

# Emotional Mastery in Addiction Recovery

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Recovery from substance use disorder is a difficult journey that requires skills and strategies for success. One of the most critical skills in addiction recovery is managing and processing emotions effectively. The absence of feelings management mastery is commonly found in people with addiction. People with substance use disorder have used alcohol or other drugs to deal with their feelings. The substance becomes the feelings management technique.

Early recovery, which begins with abstinence from those same chemicals, presents a challenge for all recovering people, especially for people who started using alcohol and other drugs before they fully developed self-regulation abilities. Feelings management is critical in early recovery because relapse is at its highest vulnerability. Emotional triggers are one of the main factors in relapse. Without feelings management skills, newly recovering people are hard-pressed to withstand cues, triggers, and cravings as they deal with life and all its emotional challenges.

Effectively managing emotions is a challenging skill; it requires practice and patience. We have a tendency to stuff or act out uncomfortable feelings. We need to be able to tolerate them and work through them.

Most people have numerous ways of stuffing their feelings, often without ever having identified what those feelings are. Folks with addiction typically use alcohol and other drugs as their default response. People who don't have a substance use disorder may also abuse alcohol and drugs to stuff their feelings. There are plenty of other numbing and stuffing techniques that people use. Some other obsessive-compulsive behaviors that numb or escape feelings involve compulsive gambling, sexual behavior, spending, shopping, eating, exercising, cleaning, or working. You don't even have to know precisely what you are feeling to use defense mechanisms that distort your reality and reduce the impact of those feelings. You can even hide from feelings by quickly pairing them up with another, more acceptable (to you) feeling. Stuffing feelings doesn't eliminate them. They can sneak out in unhealthy ways, including in symptoms of depression or illnesses.

We can act out feelings without having identified them. We can use all manner of dirty fight techniques to act out feelings, but acting them out does not release them. It only reduces the pressure behind the emotion. You might feel better temporarily after acting out but you have not resolved the feeling. Much of the time, feelings are instructional, trying to tell us that something is wrong and that we need to do something about it.

Problem-solving about feelings may be a multi-step process. You must identify, own, express, and sometimes seek a solution to release uncomfortable feelings. To name an emotion, you need a vocabulary to frame and describe it. A feelings tutorial may be the first step in learning to identify them. When you can identify a feeling, you can label it and classify it. Classifications for emotions are essential for sharing your entire range of experiences with another person.

You can frame emotions in a problem-solving model as a first step in resolving them. It is essential to label each emotion accurately, avoid grouping them, and respond to them appropriately.

Another part of problem-solving is to own the problem. With resolving feelings, you must acknowledge them as yours with "I feel" statements. "You make me feel" implies that others can control our internal emotions. Taking emotional responsibility is empowering and effective in resolving complicated feelings.

Once you know what your feeling is, that it belongs to you, you get to decide what to do with it. Feelings frequently occur as a result of cognitive distortions in our daily lives. When practicing cognitive therapy to own and manage emotions, you look at the meaning you assigned to the trigger of the feeling. Understanding where your feeling came from helps us decide on the most appropriate way to express them to the people involved. It is imperative to learn how to express emotions in ways that are safe and appropriate. Although best to share them directly, sometimes circumstances may prevent that. When that happens, talking to a confidante, writing letters, and other tools can be used instead.

After following all these steps to resolve feelings, another step in feeling resolution may be necessary. Many times, simply going through these steps is enough to resolve the discomfort of a feeling, and it will be eliminated or reduced. Sometimes more work must be done, especially an internal realization has exposed a deeper problem or a more extensive pattern. Taking ownership

of the problem and its resolution empowers you. Strategies like setting boundaries, re-examining beliefs, and gaining a deeper understanding of one's behavior can help address and overcome negative feelings.

Working through emotions is hard, and confronting them can be painful. Many people have trouble recognizing emotions, connecting them with previously unresolved experiences or unknown trauma, or experiencing powerful feelings they simply never learned to manage. Still, learning to work through emotions is crucial in addiction recovery. Mastery of feelings is essential not just for addiction recovery but for healthy living too.

Recognizing and managing emotions is critical to recovery from addiction. Those suffering from addiction often lack this essential skill, and without mastering emotions as a living skill, they will continue to be vulnerable to return to relying on substances to dull uncomfortable emotions. Gaining this new living skill is possible with practice and patience and involves identifying, owning, and expressing feelings, followed by productive problem-solving. Emotion management skills build resilience in recovery and develop emotional wellness capital that will serve you well. Being able to share feelings reciprocally is an essential relationship skill. Engaging in honest, open communication and emotional intimacy is difficult without a feelings vocabulary and the skills to use it.



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