

When I Spiral: How to Handle Out-of-Control Episodes

You are not alone in this pattern

- Many people experience episodes where intense emotion takes over: yelling, saying cruel things, throwing or breaking objects, or hurting yourself.
- Afterward, shame crashes in. You apologize, but you can feel trust eroding — and that makes the shame worse.
- This pattern has causes and it can be changed. It is not proof that you are a bad person.

Why the spiral happens

- Your nervous system is overloaded. Stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, bipolar mood episodes, autism, ADHD, or sleep deprivation can all lower the threshold for explosion.
- Once the emotional brain takes over, the thinking brain goes offline. In that state, words and actions bypass your usual values.
- Self-harm during an episode often happens because physical pain feels like a release from unbearable emotional pressure.
- Breaking things can feel like a way to externalize the chaos inside or regain a sense of control.

What to do while you are still escalating

- Name it out loud: "I'm escalating." Naming it recruits the thinking brain.
- Change your temperature: splash cold water on your face, hold an ice cube, or take a cold shower. Cold activates the dive reflex and can interrupt the surge.
- Move your body with intensity that does not cause damage: run up stairs, do push-ups, squeeze a stress ball, tear paper, scream into a pillow.
- Leave the situation if you can. Say: "I need 20 minutes. I am not abandoning you; I am protecting both of us."
- Put distance between yourself and anything you could use to hurt yourself or others.

How to reduce the frequency of episodes

- Track your warning signs for one week: sleep hours, caffeine, alcohol, hunger, social stress, sensory overload, anniversaries, hormonal shifts.
- Build a daily regulation practice, even when you feel fine: movement, breathing, adequate sleep, regular meals, limited alcohol.

- Learn your triggers and reduce them where possible. Loud environments, certain people, or unresolved conflicts may need boundaries.
- Get evaluated for underlying conditions: mood disorders, ADHD, autism, PTSD, and personality disorders can all contribute to dysregulation. Treatment helps.

What to do after the storm

- Do not try to repair relationships while you are still flooded. Wait until your heart rate has returned to baseline.
- Repair with specifics, not just apologies: "I yelled at you. That was wrong. I am working on it. Here is what I will do differently next time."
- Do not promise you will never do it again. Instead, name the steps you are taking: therapy, skills practice, medication review, removing weapons or breakable items.
- Let people have their reaction. Their hurt does not mean you are unforgivable; it means they were affected.
- If you broke something or hurt someone, take responsibility and make amends where appropriate.

Dealing with the shame

- Shame says you are the problem. Guilt says you did something harmful. Focus on guilt — it is repairable.
- Remind yourself: behavior is not identity. One episode, or ten, does not define your whole character.
- Talk to a therapist who understands emotional dysregulation, DBT, trauma, or mood disorders. Shame loses power when spoken aloud.
- If shame is making you want to disappear or hurt yourself, that is a sign to reach out immediately — call or text 988.

When to get urgent help

- If episodes include self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or violence toward others, you need professional support now.
- Call or text 988 if you are thinking about suicide. Go to the emergency room or call 911 if you cannot stay safe.
- A therapist trained in DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) can teach specific skills for distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.
- If your episodes are severe or frequent, ask about a higher level of care: intensive outpatient, partial hospitalization, or crisis stabilization.

A safety plan for the next episode

- Write down your early warning signs and put the list where you will see it.

- List three safe coping skills that have worked before.
- Name two people you can call or text when you start to escalate.
- Remove or lock up items you might use to hurt yourself or break during an episode.
- Keep the 988 number saved in your phone and know that you can call before you are in full crisis.

**If you are in
danger right
now**

Call or text **988** for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. If there is immediate danger, call **911** or go to the nearest emergency room.

This guide is educational information only. It is not medical, psychiatric, or crisis advice. If you are thinking about hurting yourself, contact 988 or 911 now.

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