

15 Response Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure

The thoughts, feelings and behaviours listed below are marks that you may have been exposed to trauma. As you review the 16 warning signs take note of how you feel. It is very likely that you identify with many of these symptoms; however, the feeling of significant emotional pain or withdrawal may indicate that there is something in your past, needing to be dealt with and released. If you feel worried or disturbed by how you feel when reviewing these, it would be a good idea to reach out to someone for help.

1. Feeling Helpless and Hopeless

Individuals hold themselves personally responsible for a troubled situation even when no one could reasonably be expected to master it. Individuals perceive that the traumatic event will be long lived – they see no possibility of relief. Individuals who feel that they are not functioning well in a specific trauma-related situation may imagine that they will experience the same difficulties.

2. A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough

The belief that “I am not doing enough and I should be doing more.” Circumstances that instill a sense of inadequacy.

3. Hypervigilance

Having a trauma exposure response can make us feel like we’re “always on”. Getting stuck in a state of hyperarousal.

4. DIMINISHED CREATIVITY

The deeper we sink into a culture of trauma, the less flexible and original our thinking becomes.

5. Inability to Embrace Complexity

You crave signs of good and bad and right and wrong and there is a need to choose sides. You may be dogmatic and opinionated, and you may take to a side in a debate no matter what the debate is about. All that concerns you is taking a side.

6. Insensitivity to Others / Numbing

People who bear witness to a range of human experience may become increasingly inoculated to other’s pain. We may start out being moved by each person’s story, but over time it may take more and more intense or horrific expression of suffering to deeply move us. Our feelings have grown numb, often as a result of one’s system being overwhelmed with incoming (negative) stimuli.

7. Chronic Exhaustion/Physical Ailments

We try so hard to keep from hitting rock bottom that we feel exhausted by the effort.

8. Inability to Listen / Deliberate Avoidance

Start feeling overwhelmed by their personal lives and lose energy for those things that once brought them joy.

9. Moments of Separation / Dissociative

We cut ourselves off from our internal experience in order to guard ourselves against sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming our system.

10. Sense of Persecution

We become convinced that others are responsible for our well-being and that we lack the personal agency to transform our circumstances.

11. Guilt / Shame

Comparing suffering with the other party – not wanting to flaunt privilege. A comparison of suffering is counterproductive. While it is an effort to connect in a loving and kind way, it often leaves one with being overwhelmed with guilt. Guilt is one of the strongest signs of trauma exposure response.

12. Fear

Fear is a natural and healthy response to much of what we witness. Fear squelches our ability to think creatively and well.

13. Anger and Cynicism

Anger is a common feeling among those trying to do right in the world. Responsible humour is one thing, but cynical humour used to avoid dealing with feelings of anger is another.

14. Problematic Substance Abuse

Problematic substance abuse can be particularly compelling for those whose work feels absolutely too intense to integrate. When we believe that we lack the inner capacity to deal with our reality, we may seek out objects, activities, or relationships that will help us to perpetuate an illusion about ourselves, numb us out or otherwise give us distance from our feelings.

15. Grandiosity: An Inflated Sense of Importance

When work becomes the center of our identity, it may be because it feeds our sense of grandiosity. We get hooked on involvement in other's lives, becoming a powerful figure for them, getting increasingly attached to the feeling of being needed and useful.

Based upon Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*. (2009).