

Chapters of My Life

Chapter 1:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into a deep hole. I couldn't get out and I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't my fault. It took a long time to get out.

Chapter 2:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. I couldn't understand. It wasn't my fault. I really had to struggle to get out.

Chapter 3:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. This time I understood why and it was my fault. This time it was easier to get out.

Chapter 4:

I walked down the sidewalk and saw the same big hole. I walked around it. I didn't fall into that hole.

Chapter 5:

I chose another sidewalk.

—Portia Nelson
(20th-century American writer)

Signs of Danger versus Safety

Listen to the messages your behavior is sending you!

★ What are your red and green flags? Check off below:

🚩 Red Flags 🚩	🟢 Green Flags 🟢
Danger	Safety
Isolation	Spending time with supportive people.
Not taking care of my body (food, sleep)	Taking care of my body
Fights with people	Able to get along
Too much free time	Structured schedule
Destructive behavior	Behavior under control
Feel stuck	Feel I'm moving forward
Lying	Honesty
Negative feelings acted out	Negative feelings expressed in words
Canceling treatment sessions	Attending all treatment regularly
Stop taking medications as prescribed (either too much or too little)	Taking medications as prescribed
Passive ("Why bother?")	Active coping
Cynical/negative	Realistic/positive
Not fighting PTSD symptoms (e.g., dissociation, self-cutting)	Fighting PTSD symptoms (e.g., grounding, rethinking, etc.)
Not learning new coping skills	Learning new coping skills
Become physically sick	Stay physically healthy
Believe treatment is unnecessary	Believe treatment is necessary
Spend time with people who use	Spend time with "clean" people
Cannot hear feedback	Listen to feedback
Too much responsibility	Appropriate responsibility
Think people are trying to make me look and feel bad	Feel okay around people
Stop caring; stop trying	Care and try
Arrogant euphoria	Realistic concern
Absent from work or school	Attend work or school

(cont.)

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★ *What are your additional red flags?*

★ *What are your additional green flags?*

Create a Safety Plan

★ Fill in the safety plan using the following as an example:

<p>Mild Danger (starting to show distress)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating poorly • Missing occasional treatment sessions • Getting cynical and negative 	<p>What I Will Do to Stay Safe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase AA to three times a week • Tell therapist what I'm feeling • Call my friend Pat and talk with her
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🔔 <i>Red Flags</i> 🔔	🛡️ <i>Safety Plan</i> 🛡️
<p>Mild Danger (Starting to show distress)</p>	<p>What I Will Do to Stay Safe</p>
<p>Moderate Danger (Getting serious—watch out)</p>	<p>What I Will Do to Stay Safe</p>
<p>Serious Danger (Emergency!!)</p>	<p>What I Will Do to Stay Safe</p>

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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 Danger." 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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