THRIVE EMERGE

Riding the Storm: Finding Grace in Emotional Dysregulation

Quick-tempered. Hot-headed. Short-fused. We all know people like that -- and, for much of my life, I've been one of them.

I've always thought of myself as self-aware -- someone willing to look squarely at my flaws and try to grow from them. Yet this part of me, the part that takes offense too quickly, that braces for defense and needs to win the argument, somehow escaped real scrutiny. I hadn't seen how deeply it shaped not only my own sense of peace, but the atmosphere around me.

There's shame in this pattern -- the kind that seeps into quiet moments when you realize your reactions have hurt the people you care about most. For years, I rationalized my intensity as passion, liveliness, a spirited nature inherited from being the youngest child always fighting to be heard. But beneath that story lived a truth I couldn't ignore forever: I have spent much of my life emotionally dysregulated.

And that's never felt good. When my emotions surge, it feels as though something dark and unpredictable has taken the wheel -- as if I'm being carried by anger or fear rather than choosing my own direction. It's unnerving to feel hijacked by your own nervous system.

Understanding my ADHD reframed this for me. It didn't excuse my behavior, but it offered compassion -- a way to see that what I'd long called "temper" was, in fact, a problem of regulation, not morality. As Russell Barkley has written, emotional dysregulation is one of the most powerful yet overlooked aspects of ADHD. It's like being a sailor lashed to the mast in a storm -- the winds of feeling batter you, and you just hold on, hoping the storm will pass before you do something you regret.

This realization hasn't erased the consequences. There are only so many times you can say "I'm sorry" before those words lose their weight. But instead of hiding from this truth, I've tried to meet it. I've learned that some of us simply have brains that react more quickly and settle more slowly. Our prefrontal cortex -- that wise part of the mind that keeps perspective -- sometimes lags behind the emotional surge.

So, I've worked to help my brain help me: I take medication that steadies the system. I protect my sleep. I exercise regularly to move the agitation out of my body. I meditate daily to remember that emotions pass -- that I have anger, but I am not anger.

Therapies like CBT, DBT, and mindfulness practices offer more tools, but the most important shift came from understanding that this isn't about weakness or willpower. It's about wiring -- and learning how to live with that wiring skillfully.

The lesson, perhaps, is this: the earlier we can name and address emotional dysregulation, the better. Because every time we rehearse anger, we deepen its grooves in the brain. Patterns become habits; habits become traits. Change gets harder -- but not impossible.

And to those who love someone who struggles this way, I offer this small plea: extend grace. Not indulgence, not excuses -- but understanding. When we replace shame with insight, something softens. The storm may still come, but with compassion — both for ourselves and for one another — we learn how to weather it differently.