



**The Family Recovery Foundation
FIX YOUR FAMILY
MODULE 11**

When the Addict Hits the Wall

**Understanding Emotional Fluctuations During Early Sobriety:
The Matrix Model's Wall Stage**

In the first several months of sobriety, it's common for individuals in recovery to experience emotional ups and downs, sometimes referred to as the **Wall Stage (week 6-20)** in the Matrix Model of treatment. This period can occur anywhere from **three to six months** into recovery and is characterized by mood instability, which can sometimes look like a relapse, even when the individual has not resumed substance use.

The Matrix Model, an evidenced-based, structured treatment approach, highlights this phase as a natural part of the recovery process. During the Wall Stage, individuals in recovery may feel frustrated, fatigued, or even depressed because the initial excitement or relief of early sobriety has worn off, and the long-term nature of the recovery journey becomes apparent.

- **Emotional Rollercoaster:** Moods during this stage can swing dramatically, often for no clear reason. Individuals may feel discouraged, anxious, or irritable, which can concern families who fear that relapse is imminent. However, these mood shifts are a normal part of healing as the brain continues to adjust to life without substances. (Dark Days)
- **Fatigue and Apathy:** Many people report feeling emotionally drained during this stage, which can lead to low motivation or a sense of hopelessness. This is because the brain's reward system is still recovering from the damage caused by substance use, leading to feelings of emotional flatness or burnout.
- **Physical and Emotional Healing:** During the Wall Stage, the brain and body are still in the process of healing. Early recovery often involves significant changes in brain chemistry, particularly in areas related to mood regulation and stress response (McKay et al., 2017). These adjustments can lead to unpredictable emotional reactions, but they are not necessarily a sign that the individual is heading toward relapse.

It is important for families to recognize these emotional fluctuations as part of the normal recovery process and not automatically assume the worst. Supporting your loved one during this phase with patience and understanding can help them stay on track. Offering emotional support and encouraging participation in aftercare programs or support groups can make a significant difference in helping them navigate this difficult stage.

Family Tools to Support Your Loved One During “The Wall”

Resisting the Urge to Overreact: It’s vital to remain calm when your loved one’s mood changes dramatically. If their behavior doesn’t involve returning to substance use, they may just be dealing with the emotional turbulence of early sobriety. Encourage open dialogue and suggest they share their feelings with a therapist or support group. *This is not an allowance for emotional abuse or mistreatment. At all times it is important for family members to protect their emotional well being and balance their compassion to the qualifier with their own protection.*

1 The Living Journal (Mood Tracker)

Create a visual mood calendar or “living journal.” Invite your loved one to rate their mood daily on a scale of 0 to 10:

- 10 = mood is high/uplifted
- 0 = mood is very low/dysregulated

This helps track emotional patterns and build self-awareness over time.

2. Conversation Starters for Challenging Days

When your loved one comes home from treatment, you might say:

“On days when you’re feeling low, what’s most supportive for you?

Do you want me to check in or give you space?

Would you like to join us in a family activity, or would you prefer to rest?”

Ask them to help co-create a plan in advance so that when a hard day comes, the family knows how to respond with care instead of panic.

3. Accountability Without Shame: Drug Testing as a Tool

During “The Wall” stage, family members often feel fear and helplessness, especially if their loved one appears distant, sad, or agitated. This can lead to codependent behavior or panicked decisions.

One simple and empowering strategy is to offer the option of drug testing—not as a punishment, but as a neutral, accountability-based tool that brings peace of mind to both parties. These conversations are best had early in recovery, before emotions escalate.

4. Normalize Emotional Rollercoasters

Help your loved one understand that these emotional swings are normal. You might say:

“I can’t even imagine what you are going through right now. Let me know how I can best support you. What you’re feeling right now will pass. These up and down days are part of healing, not signs of failure.”

Encourage them to note their low days and remind themselves: “This is normal. It will pass.”

5. And then YOU...During the Wall stage, it’s important for family members to stay steady and take care of themselves. Go to your own support meetings, talk to someone you trust, and use simple tools like deep breathing or journaling. Try not to **react to your loved one’s mood swings with fear**—your calm energy can help more than you realize.

What You Can Do During This Time:

- Attend a family recovery meeting or support group weekly
- Use calming tools like breathwork, walking, or journaling
- Reach out to a trusted friend, sponsor, or therapist for support
- Create a calm home environment by lowering reactivity and offering steady presence

Understanding the Wall Stage can help families avoid unnecessary panic and better support their loved one through this natural and temporary phase of recovery. With ongoing therapy, self-care, and family support, individuals can move beyond this stage and continue their path to long-term sobriety.

References:

- McKay, J. R., Franklin, T. R., Patapis, N., & Lynch, K. G. (2017). Conceptualizing relapse and remission in addiction research and practice. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 51(1), 12-18.
- Rawson, R. A., Obert, J. L., McCann, M. J., & Ling, W. (1991). *The Matrix Model of outpatient stimulant abuse treatment: History and description*. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 23(2), 137-151.

In early recovery, many individuals hit a phase commonly referred to as “The Wall.” This typically occurs between weeks 6 and 12 of treatment and is characterized by emotional ups and downs, flatness, fatigue, irritability, and an increased risk of disengagement or relapse. It is a normal and expected part of recovery—but it can be difficult for both the individual and their family.

What Families Can Expect During This Phase:

- Mood swings, emotional numbness, or restlessness
- Lack of motivation or questioning the recovery process
- Increased cravings or thoughts of using
- Difficulty connecting or participating in family routines