



Emotional Regulation and Eating Disorders



A SWEDA Resource

In Collaboration with Full of Beans



A decorative graphic at the top of the page. On the left, there are three thick, curved, overlapping bands of color: magenta, blue, and lime green. On the right, there are several interlocking puzzle pieces in magenta, blue, and yellow, some of which are partially cut off by the edge of the frame.

Who is this for?

This resource is for people looking to understand the link between emotions and eating disorders, and to learn new ways of navigating emotions without an eating disorder.

It may also help family members and loved ones understand the link between emotions and eating behaviours.

It's not a diagnosis tool or a substitute for professional support.

We hope it helps you feel a little less alone.

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page, consisting of three thick, curved, overlapping bands of color: magenta, blue, and lime green, mirroring the design in the top left corner.



What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is our ability to notice, understand, and manage our feelings. It includes being able to sit with difficult emotions and engage in supportive behaviours which help us to navigate different experiences.

For some people, this is something they can do without thinking about it.

But for others, especially people who are neurodivergent or who have been through difficult experiences, it can feel confusing, overwhelming and difficult.

This isn't a weakness; it's caused by a difference in how your nervous system is wired and it can change over time with the right support.





What can emotional dysregulation look like?

When people think about emotional dysregulation, they might think of visible distress, but it's important we recognise the quieter signs too.

The more visible signs can include:

- Intense or prolonged crying that's hard to stop
 - Anger or feeling like you might lash out
 - Feeling unable to control your emotions
 - Panic or dread
 - An intense sense of overwhelm
 - Emotions going from 0 to 100 very quickly
- 



The quieter signs of dysregulation

For many people, particularly those who are neurodivergent, emotional dysregulation may show up as:

- Withdrawing, being quiet, or unable to engage
 - Losing the ability to speak
 - Feeling unable to process information
 - Feeling disconnected from yourself and others
 - An intense need to sleep, be alone, or escape
 - Feeling the urge to run away or shut down
 - Struggling to name how you're feeling
 - Masking all day then crashing at home
 - Sensory overwhelm from noise, crowds, lights
- 



What is a meltdown?

A meltdown happens when your brain and body reach complete overload.

It can feel explosive and overwhelming, as though everything has become too much all at once.

It might look loud and visible from the outside, or it might not.

Either way, it's not a choice, it's your nervous system responding in the way it thinks best.



The top left corner features three overlapping curved bands in magenta, blue, and lime green. The top right corner has a blue spiral and a lime green wavy line.

What is a shutdown?

A shutdown is the quieter version of a meltdown.

Instead of everything spilling out, everything stops.

You might go very quiet, lose the ability to speak, feel blank or far away, or find it impossible to engage with what's happening around you.

It can look like you're just quiet, but inside, you're not.

The bottom left corner has a magenta spiral. The bottom right corner features three overlapping curved bands in magenta, blue, and lime green, mirroring the design in the top left.



What is dissociation?

Dissociation is when you feel disconnected from yourself, your body, or the present moment.

You might feel like you're watching yourself from a distance, or like the world around you isn't quite real.

It can happen suddenly or creep in gradually.

It's a protective response by your mind to create distance from something that feels too overwhelming to stay present with.





The link to neurodiversity

If you're neurodivergent, you might feel emotions more intensely and find them harder to manage than others. This is a reminder that's not your fault, and often general advice isn't always designed with you in mind.

Sometimes, a diagnosis comes later in life and can bring up emotions like grief or anger, feeling hard to process.

It's important to recognise there's no "correct" way to respond, and with this understanding, you can start to explore what works for you and have hope that things can change to be more supportive for you and your mind.



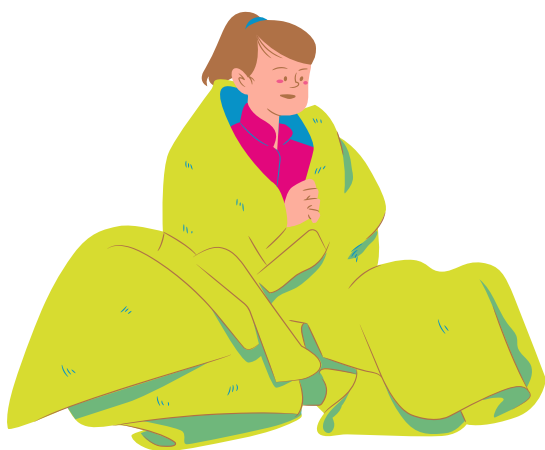


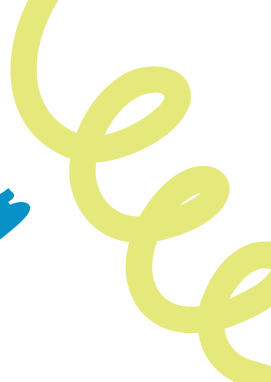
How eating disorders can be a way of coping

For many people, controlling food and body can act as a way to manage emotions that feel too big, too confusing, or too hard to cope with any other way.

It may **seem** to offer:

- A sense of control within the chaos
- Numbness or calm for unbearable emotions
- Soothing or comfort after distress or shutdown
- A way to feel something when you've gone numb
- A distraction from overwhelming thoughts or feelings





An important note:

In the beginning, it may feel like these behaviours offer some short-term relief. But over time, they stop working and create new problems of their own.

Finding compassion for yourself here is important. At the time, you were doing the best you could to try to protect yourself.

That's not something to blame yourself for.

However, they can also get in the way of finding strategies that actually help you in the long-term.

By understanding the role of these behaviours, recovery can support to find other, more helpful, coping mechanisms to help in the long-term.





Building other ways of coping

Learning new ways of managing emotions doesn't happen overnight, and useful tools may change daily.

That's okay, and is why having a tool box of coping mechanisms to lean into can be useful.

A lot of standard recovery advice can feel overwhelming, so the most useful thing is to start understanding you!

Ask yourself: what helps me feel calm, what depletes me, what do I actually enjoy, and what kind of connection would I like and when?

By recognising this, you can build a tool box with a variety of strategies to help you from one day to the next.



Things other people have found helpful

Rather than a prescribed list, here are some ideas that people with lived experience have found useful. These aren't recommendations, just a starting point for your own thinking.

When I'm on the edge of a meltdown:

- Leaving the situation if I can
- Reducing sensory input
- Finding somewhere quieter, darker, less busy
- Putting headphones in
- Speaking to someone I trust

When I'm feeling dissociated or shut down:

- Smelling incense.
- Feeling something soft
- Getting a hot water bottle or drink.
- Gentle movement e.g. yoga
- Reaching out to a safe person.
- Putting on a familiar playlist or TV show

When feeling overwhelmed/anxious:

- Feeling the sun on my face
- Breaking tasks into smaller chunks
- Slow breathing.
- Naming 5 things I can see
- Asking: what's one small thing I can do right now?

When I'm feeling sad or low:

- Being near someone I trust
- Going outside
- Doing something creative
- Letting myself rest without guilt

When I'm feeling angry or frustrated:

- Gentle movement e.g. walking
- Journalling my thoughts
- Taking time before responding



My toolkit

When I'm feeling overwhelmed or anxious:

When I'm feeling dissociated or shut down:

When I'm feeling angry or frustrated:

When I'm feeling sad or low:

When I'm feeling on the edge of a meltdown:





Your non-negotiable priorities

One thing many people find helpful is identifying a personal list of 'non-negotiable priorities'.

These are the things that, when they're in place, help you stay grounded and feel like yourself.

It's not a strict routine or a to-do list;
it's a gentle check-in.

When things feel off, ask yourself: have any of my non-negotiables slipped? And if so, what's one small thing I can do, not as punishment, but as self-care?





What are your non-negotiable priorities?

Before you think of your non-negotiables, take a moment to or write down what helps you feel okay to figure out what is essential for your wellbeing.

How does life look when things are going well?

What helps me feel calm or safe?

What are the first signs I'm struggling

What's helped in those moments before?

Who can I trust to notice things are slipping?

I am
enough





My non-negotiable priorities:

Now you know what helps you feel good, what could you do to ensure you look after yourself each day?
E.g. Making my bed to start the day fresh.

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

- 4. _____

- 5. _____



Ways to reach out



swedauk.org

1-2-1 support, support groups and more for people affected by eating disorders in the South & West



autism.org.uk

Helps autistic people and their families through specialist training and campaigning.



adhduk.co.uk

Helps those with ADHD and supports families, employers and co-workers to understand ADHD.



Pathway for Eating disorders and Autism
developed from Clinical Experience

peacepathway.org

A research group providing tips and information regarding autism and eating disorders.