

Thoughts & Mind

Emotional Dysregulation

When feelings become overwhelming

Emotional dysregulation describes difficulty adjusting the intensity, duration or expression of emotions once they have been activated. Feelings can rise very quickly, feel physically enormous, or take a long time to settle. Some people experience anger, panic or tears; others shut down, become numb or lose access to words.

Important: Strong emotions are not a character flaw. Regulation is a nervous-system skill, and capacity changes with stress, sleep, sensory load, safety, health and what is happening around you.

What can dysregulation feel like?

Common experiences include becoming overwhelmed easily, struggling to calm down, irritability, sudden anger, crying, shutting down, feeling numb or disconnected, racing heart, muscle tension, nausea, headaches, impulsive reactions, difficulty thinking clearly, and regret once the intensity has passed.

Why does it happen?

Regulation depends on more than willpower. Stress or pressure, conflict or rejection, lack of sleep, sensory overload, pain or illness, hunger, trauma reminders, uncertainty, demands, transitions and accumulated burnout can all reduce the nervous system's available capacity. Neurodivergent people may also experience intense emotional responses alongside sensory and executive-function demands.

Look for the early signs

Regulation is often easier before you reach the highest point of activation. Notice changes in breathing, jaw or shoulder tension, temperature, speech, movement, urge to escape, difficulty processing language, racing thoughts or a sudden sense that everything is 'too much'.

My earliest signs are:

Map your regulation pattern

There is rarely one single trigger. A difficult moment may sit on top of several smaller pressures. Mapping the pattern can help you intervene earlier rather than judging yourself afterwards.

Possible triggers

Consider demands, conflict, criticism, feeling misunderstood, unexpected change, waiting, sensory input, social pressure, masking, tiredness, hunger, pain, memories, deadlines, crowded environments or having too many decisions to make.

My triggers or pressures:

What happens in my body?

Body signals may arrive before you can name the emotion. Notice breathing, heart rate, stomach sensations, temperature, muscle tension, restlessness, heaviness, dizziness, tears, shutdown or the need to move.

My body signals:

What helps me return toward steadiness?

Regulation is individual. Some people need less sensory input; others need movement. Some need quiet connection; others need temporary space. The goal is not to force calm but to offer the nervous system enough safety and support to reduce overload.

Things that genuinely help me:

A useful question

What does my nervous system need right now - less input, more support, movement, rest, food or drink, predictability, reassurance, boundaries, or time?

Build your regulation toolkit

A toolkit works best when it contains several options rather than one technique you are expected to use every time.

Regulation option	How it may help
Slow the exhale	A longer, comfortable exhale can support settling. Do not force deep breathing if it feels uncomfortable.
Ground through the senses	Notice what you can see, hear and physically feel to reconnect with the present.
Reduce sensory load	Dim lights, reduce noise, change clothing, use a quieter room or reduce competing demands.
Move	Walking, stretching, shaking out tension or another safe form of movement may help discharge activation.
Predictability	Write down the next one or two steps rather than trying to solve everything at once.
Co-regulation	A calm, trusted person can offer presence, practical help and fewer words when processing is difficult.
Recovery time	After intense activation, reduce demands where possible and allow the body time to recover.

What about breathing and grounding?

These can be useful, but they are not universal. If focusing on breathing increases panic or body awareness, try external grounding, movement, rhythm, temperature change, a familiar object or reducing sensory demands instead. Choice matters.

My personalised toolkit:

When to seek extra support

Consider professional support when emotional intensity is frequently affecting relationships, work, eating, sleep, safety or daily functioning; when shutdowns or outbursts are becoming harder to recover from; or when you are relying on harmful ways of coping. Support can explore underlying stress, trauma, neurodivergence, anxiety, mood difficulties and environmental demands rather than treating the emotion alone.

If you are at immediate risk of harming yourself or another person, use urgent local crisis or emergency support.

Your interactive regulation plan

Complete only what is useful. This is a plan for understanding yourself, not a test of whether you can stay calm.

BEFORE - How do I know pressure is building?

DURING - What helps when words and thinking become difficult?

AFTER - What helps me recover without shame or over-analysis?

SUPPORT - What would I like another person to do or avoid doing?

MY PLAN - One change I can make to reduce preventable overload:

A message from Maggie

When emotions become enormous, it can be easy to focus only on the reaction. I would rather we become curious about what happened before it: what your body was carrying, what demands had accumulated and what support was missing. Regulation is not about never becoming overwhelmed. It is about understanding yourself earlier, having more choices and recovering with less judgement.

Further reading & clinical sources

NICE guidance relevant to mental health assessment and treatment; NHS information on stress and emotional wellbeing; Linehan, M. M., work on DBT skills and emotion regulation; Gross, J. J., research on emotion regulation; Porges, S. W., work on autonomic regulation (used critically alongside the wider evidence base).

Educational resource only. It does not replace individual medical or psychological assessment or treatment.