Signs of Danger versus Safety

(Adapted from Seeking Safety by Lisa Najavits, 2002)

Listen to the messages your behavior is sending you!

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

Red Flags (Danger)	Green Flags (Safety)
Isolation	Spending time with supportive people
Not taking care of my body (food, sleep)	Taking good care of my body
Fights with people (verbally, physically)	Able to get along
Too much free time	Having a structured schedule
Destructive behavior	Behavior under control
Feeling stuck	Feeling like I'm moving forward
Lying (to myself and/or others)	Honesty
Negative feelings acted out	Negative feelings expressed in words
Canceling treatment sessions	Attending all treatment regularly
Stop taking medications as prescribed (taking either too much for too little	Taking medications as prescribed
Passive ("Why bother")	Active coping
Cynical/negative	Realistic/positive
Not fighting PTSD symptoms (e.g., dissociation self-harm)	Fighting PTSD symptoms (e.g., grounding, compassionate reasoning, etc.)
Not learning new coping skills	Learning new coping skills
Becoming physically ill	Staying physically healthy
Believe treatment is unnecessary	Believe treatment is necessary
Spend time with people who use or may be dangerous	Spend time with "clean" or safe people
Cannot hear feedback	Able to listen to feedback
Too much responsibility	Appropriate amount of responsibility
Think people are trying to make me look or 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 regularly

Keys 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 the 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 assign 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 form 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 dangerous times. 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 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 a 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…

Create a Safety Plan

*Fill in the safety plan using the following as an example

Mild Danger (starting to show distress)	What I Will Do To Stay Safe
• Eating poorly • Missing occasional treatment sessions • Getting cynical and negative	• Increase AA to three times a week • Tell therapist what I'm feeling • Call my friend Pat and talk with her

Red Flags	***Safety Plan***
<u>Mild</u> Danger (Starting to show distress)	**What I Will Do To Stay Safe**
<u>Moderate</u> Danger (Getting serious-watch out)	**What I Will Do To Stay Safe**
<u>Serious Danger</u> (Emergency!)	**What I Will Do To Stay Safe** **650-299-4777** **Text line: Home 741741**

Ideas for a Commitment

Commit to one action that will move your life forward!
It can be anything you feel will help you, or you can try one of the ideas below.
Keeping your commitment is a way of respecting, honoring, and caring for yourself.

- Option 1: Give a copy of your safety plan to people you trust (e.g., safe family, friends, therapist, sponsor) and ask them for copies
- Option 2: Write a personal story of bravery: "How I Faced a Red Flag and Won."
- Option 3: Write a "How To Help Me" guild that you can give to people in your life. Describe your danger signs and what people can do to help when they see you slipping.
- Option 4: Write out what you can say to yourself when you're in a) mild danger and b) serious danger
- Option 5: Fill out the Safe Coping Sheet (See below for an example)

	Old Way	New Way
Situation	Someone cut me off in traffic.	Someone cut me off in traffic.
Your Coping	Pissed off, tailgated him for the next 3 miles. Feel like I can't take the stress. I keep thinking about using.	I need to see the danger signs earlier. As soon as I feel this stressed, it means using comes next. I need a buffer from the world-I'm going to go to a meeting and just take a mental health day off work.
Consequence	Nothing is getting better; I'm slipping	I was okay and felt more in control

Rate from 0 (not at all safe) to 10 (totally safe)

How safe is your <u>old</u> way of coping? _____

How safe is your <u>new</u> way of coping? _____