. It means practicing vulnerability in small doses, testing the water before diving in. It means discovering through experience that emotional expression can actually lead to connection, relief, and resolution rather than the punishment and rejection you expected.

The fifth step — and this is the one that changes everything — is self-compassion. The internal critic that has been judging your emotions since childhood must be addressed directly. This critic says things like: "You shouldn't feel that way." "What's wrong with you?" "Toughen up." "Nobody wants to hear about your feelings." In recovery, you learn to respond to this voice with the compassion you deserved as a child but did not receive: "This is hard, and it's okay that it's hard. I am allowed to feel this. I am not broken for feeling this."

Recovery is not the absence of difficult emotions. Recovery is the development of the capacity to feel those emotions, to understand them, to express them, and to move through them — without running, without numbing, and without destroying your life in the process. The emotions you have spent your entire life running from are not your enemies. They are messengers, and they have been trying to reach you for a very long time. Recovery is finally standing still long enough to hear what they have to say.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the five steps (recognizing the urge, distress tolerance, emotional vocabulary, safe expression, self-compassion) feels most challenging to you? Why?

2. Where in your life do you currently have a safe space to feel and express emotions without judgment?

3. How many emotional words can you identify beyond "good," "bad," "fine," and "angry"? Try to list as many as you can.

4. What would self-compassion sound like in your own internal voice? Write what you would say to yourself in a moment of emotional pain.

5. What do you think your emotions have been trying to tell you? If you stood still and listened, what would you hear?

YOUR EXERCISE

Standing Still Practice

Building the Capacity to Feel Without Fleeing

This is not a one-time exercise — it is a practice you will return to throughout your recovery. Each prompt invites you to intentionally sit with an emotional experience rather than running from it. Start with less intense emotions and gradually build your capacity.

1. Practice 1: Name It to Tame It

Right now, in this moment, what are you feeling? Not "fine" or "okay" — go deeper. Name the specific emotion. Where do you feel it in your body? Rate its intensity from 1-10. Stay with it for two full minutes without doing anything to change it. What happened?

2. Practice 2: The Urge Surfing Exercise

The next time you notice the urge to run from a feeling — to pick up your phone, leave the room, get busy, or use a substance — do nothing. Just observe the urge. Notice it like a wave: it rises, it crests, and it falls. How long did the urge last? Did it pass? What was it like to ride the wave rather than act on it?

3. Practice 3: One Honest Conversation

In the next 7 days, have one conversation where you express an emotion you would normally suppress. It can be small — telling someone you felt hurt, admitting you are scared, saying "I don't know" instead of pretending you do. Plan it here: Who will you talk to? What will you say? What are you afraid will happen? What actually happened?

4. Practice 4: The Body Scan

Sit quietly for five minutes and scan your body from head to toe. Where do you hold tension, tightness, or pain? These physical sensations often contain stored emotions. What emotion might be living in your tight shoulders, your clenched jaw, your churning stomach? Can you breathe into that space without trying to fix it?

5. Practice 5: Feeling Joy Without Escape

The next time you experience a genuinely good moment — a laugh, a beautiful view, a moment of connection — notice if you try to escape it (through cynicism, distraction, or "waiting for the other shoe to drop"). Can you stay in the good feeling for an extra 30 seconds? What comes up when you try?

6. Your Standing Still Commitment

Write a personal commitment for how you will practice standing still with your emotions going forward. What specific practices will you adopt? What support will you seek? What will you do when the urge to run returns — because it will?

PART 7 OF 7 · WORKSHEET

Reflection Worksheet

Running From Emotion

Core Reflection Worksheet

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My immediate response is always to shut down and walk away, or escape. I think when I was a really tiny kid, I learned to run... I was crying and I was feeling bad, and I learned that whatever I was feeling, and how I was expressing it was wrong. So, I stuffed that... You learn to run from your emotions... Then as you grow a little older you learn to run physically to get away from people... Eventually you learn how to run chemically... It's taken a long time for me to understand that when I want to get away, shut down, or run away, that's a part of my disease.

— Griffin, 2009

Take your time with each question. There are no right or wrong answers. The only requirement is honesty. If a question is difficult, that difficulty itself is information — lean into it rather than away from it.

1

In what ways do you attempt to run from your emotions?

Consider all three forms: emotional shutdown (numbing, disconnecting, intellectualizing), physical escape (leaving, isolating, staying busy), and chemical escape (substances, food, screens, any numbing behavior). Be specific about your personal patterns.

2

Have you ever been able to outrun an emotion? If so, how did this work out for you?

Think about specific times you tried to escape a feeling. Did the feeling actually go away, or did it come back — often stronger? What were the consequences of trying to outrun it?

3

In what ways have you avoided or run from conversations with family or friends? How has this made it worse?

Consider the conversations you have avoided — the difficult truths you have left unsaid, the conflicts you have walked away from, the vulnerability you have refused to offer. How has avoidance affected these relationships over time?

4

Do you feel judged for showing emotion?

Explore this honestly. Who specifically do you feel judged by? Is this judgment real or perceived? How does the fear of judgment affect your willingness to express what you actually feel?

5

In what ways have you been judged or punished for expressing emotion?

Go back as far as you can remember. What happened when you cried, when you were scared, when you were angry, when you were sad? Who responded and how? What did you learn from their response?

6

Now remove anger as the primary emotion. Have you ever been judged for expressing emotion? Or did you just simply judge yourself?

This is a crucial question. Many people, especially in high-performance and first responder cultures, are permitted to express anger but judged for everything else — sadness, fear, loneliness, hurt. And sometimes the harshest judge is inside your own head. Separate external judgment from self-judgment.

7

Describe ways that you can be your own worst critic.

What does your inner critic say to you about your emotions, your recovery, your worth? When is this voice loudest? Where did this voice come from — whose words is it echoing?

8

Have you ever drank or drugged AT someone?

This means using substances as a weapon — a way of punishing, communicating with, or retaliating against someone through self-destruction. "Fine, I'll just go get drunk then." Be honest about who you were targeting and what you were really trying to say.

9

Play the tape forward — how did this work out for you?

When you drank or drugged at someone, what happened next? The next morning. The next week. To the relationship. To your self-respect. To your recovery. Walk through the full consequences with unflinching honesty.
