

Early Warning Signs

What are Early Warning Signs?

Some people who experience an episode of mental illness may fully recover and never have any further episodes. However, a large number of people will experience another or a number of episodes of mental illness during their lifetime. These are commonly known as relapses.

A relapse is the worsening or return of specific symptoms of the illness. Depending on the severity of the relapse, the person may require hospitalisation, changes to medication, & further monitoring & community support. It is important to note that the experience of persistent symptoms (that continue despite stabilisation of the illness) is not a relapse, but rather an indication of symptoms that are treatment resistant. However, a worsening of these treatment resistant symptoms, or the return of previously ceased symptoms, is likely to indicate a potential relapse.

Prior to a relapse, people will often experience changes in their feelings, thoughts & behaviours that indicate an increase in illness symptoms & decline in mental health. These changes are referred to as early warning signs, and while similarities do exist, are still often specific and unique to the individual. For this reason, they are sometimes also referred to as 'relapse signatures'. Studies indicate that between 50% to 70% of people experience early warning signs over a period of one to four weeks prior to a relapse.

It is important to know that sometimes, early warning signs may indicate the individual is responding to/ effected by something stressful. The changes do not necessarily mean the person is becoming unwell, but if unaddressed, could increase stress levels to a point where they may become more susceptible to a relapse. Therefore, recognising & responding to changes in stress levels is an essential component of relapse prevention.

Why learn about Early Warning Signs?

Identifying early warning signs as quickly as possible means an individual can take positive action & seek help early to minimise or possibly prevent the impact of a relapse on their quality of life & life roles. Early intervention has been shown to reduce the severity of symptoms, shorten the duration of relapse & reduce the likelihood of further episodes. This process of acquiring knowledge and increasing understanding of mental illness & related issues is referred to as **psychoeducation**.

A clear understanding of personal early warning signs can:

- Assist a person to recognise changes in their illness as early as possible
- Enhance a person's ability to manage their illness
- Reduce the incidence of illness relapse
- Enhance the person's ability to assume a more active role in their treatment

What Can Influence Relapse?

Specific factors that effect relapse are:

Vulnerabilty Factors –

Increase the likelihood of experiencing a relapse and may include stress, non adherence to medication, use of illicit drugs and alcohol, lack of social support & poor physical health.

Protective Factors –

Reduce the likelihood of a relapse and include medication compliance, good physical health & nutrition, effective coping strategies & social support.

What Are Some Common Early Warning Signs to Look Out For?

The types of changes that may indicate early warning signs of relapse include:

Changes in feelings:

- Feeling anxious or worried
- Feeling tense or restless
- Feeling irritable or quick to become aggressive
- Feeling depressed or unhappy
- Feeling unsafe or threatened
- Feeling paranoid (thinking that others are talking about you)

Changes in thinking:

- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- Difficulty making decisions
- Thoughts racing, slowing down or jumbled/ confused
- Thinking very negative, pessimistic thoughts
- Hearing voices not coming from other people
- Thinking about harming yourself
- Dwelling on past events

Changes in behaviour:

- Isolating from others, not wanting to go outside
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Increased or decreased sleep
- Increased risk taking/ dangerous behaviour (eg – alcohol or illicit drug use)
- Increase in emotional outbursts (eg – crying, laughing or yelling)
- Reduced energy levels & motivation to participate in activities & interests
- Difficulty looking after personal appearance & living environment

What Can Help Me Identify Early Warning Signs?

- Talking to someone you trust.
This person needs to have an understanding of your illness, be prepared to tell you if they think you are becoming unwell & assist you to access further help when needed.
- Keeping record of previous episodes.
This can assist to identify previous significant events, situations & early warning signs of relapse.
- Regular self monitoring.
Monitoring of mood, events, thoughts & behaviours with the use of a journal to keep track of day to day functioning.

What to do if Early Warning Signs are Recognised

1. Talk with your health care professional – they may suggest specific strategies to employ or to make an earlier appointment with the doctor.
2. Reduce stress – try to minimise stressful events & incidents for the moment
3. Do something relaxing – take a bath, listen to relaxing music, deep breathing.
4. Distract yourself from worrying thoughts – talk to someone, watch tv, look at a magazine, go for a walk, call Lifeline or a friend.
5. Spend time with someone you trust & can talk to.
6. Try to keep to a routine of regular sleep, activity & meals.
7. Keep taking your prescribed medication.
8. Make contact your community supports for advice & encouragement.
9. Reduce vulnerability factors & increase protective factors (see page 2)
10. Action plan for next time - be prepared for future early warning signs of relapse by keeping a list of:
 - Individual early warning signs to look out for.
 - Strategies that help when you experience early warning signs. Put the list somewhere safe for future reference.

It is a good idea to discuss these lists with your health care professional or family & friends. They are likely to offer further suggestions that may be very helpful.

References

Birchwood M, Smith J Macmillan F et al. Predicting relapse in schizophrenia. The development & implementation of an early signs monitoring system using patients & families as observers, a preliminary investigation. *Psychological Medicine* 1989: vol 19: 649-656.

Fitzgerald, P. The role of early warning symptoms in the detection & prevention of relapse in schizophrenia. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2001: vol 35: 758-764.

Books

Bisbee, C (1991). *Educating patients & families about mental illness – a practical guide*. Aspen Publishers, Maryland.

Treatment Protocol Project (1997) *Management of Mental Disorders*, World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Mental Health & Substance Abuse, Sydney.

Wilson, P (1992). *Principles & practise of relapse prevention*. London: The Guilford Press.

Further Information

For more information about Early Warning Signs, speak to you treating doctor, case manager, ward nurse or other health professional involved in your care.

Phone	Mental Health Association of Qld	(07) 3358 4988
	Schizophrenia Fellowship of Southern Qld Inc	(07) 3358 4424
	Sane Australia (freecall)	1800 688 382
	Lifeline Telephone Crisis Counselling (24 hrs)	13 11 14

Websites	www.nmha.org National Mental Health Association
	www.wfmh.org World Federation for Mental Health
	www.apa.com American Psychiatric Association
	www.mental-health-matters.com Mental Health Matters
	www.mentalhelp.net Mental health information
	www.mindbodylife.com Mind Body Life Website