

Emotional Dysregulation

Character & Emotions

Step-Working Guide · The Recovery Files

In this workbook

1. **Emotional Dysregulation** — key ideas, reading, worksheet
Each topic's scored self-assessment and mind map are in the app.

TOPIC

Emotional Dysregulation

KEY IDEAS

Emotional Dysregulation

The Internal Storm

Facing the harm we've caused can trigger intense emotions—shame, anxiety, defensive anger, or numbness. Dysregulation makes it difficult to stay present and authentic during amends.

The Shame Spiral

Too Painful to Look

Toxic shame can be overwhelming, leading us to either shut down completely (collapse) or attack others (deflect). Both prevent the connection needed for amends.

Defensive Reactivity

Fighting Back

When we feel pain or accusation, our instinct may be to defend ourselves or counter-attack. This reactivity destroys the safety needed for the other person to feel heard.

Self-Regulation Skills

Staying Grounded

Developing the ability to soothe our own nervous system—through breath, grounding, and support—allows us to 'stay in the room' emotionally when things get hard.

Processing Before Action

Preparation is Key

We process our intense emotions with sponsors or therapists *before* the amend, so we don't dump them on the person we harmed. The amend is for them, not our catharsis.

Emotional Sobriety

The Ultimate Goal

Navigating Step Nine builds emotional sobriety—the capacity to feel deep emotions without being ruled by them, and to maintain our principles even under pressure.

CORE READING**Fractured: Navigating the Cognitive and Emotional Storm of Early Recovery****When Your Mind and Emotions Become Unfamiliar Territory**

The most disorienting aspect of returning to treatment after my relapse has been the profound cognitive disruption that makes even simple tasks feel overwhelming. Problems I could easily solve during my previous recovery now leave me staring blankly, unable to organize my thoughts into coherent solutions.

This mental fog extends beyond formal problem-solving into everyday functioning. I find myself standing in rooms forgetting why I entered, losing track of conversations midway through. The counselors explain this as "post-acute withdrawal syndrome"—a normal phase of early recovery—but understanding the label doesn't diminish the frustration of feeling intellectually compromised.

Beneath this cognitive cloudiness churns a constant state of emotional discomfort that manifests as persistent restlessness, irritability, and discontent. I cannot seem to settle into any activity or state of being—this physical restlessness mirrors my internal state, where no emotion or thought can rest long enough to be fully processed.

Racing and Blank

My mind operates at two dysfunctional extremes with nothing in between. Sometimes my thoughts race uncontrollably, jumping between topics with no logical progression. Then without warning, my mind shifts to the opposite extreme, going completely blank as though someone has pulled a cognitive circuit breaker.

Memory problems compound these cognitive difficulties, creating embarrassing gaps in both recent and distant recall. More distressingly, I experience gaps in autobiographical memory—important events seem to have vanished from my recall, creating a frightening sense of discontinuity in my life narrative.

The emotional volatility of early recovery finds its most troubling expression in the anger that seems to erupt from somewhere beyond my conscious control. The intensity and disproportionality of this anger frightens me, as I watch myself transform into someone I don't recognize over trivial matters.

My emotional experience swings between overwhelming intensity and disturbing numbness, with little middle ground between these extremes. This emotional volatility makes consistent engagement with recovery nearly impossible, as I alternate between being overwhelmed by feelings that demand immediate relief and being too emotionally detached to care about long-term recovery goals.

As these cognitive and emotional disturbances persist, I find myself increasingly concerned about my psychological stability, entertaining frightening thoughts that I might be "going crazy" rather than experiencing normal recovery symptoms.

The Path Through Pain

This constellation of painful problems creates the hellish landscape of early recovery after relapse. Yet within this suffering lies an essential truth: these symptoms reflect a brain and body healing from profound chemical disruption, not a permanent state or personal failure.

The very pain that makes early recovery so challenging serves as evidence of healing processes underway, as neural pathways damaged by substances begin reorganizing toward healthier functioning. This perspective doesn't eliminate the pain but gives it meaning and purpose—transforming it from pointless suffering to necessary healing, from evidence of failure to signs of repair.

WORKSHEET

Emotional Regulation Worksheet

TRIGGERS

Identifying Emotional Storms**Shame Triggers**

What thoughts/situations make you want to hide?

Anxiety Triggers

What makes you panic or freeze?

Defensive Anger

When do you feel the urge to fight back?

TOOLS

Grounding Techniques

Physical Grounding (5-4-3-2-1, Breathing):

Cognitive Reframing (Self-talk):

Support System:

PREPARATION**Pre-Amends Regulation Plan**

Before the amend, I will:

During the amend, if I feel overwhelmed, I will:

After the amend, I will:
