



ADHD & EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

Emotional Dysregulation Info Sheet

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION?



Emotional Dysregulation (ED) is the experience of intense, quickly shifting emotions which feel hard to manage or control. For many people with ADHD, this is a core aspect of daily life, and one which is deeply impactful—despite not always being included in diagnostic criteria.

WHY IS ED COMMON IN ADHD?



The following information is a brief outline of the neuroscience behind ADHD and ED.

Prefrontal Cortex & Self-Regulation:

The prefrontal cortex (involved in impulse control, reasoning, and emotional modulation) is less active in ADHD, making it harder to pause and reflect before reacting (Arnsten & Rubia, 2012).

Heightened Sensitivity to Stimuli:

People with ADHD often experience heightened sensory and emotional input, amplifying feelings of frustration, excitement, rejection, or shame (Surman et al., 2013).

Difficulty Shifting Emotional States (Inertia):

Once triggered, individuals with ADHD may struggle to “reset” emotionally. This can make small upsets feel prolonged and overwhelming (Barkley, 2010).

Delayed Emotional Awareness:

Many people with ADHD have alexithymia-like features—struggling to identify and name what they feel in the moment, which can delay their emotional regulation (Shaw et al., 2014).

COMMON EXPERIENCES OF ED IN ADHD



Some of the signs of Emotional Dysregulation are as follows:

- Feeling emotions more intensely than others around you
- Difficulty calming down once upset or overstimulated
- Sudden outbursts of anger, frustration, or crying
- Extreme emotional reactions to minor setbacks
- Struggling to express emotions constructively
- Mood swings or rapid changes in emotional tone
- Feeling shame or regret after emotional episodes

COMMON IMPACTS OF ED IN ADHD



Some of the impacts of Emotional Dysregulation are as follows:

- Strained relationships with family, friends, or colleagues
- Low self-esteem and guilt about emotional reactions
- Social withdrawal or masking to avoid emotional triggers
- Burnout and emotional exhaustion
- Increased risk of co-occurring anxiety or depression



If you experience Emotional Dysregulation, it is recommended that you:

Name It to Tame It:

Use tools like mood wheels or journalling to track and label emotions more clearly.

Pause & Breathe:

Breathing exercises in conjunction with body scans can together help to create space between feeling and reacting.

Plan for Triggers:

Notice recurring emotional triggers and make proactive plans to manage or avoid them, as and when they occur.

Use Movement:

Physical activity, especially rhythmic exercise (e.g., walking, drumming, and dancing, etc.), helps regulate intense emotions.

Seek Support:

Therapy and ADHD coaching support can teach practical regulation strategies and self-compassion.

References:

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Shaw, P., Stringaris, A., Nigg, J., & Leibenluft, E. (2014). *Emotional dysregulation in ADHD*. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 171(3), 276–293. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2013.13070966>

Surman, C. B., Hammerness, P. G., Pion, K., et al. (2013). *Emotional impulsivity predicts functional impairment in adult ADHD*. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 17(8), 703–710.