

FAIRY GODMOTHER

Strong Hearts™

Emotional Strength & Healthy Relationships for Men

Being emotionally strong doesn't mean feeling less. It means knowing what to do with what you feel.

Printed workbook · 12 sessions

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This workbook is educational material for personal reflection. It is not therapy, diagnosis or medical treatment. If you are in crisis or at risk of harm, contact your local emergency services, Samaritans (UK) 116 123, or SNS 24 (Portugal) 808 24 24 24.

Strength was explained to you wrong

Capacity, not absence

Most men are taught that strength is the absence of feeling. Don't show it, don't discuss it, handle it. That instruction works for about a decade and then quietly starts costing you: sleep, patience, closeness, sometimes a relationship you actually wanted.

Here is a more accurate definition. Emotional strength is capacity — the amount of feeling you can hold without it turning into damage. A man with high capacity still feels rejection, grief, jealousy and fear. He just isn't run by them. Nothing in this programme asks you to feel less. It teaches you what to do with what you already feel.

The reason this matters practically is that suppressed emotion doesn't disappear; it changes address. It leaves the conversation and shows up as a short temper in the car, a wall at the dinner table, a third drink, a body that aches for no reason a doctor can find. You are not avoiding the feeling. You are paying for it later, with interest, and usually in front of people you love.

There is one non-negotiable in this programme, stated at the start so it is never ambiguous. Violence, threats, intimidation and coercion are not emotional overflow and are never framed here as losing control. They are choices, they are your responsibility, and no amount of pain makes them acceptable. If that is happening, the work is not this course alone — get professional support, and if anyone is at risk, act on that today.

Everything else is learnable. You learned to weld, to drive, to do your job; nobody expected you to arrive knowing. This is the same. It is a skill set with a vocabulary, and you start where everyone starts: not knowing the words yet.

PRACTICE

Write the definition of 'being a strong man' you absorbed growing up, and who taught it to you. Then write, in one line, what it has cost you.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Where in my life am I paying later for something I refused to feel now?"

CARRY THIS

Strength is what I can carry, not what I refuse to feel.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Naming what is actually happening

Three words instead of one

Most men have three settings: fine, stressed, angry. That isn't a character flaw, it's a vocabulary problem — and vocabulary is trainable. Research on naming emotion is unusually consistent: putting an accurate word to a feeling measurably reduces its intensity. Not because naming is soft, but because it moves the experience from the part of the brain that reacts to the part that plans.

'Stressed' is almost always a cover word. Underneath it is usually one of six: hurt, afraid, ashamed, lonely, powerless, or genuinely angry. Notice that anger sits at the end of that list, because anger is frequently the second emotion — the armour that arrives about a second after something more exposed.

The practical drill is small. Three times a day, stop for twenty seconds and answer two questions: what is the feeling, and where is it in my body? Jaw, chest, stomach, shoulders, throat. The body reports before the mind admits, so the physical location is often the fastest route to an accurate word.

Precision matters. 'I'm annoyed' and 'I feel disrespected in front of my kids' produce completely different conversations. The first invites an argument, the second invites a response. You are not being asked to overshare. You are being asked to be accurate — which is, in fact, the more masculine skill.

Expect this to feel awkward for two weeks. Everything unfamiliar does. The measure of progress is not that you feel calmer immediately; it is that the gap between something happening and you knowing what it is starts to shrink.

PRACTICE

Do the twenty-second check three times today. Write the six entries: feeling word + body location.

JOURNAL PROMPT

“Which word do I use to avoid a more accurate one?”

CARRY THIS

If I can name it, I don't have to be run by it.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Rejection, heartbreak and the hit to identity

Why it hurts more than it 'should'

When a relationship ends, men are often told to be surprised by their own reaction. You weren't the one crying at the wedding, so why is this flattening you six weeks later? Because heartbreak is not only the loss of a person. It is the loss of a role, a routine, a home, a future you had already half-built in your head, and — for many men — the loss of the only person you spoke to honestly.

That last one is the hidden multiplier. Many men run their entire emotional life through one relationship. When it ends, you don't just lose your partner; you lose your only outlet, at exactly the moment you need one most. This is why male grief so often looks like isolation and overwork rather than sadness.

Rejection also lands on identity rather than event. 'She left' becomes 'I am the kind of man who gets left.' That translation is automatic and false. A relationship ending is information about fit, timing and two people's capacity — it is not a verdict on your worth. Read it as data, not as sentence.

There is also a physical layer worth knowing: disrupted sleep, appetite changes, a genuinely worse immune response, a mind that keeps rehearsing the same three conversations. None of that means you are weak or unstable. It means your nervous system has registered a significant loss and is doing what nervous systems do.

The task in this phase is not to get over it faster. It is to stop making it worse — through isolation, alcohol, revenge contact, or a rushed replacement relationship. Grief that is allowed to happen finishes. Grief that is suppressed just gets postponed, and it never arrives at a convenient time.

PRACTICE

List everything you lost besides the person: routine, home, friendships, role, future plans. Grief makes more sense once the list is visible.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Who do I speak honestly to, apart from a partner?"

CARRY THIS

It ended. That is information about fit, not a verdict on me.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Loneliness, pride and the ask

Rebuilding a support base

Male loneliness is rarely a shortage of people. It is a shortage of conversations. You can have a full contact list, a busy job and a five-a-side team, and still not have said a true sentence about your life in two years. Company is not the same as connection, and banter is not the same as being known.

Two beliefs keep this in place. First, that talking about difficulty burdens people — when in reality the men you'd tell are almost always relieved, because they are carrying the same silence. Second, that a problem should only be shared once solved, which means it can only be shared when it no longer matters.

Rebuilding a base is a numbers exercise, not a personality change. You need roughly three people: one who has known you a long time, one who is in a similar situation now, and one who is entirely outside the situation. They do not need to be your best friend. They need to be reachable.

The ask itself can be small and unembarrassing. 'Rough month, fancy a walk Saturday?' does the whole job. You are not asking them to counsel you; you are opening a door. Most men need one honest sentence to be said first before they'll say theirs — be the one who says it, and you will be surprised what comes back.

One caution: alcohol is the most common substitute for this conversation, and it is a poor one. It gives you the disclosure without the memory, the relief without the repair, and it deepens low mood over the following days. If drinking is how you access your feelings, that is worth naming honestly here — and worth speaking to a professional about if it's frequent.

PRACTICE

Name your three people. Message one of them today with a real sentence, not a joke.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What would I have to admit for someone to actually know how I am?"

CARRY THIS

Asking is not weakness. It is maintenance.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Regulation before conversation

The body first, always

You cannot have a useful conversation while your body is in threat mode. Once your heart rate goes past roughly 100 beats per minute in conflict, your capacity for listening, nuance and memory drops sharply. You will hear the tone and miss the content, and you will say the sentence you spend the next week regretting. This is physiology, not weakness — and it is manageable.

Learn your early signs, because they arrive before you feel angry: heat in the face or chest, jaw tightening, shoulders rising, shallow breathing, tunnel vision, the urge to talk over someone. That window between the first sign and the first word is where all the power in this programme lives.

Three tools, in order. Breathing: out for longer than in, six seconds out, four in, for two minutes — the long exhale is the part that actually shifts the nervous system. Grounding: name five things you can see, feel your feet on the floor, hold something cold. Movement: walk, hard, for twenty minutes; adrenaline is a chemical and it needs somewhere to go.

Then the timeout, done properly, because a badly-done timeout is just walking out. It has four parts: say you need it ('I need twenty minutes, I'm not walking away from this'), give a time, actually leave the room, and come back at the time you said. Coming back is the part that makes it trustworthy rather than abandonment.

During the break, do not rehearse your case. Rehearsing is why men come back angrier than they left. Regulate first — walk, breathe, physically discharge — and only then think about what you want to say. The goal of the break is not to build a better argument. It is to return as someone who can hear one.

PRACTICE

Write your three earliest physical warning signs, and the exact sentence you will use to ask for a timeout.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What does my body do in the sixty seconds before I lose my temper?"

CARRY THIS

Calm the body, then have the conversation.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Anger, and what sits underneath it

A signal, not a strategy

Anger is a legitimate emotion and often an accurate one: it usually means a boundary has been crossed, something matters, or you feel disrespected. The problem is almost never that men feel anger. It is that anger is frequently the only emotion given permission, so everything gets converted into it — hurt, fear, shame, helplessness, grief.

So run the check underneath. When anger arrives, ask what was there half a second earlier. Nine times out of ten the honest answer is one of four: I felt humiliated, I felt afraid of losing something, I felt powerless, or I felt not good enough. Say that sentence internally before you speak, and the conversation you were about to have changes completely.

Be clear about the categories. Feeling angry is normal. Expressing anger — 'I'm angry about this, here's why' — is healthy and necessary. Aggression is different: raised voice used to dominate, insults, punching walls, driving fast, standing over someone, silence used as punishment. Those are not expressions of feeling; they are tactics that produce fear, and fear kills intimacy permanently.

State it plainly because this is the line the whole programme is built on: violence, threats, intimidation and coercive control are choices, not overflow. They are never justified by provocation, alcohol or a bad day, and 'I lost control' is a description that doesn't survive scrutiny — men who 'lose control' at home rarely do it in front of a police officer. If this is present in your relationship, get specialist help now. In an emergency call 112 in Portugal or 999 in the UK. In the UK, the Respect Phoneline (0808 802 4040) supports men who want to stop being abusive; in Portugal, the APAV line is 116 006.

For everyday anger, the useful goal is a longer fuse and a shorter fire: notice earlier, discharge physically, name the feeling underneath, then speak. Anger handled this way becomes what it was designed to be — information about what matters to you — instead of the thing your family organises itself around.

PRACTICE

Take your last three flashes of anger and write the feeling that was underneath each one, in one word.

JOURNAL PROMPT

“What does my anger usually protect me from admitting?”

CARRY THIS

Anger tells me something matters. It does not tell me what to do.

Jealousy, insecurity and control

The fear behind the checking

Jealousy is fear wearing a suspicious face. Underneath almost every jealous thought is a simpler sentence: I am afraid of being replaced, or I don't believe I'm enough to keep her. That fear is human and common. What matters is what you do with it in the following ten minutes.

There are two roads. The first is disclosure: 'I noticed I felt insecure when that happened — I'm telling you rather than acting on it.' It is uncomfortable and it works, because it invites reassurance and keeps you an adult in the exchange. The second is surveillance: checking the phone, questioning the outfit, tracking location, interrogating a text, sulking to extract proof. That road feels like relief for an hour and costs the relationship over months.

Understand the mechanism, because it is what makes surveillance so hard to stop: every check gives a small hit of relief, which trains you to check again, and reassurance obtained by pressure never satisfies — you always need the next one. Meanwhile she learns that honesty produces an interrogation, so she starts telling you less, which produces more suspicion. That loop ends relationships that had no other problem.

It also has a boundary. Monitoring someone's phone or location, deciding who she can see, controlling money or clothing, or making her manage your emotions to stay safe is not intense love — it is coercive control, and in the UK it is a criminal offence. If you recognise yourself here, the honest and genuinely strong move is specialist support, not another promise.

The repair work is mostly internal: build a life with enough in it — friends, purpose, fitness, work you respect — that your entire sense of worth is not held by one person's attention. And practise the disclosure sentence. Saying 'that made me feel insecure' out loud, without demanding anything, is one of the most difficult and most attractive things a man can do.

PRACTICE

Write the last time jealousy showed up, what you did, and what the disclosure version would have sounded like.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What am I afraid would be true about me if she left?"

CARRY THIS

I can say I feel insecure without asking her to prove anything.

Conflict, repair and the apology that works

Repair beats being right

Couples who last are not the ones who argue least. They are the ones who repair fastest. Repair is a skill, and most men were shown two options — win the argument, or go silent for three days — neither of which repairs anything.

Start with how you open, because the first minute of a conflict predicts most of it. 'You always...' guarantees defence. 'When X happened, I felt Y, and what I'd like is Z' gets you an actual answer. Complain about the event, never about the character; the moment it becomes 'you're selfish' rather than 'that felt one-sided', you are no longer solving anything.

Then listen properly, which means one thing: summarise her point accurately enough that she agrees you got it, before you say a single word of your own. You are not conceding. You are proving you were listening, which removes the reason to keep escalating. Most arguments continue only because neither person believes they've been heard yet.

Watch the four behaviours that predict breakdown: contempt (mockery, eye-rolling, sneering — the most damaging of the four), criticism of character, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Stonewalling is the male speciality: shutting down, going flat, refusing to engage. It usually comes from being flooded, not from indifference — which is exactly why the timeout from Session 5 matters. Say 'I'm overloaded, twenty minutes,' rather than disappearing behind a wall.

A real apology has four parts and no fifth: name the specific thing you did, acknowledge the impact on her, say what you'll do differently, and change the behaviour. What kills it is the word 'but' — 'I'm sorry, but you' erases everything preceding it. And an apology without changed behaviour isn't an apology; it's a request to stop discussing it.

PRACTICE

Rewrite your last argument opener as 'When X, I felt Y, and I'd like Z'. Then write a four-part apology for something still unrepaired.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Do I want to be right, or do I want this to be repaired?"

CARRY THIS

Repair is the skill. Winning is not.

Masculinity you actually chose

Values over inherited script

Most men run a script they never wrote. Provide, don't complain, don't need anything, be useful, be unbothered. It was assembled from a father, a schoolyard, a workplace and a decade of films, and almost none of it was ever examined as a choice.

Some of it is worth keeping. Reliability, protectiveness, physical courage, the willingness to carry weight for other people — these are genuinely good and this programme is not interested in stripping them from you. What needs revising are the clauses that cost you: never show uncertainty, handle everything alone, contempt for men who struggle, worth measured only by earnings or usefulness.

The test of a value is simple: does it hold up when it's expensive? Anyone can be honest when it's convenient. Character is what your values do on a bad day, when nobody's watching, when it would be easier to lie, drink, or go cold on someone.

There is a version of male strength that has nothing to do with dominance: a man whose word means something, who can hear criticism without collapsing or attacking, who apologises without theatre, who protects people who have less power, who is steady when things are bad. That is not softness. It is the harder version, and everyone around such a man can feel the difference within a week.

So write your own. Three to five values, stated as behaviour rather than adjectives — 'I say the difficult thing kindly and early' beats 'honest'. Then look at your last month and ask honestly where you lived them and where you didn't. That gap, not a personality overhaul, is the work.

PRACTICE

Write three to five values as behaviours. Mark each one: lived it this month, or didn't.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Which rule about being a man did I inherit rather than choose?"

CARRY THIS

My word, on a bad day, is who I actually am.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Fatherhood and being the steady one

What children copy

Children do not learn emotional regulation from what you say about it. They learn it from watching how you handle a bad day, a broken plan, a driver who cuts you off, and an argument with their mother. Whatever you do repeatedly in front of them becomes their internal default, whether you intended to teach it or not.

That sounds like pressure, but it comes with relief attached: you do not have to be calm all the time. What children need is not a father who never gets it wrong; it's a father who gets it wrong and then repairs. 'I was short with you earlier, that was about my day, not about you, I'm sorry' teaches more emotional intelligence than a hundred calm evenings — because it shows that mistakes are survivable and repair is normal.

With sons, notice what you laugh at and what you dismiss. If 'don't cry' and 'man up' are the reflexes, you are handing over the same silence that brought you here. With daughters, notice that how you speak to their mother sets the standard for what they will later accept as normal treatment. Neither of these is about being permissive; boundaries and consequences still matter enormously.

If you are separated, hold one line above all: never use the children as messengers, weapons or witnesses. Say nothing negative about their mother in front of them, even when it's accurate and even when it's tempting — children experience criticism of a parent as criticism of half of themselves. Keep your logistics adult and boring: a shared calendar, brief factual messages, no relitigating the relationship through the arrangements.

And presence beats intensity. Reliable small time — the school run, Saturday morning, twenty minutes at bedtime with the phone in another room — builds far more security than an expensive day out once a month. Being predictable is a gift most men underestimate.

PRACTICE

Write one emotional habit you'd hate your child to copy, and the specific repair sentence you'll use next time it slips out.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What is my child learning about emotion from watching me this month?"

CARRY THIS

They copy what I do with feeling, not what I say about it.

Repair or move on

A decision framework

Some relationships should be repaired and some should end, and staying stuck between those two for years does more damage than either. What follows is a framework, not a verdict — the answer is yours, and it should be made with a regulated nervous system, not at midnight after an argument.

Four questions decide most of it. One: is there safety? If there is violence, threat, intimidation or coercive control in either direction, safety comes first and the rest of the framework is irrelevant until it is addressed. Two: is there willingness? Not perfection — willingness. Two people trying imperfectly can rebuild almost anything; one person trying alone cannot, no matter how hard they try.

Three: is there respect? Contempt is the strongest predictor of relationship breakdown there is. Affection can be rebuilt, routine can be rebuilt, even trust after betrayal can sometimes be rebuilt — but a relationship where one person fundamentally looks down on the other rarely recovers. Four: is there a version of this that you would genuinely want in five years, if both of you did the work? If the honest answer is no even in the best case, you have your answer.

If you're staying, stay properly: a specific behaviour each of you changes, a way to raise problems early, and a review date. 'We'll try harder' is not a plan and will collapse within a month. If you're leaving, leave cleanly: say it directly, don't stage it through months of coldness, and don't leave a door ajar because you're afraid of the silence.

One warning specific to men: the rebound. The temptation after separation is to find someone quickly because the loneliness is unbearable and because a new relationship briefly makes you feel competent again. It postpones the grief rather than resolving it, and the person you choose from that state is chosen by your panic, not your judgement. Give it time. You will pick differently.

PRACTICE

Answer the four questions in writing — safety, willingness, respect, five-year version — with one honest sentence each.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Am I staying because I want this, or because I'm afraid of the alternative?"

CARRY THIS

I can decide from a calm state, not from a bad night.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Your maintenance plan

Keeping this after the course

Skills without maintenance decay, and emotional skills decay fastest, because the old defaults are decades deep and they wait patiently for a stressful month. So this final session is not a summary. It's a plan you'll actually run.

Keep four things weekly. A twenty-second emotional check, three times a day. One honest conversation with another man. Physical discharge — training, walking, whatever moves adrenaline out of the body. And one repair: anything left unsaid or unapologised for that week, closed before the weekend.

Know your warning lights, because relapse announces itself before it arrives: sleep going, drinking creeping up, cancelling on friends, short with the people at home, phone-checking, that flat grey feeling where nothing is exactly wrong. Two of those at once means intervene now — call someone, train, book the appointment — not in a fortnight when it's harder.

Be honest about the limits of a course. This is education, not therapy or medical treatment. If you have persistent low mood, thoughts of harming yourself, trauma that intrudes, or a drinking pattern you can't move, speak to a GP or a professional — that is the same category of sensible as seeing a physio for a torn muscle. In a crisis: 112 in Portugal, 999 in the UK; Samaritans on 116 123 in the UK; SOS Voz Amiga on 213 544 545 in Portugal.

And measure this the right way. You will still feel rejection, jealousy, grief and anger; that was never what we were removing. What should change is the gap — between the feeling arriving and you knowing what it is, between the trigger and the reaction, between the rupture and the repair. Shorter gaps, every month. That's the whole job, and it's the version of strength worth having.

PRACTICE

Write your weekly plan (four items), your three warning lights, and the two people you will contact when two of them appear.

JOURNAL PROMPT

“What is my earliest warning light, and what will I do the day I see it?”

CARRY THIS

Shorter gap between feeling it and knowing what to do.

YOUR WRITING SPACE
