

Warning Signs List

Before we dive into the problem-solving worksheets, let's talk about some warning signs that might indicate a more serious issue than you or the first responder realized. This can also serve as a training handout for discussions on when to seek mental health help.

Think about warning signs as a check engine light. Everyone throws different codes, but there is definitely something wrong. Just like a car, if you ignore it, you may be able to limp it along for years, or you might have a breakdown tomorrow. None the less, when it breaks, you are going to really wish you took the light more seriously, because what was a small fix then, is now a much bigger one.

Here are some warning signs that maybe you need to check in with someone:

Low Energy or Mood for Extended Periods:

- You find yourself coming home and just wanting to sleep or sleeping too much, even though you know you have things to do.
- You don't feel like doing the things you usually enjoy.
- Getting tasks done feels like it requires three times the effort.
- You engage in risky or thrill-seeking behaviors just to feel something.

A Constant "Hum" of Anxiety:

- You find yourself worrying about something going wrong all the time
 - This MAY be appropriate at work, but it shows up everywhere
- You can't sleep at night because your mind is racing, despite being exhausted.
- You feel tension in your body—like TMJ, GI distress, shoulder pain, or chronic headaches—without any medical explanation.
- You feel wired or on edge even when you're not at work.
- You might overwork yourself to keep your mind busy.

Substance Use or Abuse:

- You're drinking more than you'd admit to your boss or doctor.
- You drink to help yourself fall asleep.
- You're using illegal substances, putting your job at risk.
- You feel like you need substances to feel "normal."

Feeling Detached from Loved Ones:

- You avoid spending time with family, even though you want to connect.
- You feel like your problems or trauma would disturb the happiness of your family.
- You might think they'd be better off without you.
- You frequently lash out or feel the urge to escape when you're frustrated.
- You overwork to avoid going home.

Intrusive Thoughts or Memories:

- You find yourself frequently remembering bad calls that stick in your mind.
- Nightmares about difficult calls or flashbacks can become commonplace.
- You might catastrophically plan for unlikely scenarios.
- You could see family members in your mind being harmed in ways you've witnessed at work.
- Feelings of panic in crowded or unfamiliar places may arise, along with a desire to stay home when not at work.
- Hyper vigilance can set in, where you're constantly checking for security even after you've already secured your home.

Dissociation:

Note- feeling a little "in the zone", "autopilot", and "doing the job without feeling" is not necessarily a symptom when at a scene, since it is part of your training. If it shows up in other areas of your life, then we have a problem.

- You might feel disconnected, going through the motions but not really being present.
- It can feel like you're watching yourself from the outside.
- You might lose track of time or forget things you've said or done.
- Constant "zoning out" can become common, making it hard to feel like what you've said or done is really you.

Suicidal Ideation:

- You find yourself thinking about "not being around," or feeling like "the world would be better off without me."
- You might have active thoughts of suicide.
- Volunteering for risky situations could be a sign.
- Daydreaming about dying heroically during a work call can indicate deeper issues.

Addressing Anxiety- Box Breathing Exercise

Instructions: While doing this exercise, try to breathe deeply into your belly. If you notice only your chest rises, work on your breathing to see if you can breathe deeply and see movement in the abdomen. You may choose 4 or 5 seconds for the exercise, based on preference.

Steps:

- 1. Inhale:** Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose for 4-5 seconds, allowing the belly to expand.
- 2. Hold:** Hold the breath for 4-5 seconds.
- 3. Exhale:** Release the breath slowly through your mouth for 4-5 seconds, allowing all the air out of your lungs.
- 4. Pause:** Hold your breath for 4-5 seconds at the bottom of your exhale.
- 5. Repeat:** Repeat the cycle as many times as necessary to achieve regulated breathing and improved relaxation.

One of my favorites is progressive muscle relaxation, where we combine the breathing exercise with tightening and relaxing of the muscles, which achieves a more whole-body relaxation. This exercise is great for when the body feels tight and tense, after a nightmare, and can even be done when at work and we notice ourselves getting dysregulated.

Addressing Anxiety - Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise

Instructions: Start with getting some good diaphragmatic breathing, expanding the abdomen in the slow inhale through your nose, and releasing all of the air in a slow exhale through your mouth. Do this a few times to get the feel.

Steps:

1. Feet:

- Take a deep breath in, ball your feet, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

2. Calves:

- Take a deep breath in, clench your calves, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

3. Upper Legs:

- Take a deep breath in, clench your upper legs, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

4. **Glutes:**

- Take a deep breath in, clench your glutes, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

5. **Abdomen:**

- Take a deep breath in, clench your abs, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

6. **Chest and Shoulders:**

- Take a deep breath in, clench your chest and shoulders, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

7. **Arms and Hands:**

- Take a deep breath in, clench your arms and ball your fists, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

8. **Face and Head:**

- Take a deep breath in, squinch your face and clench your jaw, clenching the muscles and holding your breath.
- After 4 seconds, slowly release your breath and relax your muscles. Imagine the tension from that area being blown away with your exhale.

Conclusion: Continue to breathe until you have blown any residual tension from your body. Allow yourself as much time as needed to recenter before continuing with your day.

You can find videos of these exercises on-line. I recommend practicing so you can walk someone through it real time and have a video saved on your phone that you can share quickly. I am also a big advocate of yoga. There are many different types, and you can find some good, short, restorative yoga scripts on-line as well. It can help with the mind-body connection.

Grounding

Sometimes it is the mind that is feeling out of our control, or disconnected. After a bad situation, many people get the "1000 yard stare". Basically, they are a little checked out because the situation is pretty intense. Sometimes we can get so lost in our thoughts and overwhelming feelings that we feel disconnected from this moment, right now. Sometimes just simply bringing myself back to this present moment, reminding myself of the here and now, can help me refocus and gain control of my thoughts and feelings.

Addressing Anxiety - 5 Sensations Grounding Technique

Instructions: At a basic level, you can simply observe the items. A more advanced process would involve interacting with each item listed.

1. Sight:

- **Basic:** What are 5 things you can see?
- **Advanced:** Describe 5 things you can see.

2. Feel:

- **Basic:** What are 4 things you can feel?
- **Advanced:** Describe the sensation of the 4 things you can feel (you can intentionally touch something to describe a tactile experience).

3. Sounds:

- **Basic:** What are 3 things you can hear?
- **Advanced:** Describe 3 sounds you hear.

4. Smell:

- **Basic:** What are 2 things you can smell?
- **Advanced:** Find 2 things that have a smell, take in the scent of each one individually and describe them.

5. Taste:

- **Basic:** What is one thing you can taste?
- **Advanced:** Describe one thing you can taste or you may grab a piece of gum or a drink and notice the taste sensation.

Addressing Depression- Gratitude/Positive Thought Journal

It is common for people to notice all the bad things in their lives, the problems that show up, and generally what is going wrong. The issue is that we tend to put more weight and importance on noticing the bad things over the good things. Think about it. When you spill your coffee in the car, it feels like a massively stressful life event. However, when your partner goes to the trouble to make your coffee for you just the way you like it, you don't think about it longer than to say thank you. At the end of the day, if you are trained to notice the problems in life, your day review would be pretty bleak.

The intentional process of being grateful can increase positive emotion, reduce cortisol, and improve social relationships.

Instructions:

1. Set a Daily Time:

- Dedicate a specific time each day to write in your gratitude journal, ideally in the morning or before bed.
- You can use a notebook, digital document, or a dedicated app for this purpose.

2. List 3 Things You're Grateful For:

- Write down at least three things you are grateful for today. They can be big or small.
- For example:
 1. "I am grateful for the support of my friends."
 2. "I am grateful for the sunshine this morning."
 3. "I am grateful for a moment of peace during a busy day."

3. Reflect on Why or How:

After each item, write why you are grateful for it. Reflect on the feelings it brings up and how it positively impacts your life. Consider how this good thing came about and if you can repeat it.

- Example: "I'm grateful for my morning coffee because it helps me feel energized and ready for the day."
- Example: "I'm for my spouse taking the kids to school. It allowed me more time to prepare for my early meeting. I could ask in the future when I know I need to work early so I don't feel rushed."

4. Observe Your Feelings:

Notice how you feel as you write. Do you feel more positive? Calm? Appreciative? This can help reinforce the benefits of the practice.