

What are some common early warning signs?

Some early warning signs are quite common. Others are more unusual. The following chart lists some examples of the more common early warning signs. Please check off the examples that reflect an experience you have had.

Examples of Common Early Warning Signs

Early warning sign	Individual Example	I experienced something like this
Feeling tense or nervous	“Even going to the playground with my kids made me nervous. It seemed like the merry-go-round was going faster and that there were accidents waiting to happen everywhere.”	
Eating less or eating more	“First I started skipping breakfast. Then I started skipping lunch. I lost weight even though I wasn’t trying.”	
Decreased need for sleep	“When I started to relapse, I didn’t feel like I needed sleep. I would start working on my inventions and stay up all night.”	
Trouble sleeping too much or too little	“I was tired and wanted badly to sleep. But somehow I couldn’t fall asleep. I was exhausted all the time.”	
Feeling depressed or low	“I started to feel that my work wasn’t any good. And that I wasn’t a good person. I couldn’t take pleasure in anything. My mood was sliding down and down.”	
Social withdrawal	“I only wanted to be alone. I even waited to eat dinner until my roommates had gone to bed.”	
Feeling irritable	“Even the smallest things would irritate me. For instance, I would fly off the handle if my husband called to say he was going to be 15 minutes late. I had no patience.”	

Stopping medication	"I stopped taking my medicine. I even threw away the bottles. I stopped going to my support group."	
Trouble concentrating	"Knitting usually relaxes me. But I couldn't concentrate enough to do the stitches right. My mind was wandering."	
Thinking that people are against you	"It seemed like people behind the counter at the fast food restaurant were talking about me. They even seemed to be laughing at me. I couldn't understand why."	
Hearing voices	"The voice was not loud at first. Sometimes it just said my name."	
Drug or alcohol use or abuse	"Usually I don't drink. But when I was starting to relapse, I found myself pouring a drink of scotch every night. I think I was just trying to get in a better mood."	
Increased spending or shopping	"I used up my checking account and then charged two credit cards to their limits."	
Being overconfident about your abilities	"I thought I was such a great driver that the traffic laws didn't apply to me. I was stopped by the police going 30 miles over the speed limit."	
Other:		
Other:		

Common early warning signs include:

- *Feeling tense or nervous*
- *Eating less or eating more*
- *Trouble sleeping too much or too little*
- *Decreased need for sleep*
- *Feeling depressed or low*
- *Feeling like not being around people*
- *Feeling irritable*
- *Stopping treatment*
- *Trouble concentrating*
- *Thinking that people are against you*
- *Drug or alcohol use or abuse*
- *Increased spending or shopping*
- *Being overconfident about your abilities*

Question: Have you experienced any of the common early warning signs? Which ones?

What are some other early warning signs?

Some people have early warning signs that others don't have. These unique warning signs are equally important to recognize.

Some examples of unique warning signs are:

"Before my last two episodes, I cut my hair very, very short."

"My brother noticed that I was whistling all the time."

"I started buying lottery tickets two or three times a day."

"I started wearing the same clothes every day. The same khaki pants and blue T-shirt."

"I became preoccupied with martial arts. I practiced martial arts moves for hours."

Some people have early warning signs that are unique.

Questions: Have you experienced early warning signs that other people don't have? If so, what are your unique early warning signs?

Is there a systematic way to identify your own warning signs?

The following checklist contains a list of common early warning signs. Check off the early warning signs that you experienced in the week before your last relapse.

Early Signs Questionnaire
(Adapted with permission, Herz and Melville, 2001)

Early warning signs	I experienced this sign
My mood shifted back and forth.	
My energy level was high.	
My energy level was low.	
I lost interest in doing things.	
I lost interest in the way I looked or dressed.	
I felt discouraged about the future.	
I had trouble concentrating or thinking straight.	
My thoughts were so fast I couldn't keep up with them.	
I was afraid I was going crazy.	
I was puzzled or confused about what was going on around me.	
I felt distant from my family and friends.	
I had the feeling that I didn't fit in.	
Religion became more meaningful to me than before.	
I felt afraid that something bad was about to happen.	
I felt that other people had difficulty understanding what I was saying.	
I felt lonely.	
I was bothered by thoughts I couldn't get rid of.	

I felt overwhelmed by demands or felt that too much was being asked of me.	
I felt bored.	
I had trouble sleeping.	
I felt bad for no reason.	
I was worried that I had physical problems.	
I felt tense and nervous.	
I got angry at little things.	
I had trouble sitting still. I had to keep moving or pace up and down.	
I felt depressed and worthless.	
I had trouble remembering things.	
I was eating less than usual.	
I heard voices or saw things that others didn't hear or see.	
I thought that people were staring at me or talking about me.	
I had a decreased need for sleep.	
I was more irritable.	
I was overconfident about my abilities.	
I increased my spending or shopping.	
Other:	
Other:	

Do people always recognize that they are experiencing early warning signs?

People are not always aware when their behavior has changed and they are experiencing an early warning sign of relapse. For example, someone might not realize that he or she is feeling unusually irritable. Instead, it may seem to him or her that other people are being especially annoying.

Friends, family members, co-workers, healthcare practitioners and other supportive people often notice when someone seems different or is acting out of character. They can be helpful allies in recognizing early warning signs.

If you ask them, your family members, friends and mental health practitioners can be your “extra eyes and ears” for noticing early warning signs. You can tell them some possible early warning signs to look for, and let them know that you would like them to inform you when they notice these signs. You can also include them in your “relapse prevention plan” to help you take action to keep early warning signs from becoming relapses.

Family members, friends, mental health practitioners and other supporters can help you recognize early warning signs.

Question: Whom would you like to help you recognize early warning signs?
You can use the following chart to record your answer.

**People Who Could Help Me
Recognize Early Warning Signs**

Friends?
Family members?
Support group members?
Practitioners?
Co-workers?
Spouse or significant other?
Others?

What can be done when you become aware that you are experiencing an early warning sign of relapse?

The more quickly you act on early warning signs, the more likely it is that you can avoid a full relapse.

When early warning signs are noted, it helps to ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my stress level high? What can I do to reduce it?
- Am I taking part in the treatments I chose? Am I going to my support group, doing my relaxation exercises, going to my appointments with my counselor, etc.?
- If medication is part of my treatment, am I taking my medication as prescribed? If not, how can I make sure I do?
- Should I arrange a special appointment to talk to the doctor? Do I need to start a medication? Do I need a higher dose of the medication I am taking?
- Should I contact someone for extra support?

The following list contains examples of what other people have done when they recognized they were experiencing early warning signs. Some examples may sound familiar to you.

- “When I started to feel so irritable with everyone, even my best friend, I realized that I was under a lot of stress with changes at the office. I talked with my practitioner about strategies for coping with the stress better so it didn’t affect me so much.”

- “First someone called from my synagogue, asking why I hadn’t been coming to services like I used to. Then someone from my support group called and asked why I hadn’t been coming for the past three weeks. I realized that something might be wrong. I decided to go to the next support group, and asked a friend to give me a ride.”
- “I thought my medicine wasn’t helping me. So I didn’t renew the prescription when it ran out. My thinking got very confused. I kept forgetting things, too. I called the pharmacist about getting the medicine renewed, and then I called the doctor to talk about what had happened.”
- “My brother noticed empty beer bottles in the kitchen when he came to visit. When we got to talking, I realized that I was starting to use alcohol to help me fall asleep. The next day I called my counselor.”

The more quickly you act on early warning signs, the more likely you can avoid a full relapse.

Question: Have you had an experience where you were able to avoid early warning signs from becoming full relapses? If so, what did you do?