

Understanding the ISM

The Core of Addiction

Thinking Patterns & Progression

Topic Studies · The Recovery Files

In this workbook: key ideas, worksheet.

The topic's scored self-assessment is in the app.

KEY IDEAS

Understanding the ISM

The Core of Addiction

Addiction is only a symptom of a deeper disease. You can remove the substance—whether alcohol, drugs, gambling, or any compulsive behavior—but what remains is the "ism" at the heart of this condition.

The ism is why we used in the first place, what drove us to the dark corners of our minds, and what will rapidly pull us back into active addiction if left unaddressed in recovery.

The disease—the 'ism' of addiction—encompasses far more than the act of using.

Breaking Down the Disease

Alcoholism = Alcohol + ISM

The Substance or Behavior

The external thing that addicts use: alcohol, drugs, food, sex, gambling, shopping, work, relationships, or any compulsive behavior that provides temporary relief.

The ISM

The underlying psychological, emotional, and spiritual conditions that drive addictive behavior. These isms exist on a spectrum in all people to varying degrees.

The isms represent our attempts to make life bearable, serving as mechanisms for "interpersonal control and coping." We all need thinking patterns and behaviors to navigate daily life. Most people manage reasonably well, while the alcoholic struggles and spirals downward.

Defining the ISM

Helpful Acronyms

I, Self, Me

The overwhelming focus on self

I Sponsor Myself

The refusal to accept help or guidance

Internal Spiritual Malady

The deep soul-sickness at the core

Incredibly Short Memory

Forgetting consequences and lessons learned

InSide Me

The internal war and self-obsession

I Sabotage Myself

The self-defeating patterns we repeat

Insane Survival Mechanisms

The twisted coping strategies we develop

The Core Challenge

Why We Must Address the ISM

No matter what, when you remove the substance or compulsive behavior, the underlying traits and characteristics remain intact.

The "ism" is why we used. The "ism" must be addressed directly and honestly. We need an entirely new way of living.

Most addicts cannot cope with life's inevitable difficulties without their substance or behavior of choice. This inability to cope with life on life's terms without an external solution is the "ism" component.

Generally, most addicts are egotistical yet insecure, self-centered yet self-loathing. Many are emotionally immature relative to their chronological age.

Fear: The Master ISM

The Primary Driver

One of the primary isms in addiction is fear itself. Recovery is largely about identifying and releasing fear.

Fear produces most of our insane, self-destructive moments. Whenever a reality check is needed, we must pause and ask: "Is there fear driving what I'm doing or thinking right now?"

Fear of failure

Fear of loneliness

Fear of intimacy

Fear of risk

Fear of pain

Fear of abandonment

Fear of rejection

Fear of looking foolish

Fear of judgment

Fear of punishment

Fear of poverty

Fear of being exploited

Fear of missing out

Fear of success

Fear of change

Fear of fear itself

Addiction Protection

Cognitive Distortions

Denial & Minimization

"It's not that bad" or "I can handle it"

Rationalization

Creating elaborate justifications for using

Projection

Blaming others for our problems and behaviors

Intellectualization

Analyzing endlessly rather than feeling and acting

Selective Memory

Remembering the "good times," forgetting consequences

Comparison

"I'm not as bad as that person"

Uniqueness

"My situation is different; normal rules don't apply"

Terminal Uniqueness

Believing we are special exceptions to recovery principles

Behavioral Protection

Actions That Shield the Addiction

Isolating

Pulling away from support and accountability

People-Pleasing

Avoiding honest confrontation and feedback

Conflict Creation

Generating chaos to justify using

Geographical Cures

Believing location change will solve the problem

Relationship Hopping

Using relationships as distraction or replacement

Victim Mentality

Positioning ourselves as powerless or wronged

Grandiosity

Inflating our importance to avoid vulnerability

Perfectionism

Setting impossible standards to justify giving up

Procrastination

Delaying recovery actions while claiming intention

Half-Measures

Participating superficially without real commitment

The Daily Work

Recovery Requirements

The "ism" doesn't disappear—it's managed daily through conscious awareness, healthy coping mechanisms, connection with others, and spiritual growth.

✓

Rigorous honesty about our isms and protection mechanisms

✓

Willingness to examine our thinking and behavior patterns

✓

Humility to accept help and guidance from others

✓

Action to practice new coping skills consistently

✓

Connection with others in recovery for support

✓

Spiritual practice to address the internal malady

✓

Self-compassion as we learn and occasionally stumble

✓

Patience with the gradual process of transformation

Recovery isn't about perfection; it's about progress, one day at a time, addressing the real issues that drove us to seek escape in the first place.

WORKSHEET

Understanding the ISM Worksheet

Identifying Your Primary ISMs

Which ISMs from the assessment resonated most strongly with you? List your top 5-10.

How long have you been aware of these patterns in yourself?

Which ISM causes you the most problems in your daily life? Describe specific examples.

Which ISM do you use most often as a coping mechanism? How does it serve you?

Which ISM feels most difficult to address or let go of? Why do you think that is?

Fear-Based ISMs

Which fears from the 'Master ISM' list drive your behaviors most often?

Describe a recent situation where fear drove your thinking or behavior. What ISM did fear activate?

How does fear show up differently in your recovery journey compared to your active addiction?

What would it look like to make a decision without fear as the primary motivator?

Which fear feels most urgent to address for your continued recovery?

Addiction Protection Mechanisms

Which cognitive distortions (denial, rationalization, projection, etc.) do you recognize in your thinking?

Describe a time recently when you caught yourself using one of these protection mechanisms. What was happening?

Which behavioral protection patterns (isolation, people-pleasing, perfectionism, etc.) do you engage in most?

How do these protection mechanisms keep you from fully engaging in recovery?

What triggers activate your protection mechanisms? What situations make you defensive or closed off?

The Core Challenge

In what ways are you 'egotistical yet insecure' or 'self-centered yet self-loathing'?

How emotionally mature do you feel relative to your chronological age? What areas need growth?

What life situations or emotions trigger your strongest urge to use substances or addictive behaviors?

What new coping mechanisms are you developing to handle life's difficulties without external solutions?

How has addressing your ISMs changed your relationship with the substance or behavior?

The Daily Work

Of the daily work requirements (honesty, willingness, humility, action, connection, spiritual practice, self-compassion, patience), which comes most naturally? Which is most challenging?

What specific practices help you manage your ISMs on a daily basis?

How do you respond when you notice yourself acting from an ISM? What's your recovery plan?

Who in your support system helps you recognize when ISMs are driving your behavior?

What does 'progress, not perfection' mean to you in the context of managing your ISMs?

Save Responses