

Trigger and warning signs tip sheet

Triggers are external events or circumstances that can bring on a deterioration in mental state.

Warning signs are internal or external indicators that mental health is deteriorating. Warning signs can occur in four domains: thoughts, feelings, behaviours and general interactions with the world.

The following lists are common and/or evidence-based examples but are not exhaustive. Getting to know the person you are working with, discussing their patterns and behaviours, and seeking the perspective of others in that person's life are the best ways of identifying individual triggers and warning signs.

Risk domain	Triggers	Warning signs
Suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stressful event: negative (e.g. death of a loved one, recent abuse or violence), or positive (e.g. moving, having a child, changing jobs) Loss: health, financial, relationship Conflict: with family members/friends Peer pressure Difficult or challenging situations Alcohol and drug misuse Trauma event Behavioural contagion effect (copying the behaviour of others) Depressed mood Exacerbation of mental illness symptoms Newly diagnosed Mental Illness Severe depression improving Physical illness and pain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exacerbation of mental health symptoms Thoughts of suicide Experiencing hopelessness and helplessness Expressed loneliness Lack of belongingness Experiences of shame Increased sadness Feeling trapped Expressed exhaustion Increased impulsivity Increased use of alcohol or other drugs Withdrawing from family Ceasing activities that were important Writing suicide notes Self-harming Risk taking behaviour Unexplained crying Emotional outbursts Irritability Loss of energy Loss of interest in appearance Weight changes- unintentional Reduced concentration Increased level of anxiety Increased levels and severity of self-harm Evidence of giving away personal belongings Sudden changes in mood (elation or depression).
Self-harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behavioural contagion effect (copying the behaviour of others) Anniversaries of significant events Family conflict Relationship conflict Relationship break down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exacerbation of mental health symptoms Social withdrawal Wearing clothes that cover body Increased anxiety Reduced low mood Reduced social support

Risk domain	Triggers	Warning signs
Self-harm (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer rejection • Job loss • High emotional arousal • Panic • Crisis or recent difficult life event (e.g. death of a loved one, recent abuse or violence) • Alcohol and drug misuse • Difficulties at school • Difficulties at work • Episode of bullying (cyber, home, school or work) • Financial stress • Trauma event (car crash, sexual assault) • Event that retriggers trauma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scars - often in patterns • Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, bite marks or other wounds • Keeping sharp objects on hand/hidden • Increased behavioural and emotional instability • Increased impulsivity • Statements of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness • Academic failure • Misusing alcohol or other drugs • Talking about self-injury • Poor physical health (especially in older adults) • Dramatic changes in mood • Changes in sleeping and eating patterns • Hiding or washing their clothes separately • Strange excuses provided for injuries • Dramatic drop in school/work performance.
Aggression/violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of being treated unfairly • Perception of being disrespected • Distress, frustration • Fear and anxiety • High emotional arousal • Periods of confusion • Family conflict • Relationship conflict • Increased stress and frustration • Stressful work environment • Alcohol and substance use (including withdrawal) • Deterioration in mental state (increase in positive symptoms) • Physical pain (acute and chronic). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal aggression • Threatening speech or behaviour • High activity level • Hyperarousal • Acute awareness of the environment • Invasion of personal space • Moodiness • Poor concentration/disorientation • Increased substance use • Increased episodes of agitation • Deteriorating mental state • Reduced help seeking behaviours • Increased impulsivity • Increased irritability • Insomnia • Confusion.
Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterioration in mental state • Reduced cognitive capacity • Alcohol and other drug misuse • Relationship conflict • Relationship loss • Transitions (motherhood, moving service, moving house) • Recent bereavement • Current or exacerbation of physical illness • Exacerbation of chronic pain • Loss of income • Workplace stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor self-care • Social withdrawal • Cognitions around hopelessness and worthlessness • Weight changes • Poor sleep • Increase/decreased help seeking behaviours • Poor motivation • Tearfulness • Increased irritability • Increased rumination • Reduced decision-making ability

Risk domain	Triggers	Warning signs
Vulnerability (Continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal difficulties • Parenting stress: child with disability • Bullying, victimization • Recent trauma (sexual assault, DV) • Christmas time, school holidays Anniversaries • Shame • Hormone changes • Unstable accommodation • Reduced/increased physical activity • Sexual exploitation • Vicarious trauma • Environmental factors (e.g. mixed gender ward). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorientation • Sexually disinhibited behaviour • Self-harm • Risk taking behaviour.
AWA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent inpatient admissions • Stressful events • Increase in positive symptoms • Transition in care • Unattended tasks for which the person has responsibility • Concerns about care responsibilities for children, pets and others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voicing thoughts about wanting to leave • Violent episode in last seven days • Increase in aggressive behaviour • Reduced insight and judgement • Impulsive behaviour • Increase in positive symptoms of psychosis • Hypervigilant behaviours • Monitoring exits • Making preparations to leave (e.g. tidying up belongings; wearing more clothes than necessary).
Child safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in symptomatology • Parent child conflict • Rupture in child parent relationship • Increased externalising behaviour • Alcohol and substance use • New relationships • Escalating domestic violence • Parental suicidality • Parental criminal behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expressed criticism of child • Child under four years of age • Low empathy • Suicidal intent • High levels of aggression • Fantasies of harming child • Child rejection • Hostility toward child • Teasing/bullying • Yelling • Criticism • Parental aggression • Scapegoating (blaming child for mistakes of others) • Child punishment focussed • Emotional indifference.

For further information on the various domains of risk, see the additional resources and further training and education links in the Resource Hub.