

Key Points about Red and Green Flags

☞ **Red flags are messages of distress.** Just as a fever is a sign that you must rest your body, the red flags are signs that you are in emotional distress. With PTSD and substance abuse, the tendency is to push them out of mind, unconscious, not seeing the signs as they occur. But it is essential to notice the red flags and to validate that they are there for a reason; they are not signs of weakness or failure, but messages to attend to yourself.

☞ **Remember "budding."** Some people are helped by the acronym "BUD"—"Building Up to Drinking." You could also use "Building Up to Danger." The list of red flags in Handouts 1 and 2 can be a sign that you are gearing up to act destructively. There is a window of opportunity during which you can stop yourself from sliding downhill if you can see the warning signs and actively try to cope with them. Thus dangerous times in both PTSD and substance abuse are not all-or-none events, but rather gradual buildups that allow time to save yourself.

☞ **Help from others is essential as danger escalates.** As red flags increase, the need to reach out for help from safe people increases too. One of the most difficult aspects of PTSD and substance abuse is isolation. As symptoms increase, the tendency is to hide away. That's why it is necessary to plan in advance whom you will call and to prepare that person for how to help you through a dangerous time. Rehearse what you will say to each other.

☞ **Listen to the "whispers" before they become "screams."** A safety plan identifies your warning signs and ways to respond to them. The safety plan in Handout 2 has three levels so that you can attend to mild danger signs (level 1) before they become an emergency (level 3). The earlier in the process you take action, the better.

☞ **As danger increases, so does acting out rather than talking.** Notice that many of the danger signs are behaviors. As distress increases, it is essential to keep talking about your feelings; otherwise you'll likely find yourself "acting them out" in your behavior. Think of a small child who feels hurt and starts punching a wall. When the child cannot express the feelings directly, they get acted out.

☞ **Most substance abuse relapses occur within 90 days of abstinence.** Research shows the first 90 days to be a vulnerable time, across various substances of abuse (heroin, smoking, alcohol). Thus knowing your danger signs is especially important in early recovery.

☞ **Notice spiraling.** In recovery, there is a process of "spiraling" or "snowballing" that can occur in both positive and negative directions. A downward spiral occurs when symptoms start to pick up speed and get worse and worse, often rapidly. An upward spiral occurs when your recovery efforts are so persistent that good things begin to happen. For example, you get a job, and are therefore able to get an apartment in a safer area, where you can make friends with healthier people, and so on . . .

Acknowledgments: The concept of relapse warning signs is described in detail in Marlatt and Gordon (1985). The term "red flag" is from Trotter (1992). The safety plan (Handout 2) is derived from a form used in the McLean Hospital Women's Day Treatment Program, author unknown. Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate any of these sources.

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