

Why The Recovering Person Should Not Make Major Decisions In Early Recovery

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Early recovery from addiction can be challenging. It brings about significant changes in a person's life. As an individual's body begins the detox process, they may experience a variety of symptoms, including physical, psychological, and emotional. The newly recovering addict often undergoes mood swings that create an emotional rollercoaster.

Everyday experiences during this phase include depression, anxiety, and fear. Mood swings from irritability to joy are equally prevalent. This emotionally sober individual might cycle rapidly between feelings of sadness, shame, and guilt, and hope and joy about their decision to quit. These mood swings can be disconcerting if unexpected and misunderstood.

Introspection is encouraged in early recovery. Not only is the individual trying to accept their addiction and the damage it has caused, but they are also attempting to make sense of the flood of emotions they experience. Much of this involves assessing relationships, work, social life, motivations, beliefs, and personal history.

Although individuals are advised not to make significant decisions in the first year of recovery, many succumb to emotionally driven decisions that they later regret once their emotions have settled. For instance, questioning the viability of a marriage and deciding to end it is a too-frequent example. When the emotional rollercoaster subsides, attempting to salvage the marriage often proves futile.

Family members observing these emotional fluctuations in the person with a substance use disorder may mistakenly assume that the addiction is still active, attributing the behavior to immediate wellness expectations. However, emotional highs and lows are expected in early recovery as the body detoxifies and unresolved issues resurface.

In early recovery, feelings return to life. Alcohol and other mood-altering substances serve to modify mood, including emotions. Over time, people with a substance use disorder may have used these substances to numb various feelings, both negative and positive. Thus, upon cessation, these feelings resurface intensely.

Recognizing that emotional highs and lows may be detox symptoms helps individuals contextualize these experiences. This awareness can motivate them to develop effective ways to manage their emotions.

Early recovery presents a prime opportunity to learn how to identify, label, own, express, and navigate through feelings appropriately. Few alcoholics and addicts possess these skills initially, making this period an ideal time to acquire them. These skills are valuable for everyone, not just those in recovery. Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.

