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Mental health and substance use
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Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

tips for

preventing relapse of mental illnesses

2011 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



When you feel well, the last thing you want to think about is a relapse of a mental illness. But you can do a lot to lower the risk of relapse if you plan ahead. Try thinking of it this way: if you injure yourself, you would likely do things to prevent the injury from happening again. If you hurt your ankle running, for example, you might prevent another injury by being more mindful of where you step. Preventing a relapse of a mental illness isn't much different. In this sheet, you will learn a systematic way to monitor your well-being and take action when you need it.

A "relapse" is when troubling symptoms come back or get worse. Fortunately, you can take a lot of steps to help prevent a relapse or worsening symptoms. No one can guarantee that you'll never feel unwell again. But you can look for early warning signs, create a plan to help with difficult situations, and take steps to care for yourself. These steps may help you take action before symptoms become a major problem and help lessen the effect of symptoms on your day-to-day life.

This is based on the principles of "self-management," which means you taking charge of your health. It may sound daunting, but self-management is really about building small, practical steps into your day.

When it comes to preventing relapse, there are three big parts to self-management: identifying your warning signs, taking action, and seeking outside help when it's needed. The best time to do this is when you're well.

Before Part One: Medication management

If you take medication, it's important to follow your doctor's recommendations, even when you feel well. You may need to continue the medication for several months or longer, depending on your risk factors. Stopping medication too early is a major reason for relapse. Think of a time you've had to take antibiotics for an infection. You likely started to feel better after a few days, but you still had to take the antibiotics for one or two weeks to help stop the infection from returning. It's the same thing for mental health medications. It's also important to talk to your doctor if you want to make any changes to your medication plan, such as reducing your dose or stopping your medication. See our Module #2 on working with your doctor on a treatment plan.

Part One: Identifying early warning signs

An early warning sign is a sign that shows your health may be starting to get worse. These warning signs are the first signs to appear, before major symptoms begin to affect your life in a big way. The purpose of identifying your unique warning signs is to help you take action early.

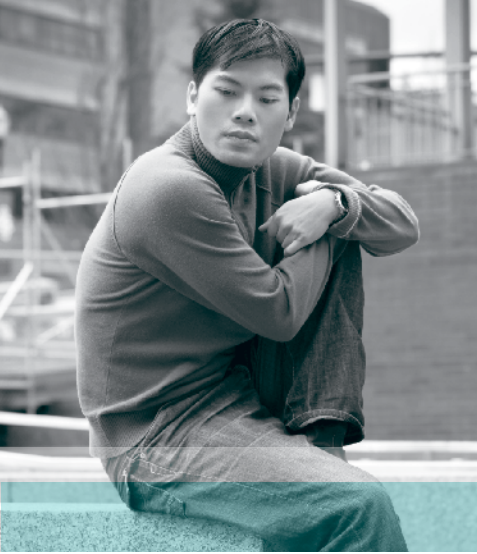
The act of identifying early warning signs can make some people nervous. After all, no one wants to remember difficult or unpleasant situations. It may be helpful to think of this exercise as an opportunity to take control of your health. When you identify your early warning signs, you give yourself the power to challenge a mental illness.

To start identifying your warning signs, you'll need to think back to times you were depressed. How did it start? How did it progress? What did you experience? What kind of thoughts did you have? Did your behaviour change? Did anything happen in a particular order? It may also be helpful to ask loved ones for their feedback—people close to us often notice changes before we see changes in ourselves.

Now that you've thought about what your warning signs look like, think about what was happening in your life when you started to notice these changes. This will help you see when and where your warning signs start to happen. For example, do warning signs seem to come up after working a lot of overtime or after a fight with loved ones? These situations are also called "triggers." While everyone will have their own triggers, there are some common triggers. Here are some examples:

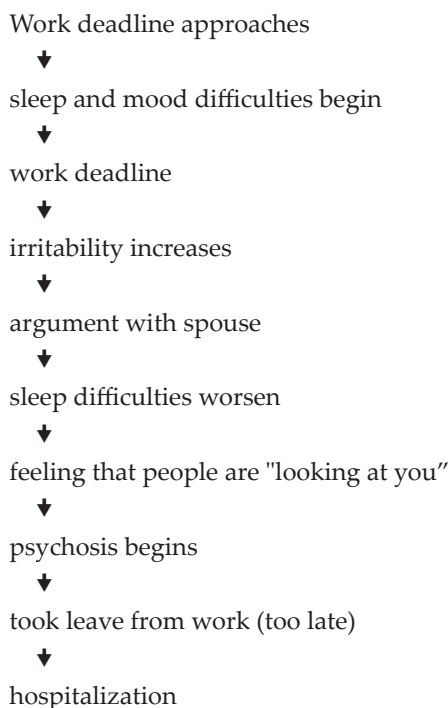
- Poor sleep or not getting enough sleep
- Loss or grief
- Conflict among loved ones
- An unpleasant event such as a perceived failure, disappointment or criticism
- Other stressful events
- Alcohol and other drug use
- Certain times (a change in the season or, if you're a woman, your reproductive cycle)
- Not following through on your treatment plan (such as not taking prescribed medications)
- Other health problems or concerns

Now that you have your early warning signs and your triggers, it's time to put everything together. Think back to your last episode of a mental illness. Can you tie your warning signs to a particular trigger? If you can, try to map out a timeline that shows your triggers and warning signs in order.



When you identify your early warning signs, you give yourself the power to challenge a mental illness.

Here's an example of a timeline:



Part Two: Taking action

Now that you've figured out what warning signs and triggers to watch for, it's time to decide how you'll take action when they come up.

This part is made up of smaller parts, but they all work together. Taking action includes:

- Building healthy coping skills
- Identifying stressful situations
- Managing stressful situations

Building healthy coping skills

A big part of coping skills is a healthy lifestyle. Healthy activities like eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and practicing relaxation exercises can have a significant impact on your mood and your ability to tackle challenges. Likewise, unhealthy activities can make mood problems worse. The goal is to make healthy changes you can maintain for a long time—and commit to keeping up even during times of stress.

Eating well—Food gives you energy. When you're dealing with a mental illness, though, eating habits often suffer. Visit Health Canada's website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca for Canada's Food Guide.

Exercising regularly—Exercise has many positive benefits for mental health. Find an activity you enjoy. The goal is to exercise for at least short period of time on a regular basis. Remember, start with manageable, realistic goals and gradually increase your goals as you gain confidence.

Getting enough sleep—Sleep plays a big part in mental health. Mental health problems may cause sleep problems, and sleep problems may cause or add to mental health problems. Certain medications for mental illnesses may also affect sleep for some people. It's important to practice good sleep habits into your daily routine.

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Relaxation skills—Relaxation skills help calm you down. You can learn specific skills like meditation, mindfulness, deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga or cognitive-behavioural therapy skills. Other activities like music, art or writing may also be helpful.

Healthy thinking skills—Mental illnesses can really affect the way you think about yourself, others and the world around you. Part of healthy coping is identifying and challenging thinking problems.

Thinking problems are also called "thinking traps" or "distorted thinking" because they change the way you see a situation. Here are a few different thinking traps:

- **Overgeneralization:** Thinking that everything is bad because you had one negative experience.
- **Filtering:** Only hearing the negatives and ignoring the positives.

- **All-or-nothing:** Something is only all good or all bad; there is no middle ground. Thinking that you "aren't good enough" because you made a small error is an example of all-or-nothing thinking.
- **Catastrophizing:** Seeing a small negative event or mistake as a massive disaster, and reacting to the small mistake like it was a massive disaster.

Once you've identified thinking traps, you can start to challenge them. You can ask yourself what the evidence says, ask yourself if you've considered all the information, and look for more helpful ways to look at the situation. When you challenge a thinking trap, you are looking for the realistic thought.

Thinking skills are a big part of cognitive-behavioural therapy. You can learn these skills from a practitioner. If you'd like to try them on your own, you can find self-help resources online or in bookstores.



For more detail on lifestyle changes to keep you well, visit heretohelp.bc.ca and see our info sheet "Tips for Improving Mental Health" or our series of eight Wellness Modules.



Activity: A toolbox of support

Taking time to do things you enjoy is important for everyone. But when you're not feeling well, it's easy to cut back on these activities. Write down a list of things that help you when you start to feel overwhelmed or notice warning signs.

Some examples include:

- ☐ Setting aside time for extra sleep
- ☐ Talking with a friend or loved one
- ☐ Talking with your health care professional
- ☐ Attending a peer support group
- ☐ Spending time in nature, like going to a park
- ☐ Writing in a journal
- ☐ Spending time on a hobby
- ☐ Volunteering for your favourite organization or helping someone else
- ☐ Watching a funny movie
- ☐ Cutting back on a few non-essential responsibilities

Other **healthy** actions:

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

You can also list things that don't help and should be avoided until you feel better. For example:

- ☐ Staying out late
- ☐ Taking on extra projects or responsibilities
- ☐ Spending time with people who aren't supportive
- ☐ Overanalyzing why I feel bad
- ☐ Drinking more

Other **unhealthy** actions:

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Keep this list in a place you'll see it often. When you're feeling overwhelmed or unwell, pick a helpful activity from your list and set aside time to do it.

Identifying stressful situations

Managing stress is a big part of wellness. You can control some things that cause stress—for example, you can try to get enough sleep and use substances like alcohol wisely. But it's unlikely that you can eliminate all stress from your life. This is why stress management skills are important. These skills help you identify stress and take action by solving problems proactively. These skills can help you handle stressful situations before the stress affects your well-being.

“*Managing stress is a big part of wellness*”

The first step is learning to identify when you're experiencing stress. You may notice stress in four general areas:

- Physical signs in your body, like tense muscles or an upset stomach
- Emotional signs, like feeling overwhelmed or feeling upset
- Cognitive or thought signs, like thinking that everything is hopeless or thinking that you aren't appreciated
- Behavioural signs, like getting into arguments or acting aggressively

Remember, these signs of stress may look just like some of your early warning signs, and in fact, that's what they may be for you.

Next, you can plan ahead if you know a particular event or situation is coming up. Identifying situations that cause you stress and taking action before you feel overwhelmed is a big part of maintaining wellness.

Think about situations that you find stressful. Problems with your job, money or relationships may come to mind easily. But remember, a situation doesn't have to be "bad" for it to cause stress. Stressful situations or events people sometimes forget about include:

- Starting a new job or school course or taking on new responsibilities
- A major holiday or anniversary
- A new relationship or commitment
- Pregnancy
- Moving or other changes in your home
- Other health problems

Managing stressful situations

Now that you've identified your signs of stress and situations that may cause problems, it's time to decide how you manage them. Healthy coping skills, including your toolbox of supports, are a good place to start. But you may need some extra help.

There are practical steps you can take as you approach upcoming situations or events. Here are some tips to consider:

- Start slowly. If possible, add in new stress gradually, rather than all at once. For example, if you want to go back to school, it may be possible to start taking courses part-time.
- Give yourself time for self-care. Remember, self-care is even more important when you're dealing with a stressful situation.
- Cut back on ongoing responsibilities. We all take on responsibilities that aren't always essential, like hosting family dinners. But it's okay to let people know that you need to spend that time on new responsibilities or challenges.
- Make sure your own expectations are realistic. If you're going back to school, for example, it's okay to cut back on housework.

coping with voices and delusions



coping with voices

Hearing voices or other sounds can be very distressing. This is especially true if they are critical or threatening. It's important to talk to your doctor or mental health practitioner about voices. Proper treatment can lessen or even eliminate voices. You can also learn ways to live well with the voices. You might have a try a few different strategies to see what works best for you. Here are some suggestions:

- ☐ Remind yourself that you are in charge.
The voices can't harm you if you don't listen to them. The voices know a lot about you because they are part of you
- ☐ Try to keep track of the voices. You may find that certain voices are triggered by a particular situation
- ☐ Do something you enjoy that distracts you from the voices, like listening to music
- ☐ Set boundaries. Tell the voices to stop or say that you will listen to them later
- ☐ Find a support group. Talking about your experiences can help. You can also learn new ways to cope with voices from others

You can also find some things are unhelpful, and you may wish to avoid them. Here are some activities that may be unhelpful:

- ☐ Passive activities (things that don't take your full attention), like watching a lot of TV
- ☐ Arguing with voices
- ☐ Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- ☐ Isolating yourself from others

coping with delusions or unusual thoughts

Delusions are false beliefs that aren't based in reality. Delusions can be frustrating or even scary. But you can learn strategies to help cope with delusions. Of course, it's important to talk to your doctor or mental health practitioner about delusions or unusual thoughts. But here are some coping strategies to try:

- ☐ Think about the evidence for and against a belief. What does the evidence say?
- ☐ Write down a list of alternative explanations for the belief
- ☐ Talk to a trusted family member, friend or professional. They can help you test your belief

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Problem-solving skills are also useful when you're facing a challenging situation. This is a structured approach to help you think through problems and solutions in a logical way. There are six basic steps:


- Define the problem. Figure out what is causing the problem and how it's causing problems.
- Set goals. Decide what you want your solution to address. It's important that your goals are realistic and concrete.
- Think of solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions. You can also ask friends or loved ones for ideas.
- Look at the pros and cons. Pick a few possible solutions that you think might work best, and consider the positives and negatives of your choices.
- Pick a solution. Remember, it should describe who does what and what you want to achieve.
- Evaluate the results. After you put your plan into action, see if it worked as expected. If it didn't work, see if your solution needs to be modified or if you need to try a different approach.

Moving beyond the basics

So far, you've learned how to recognize warning signs, take action when warning signs come up, manage stress and build your wellness. Now it's time to fine-tune your skills. There may be situations where troublesome symptoms come up, despite your best efforts. It's helpful to plan for these situations ahead of time, so you know what to do right away.

The first step is reviewing your early warning signs. Think back to your timeline and consider where you might be on the timeline. Do your warning signs tell you that you have time to cope with the situation on your own, or do they say that you need help soon? If your warning signs show that you are close to relapse, it's time to get help.

If you have time to cope with the situation on your own, you can think about strategies you've used in the past. Think back to a strategy that has worked for you and put that strategy into place. You can even try to make it better. For example, you might take a few days off work when you notice symptoms. You might improve that strategy by scheduling an activity you enjoy or spending time talking with a trusted loved one or a mental health professional. But if you aren't confident that you can carry out your plan, seek help. It's always better to ask for help early.



“If you aren't confident that you can carry out your plan, seek help. It's always better to ask for help early.”



Planning ahead may help ease worries of what might happen if you experience a relapse because you know there is a plan if you need it.

Part three: Seeking outside help when needed

At times, you may need extra outside help. Warning signs may come up very suddenly or you may feel that your self-management strategy isn't enough. Seeking outside help doesn't mean that you've done anything wrong and it isn't a sign of weakness. In fact, asking for help when you need it is a sign that you understand how the mental illness affects you and you want to take action.

Talking with your health care professional is a good first step. You may schedule more frequent visits, and your health care professional may adjust your treatment, such as adding medication or changing medication, or adding therapy techniques. Loved ones and members of your support network can also help, even if you just need to talk to someone.

Planning for relapse

You can plan ahead for times you need extra help. Planning ahead may help ease worries of what might happen if you experience a relapse because you know there is a plan if you need it. Your plan may be a formal agreement with your health care professional, or it may be an informal plan among loved ones or other members of your support network. Whatever you choose, your plan will outline what will happen if you or others notice warning signs and what each person should do. It might include:

- Signs that show you aren't feeling well
- At what point you want outside help: As soon as you notice warning signs? When you can no longer manage symptoms on your own?
- Where to go for help or who to contact in an emergency situation
- What treatments you'd prefer
- A list of your current medications and any other treatments (including alternative treatments)
- Contact information for your health professional, the nearest emergency room, and contact information for the loved ones you want notified

Your action plan may also include practical steps that your loved ones agree to take. For example, a loved one may contact your employer and keep everything in order (like rent or bill payments) if you need to spend time in the hospital.

If your plan or agreement involves the care of your children, access to your financial information or other important matters, it's best to talk with a lawyer about your options. There are a number of different legal tools to help you plan for your care, but there are important differences between these tools. A legal professional can help you make the best choice for your unique situation.

preventing relapse of mental illnesses



Activity: Relapse prevention plan

- ▶ Events or situations that triggered relapses in the past:

- ▶ Early warning signs that I experienced in the past:

- ▶ Things that help me when I experience an early warning sign:

- ▶ People who help me and what I would like them to do:

- ▶ People I'd like to contact in case of an emergency:

(Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,
Center for Mental Health Services)

Crisis Plan

- ▶ My crisis plan (what can be done if I am in crisis):

- ▶ Ways I can relieve stress, regain balance, calm myself or make myself safer:

- ▶ People I can call (friends, family members, counsellors or other mental health professionals):

- ▶ Resources I can use (support groups, organizations, etc):

- ▶ Things I or others can do that I find helpful or keep me safe:

- ▶ Medications that have helped in the past: _____

- ▶ Medications that have **not** helped: _____

- ▶ Types of medication(s) I take: _____

- ▶ If I become unable to handle my personal affairs, the following people have agreed to help
(for example, look after pets, notify family and workplace, etc):

name and phone number: _____

what they will do: _____

(Source: Western New York Care Coordination Program)

preventing relapse of mental illnesses

where do I go from here?

In addition to your family doctor, check out the following resources for managing mental disorders:

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit heretohelp.bc.ca for info sheets on mental illnesses and other mental health topics, such as Coping With Mental Health Crises and Emergencies, Finding Help for Mental Disorders, and Relapse Prevention. You can also find personal stories from people who are working through recovery, our Wellness Modules, and self-tests.

WRAP: Wellness Recovery Action

Plan WRAP is a recovery and prevention tool for mental illnesses. Visit www.mentalhealthrecovery.com to learn more about the program, try practice exercises, or purchase WRAP materials.

AnxietyBC: Visit www.anxietybc.com or call 604-525-7566. AnxietyBC increases awareness about anxiety disorders, provides education and increases access to evidence-based resources and treatments

BC Schizophrenia Society: Visit www.bcscs.org or call 1-888-888-0029 (toll-free in BC) or 604-270-7841 (in Greater Vancouver). BCSS provides support to people with serious mental illness and their families, public education, advocacy and research.

Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division: Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver). CMHA promotes the mental health of all British Columbians through education, advocacy, research and direct services.

Centre for Addictions Research of BC: Visit www.carbc.ca. CARBC is dedicated to research and knowledge related to substance use, mental health and wellbeing. For referrals to service providers, contact the Alcohol and Drug Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free in BC) or 604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver).

FORCE Society for Kids Mental Health: Visit www.forcesociety.com or call 1-855-887-8004 (toll-free) or 604-878-3400 (in Greater Vancouver). The FORCE raises the awareness and need for early intervention for the mental health of children and youth and assists families in finding information and help.

Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore: Visit www.familyservices.bc.ca or call 1-888-988-5281 (toll-free in BC) or 604-988-5281 ext 204 (in Greater Vancouver). Jessie's Legacy provides eating disorders prevention education, resources and support for BC youth, families, educators and professionals.

Mood Disorders Association of BC: Visit www.mdabc.net or call 604-873-0103. MDA provides support, education, and hope of recovery for all British Columbians living with a mood disorder or other mental illness.

This is the third module in a three-part series. The other two modules are "Dealing with a mental illness diagnosis" and "Working with your doctor for mental illnesses."

This info sheet has been adapted from an older resource from BC Partners and HeretoHelp: Macnaughton, E. (2003). "Module 4: Developing an Early Warning System and Action Plan." In *Mental Disorders Toolkit: Information and Resources for Effective Self-Management of Mental Disorders*. Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division.

This info sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.