

STEP 1: RECOGNIZE YOUR STRESS WARNING SIGNS

The first step in an emotional autopsy is to look at the early signs of trauma.

If you're currently in a stressful situation, this is a helpful exercise because it helps you get in tune with how you're feeling and how you are being affected.

If you're not in a stressful situation right now, this exercise is still important because it will help you catch yourself earlier and take corrective action before you start to feel the unravel.

Cars have a warning light that comes on when there is a problem. Sadly, I had a friend who paid no attention to his car's warning light and kept driving for several hundred miles—only to find out that he'd burned out his engine!

Just as cars have warning lights, we humans have physical and emotional warning signs that we need to watch for.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SIGNS OF STRESS

Everyone reacts differently to emotional conflicts. For some, disturbing strain registers *physically*. For others, apprehensions manifest themselves *emotionally*.

Here are some signs that your difficulties may be affecting you physically:

- shallow breathing
- irregular pulse
- rashes
- bodily aches and pains in your joints, neck, back
- intestinal disturbances (diarrhea, constipation, hemorrhoids, gut aches, vomiting)
- sleep problems (struggling to fall asleep, sleeping fitfully, or sleeping too much)
- unusual fatigue

Remember, you don't have to manifest all the physical signs to mean that your dilemma is really getting to you. Experiencing only a few symptoms may mean your body is showing a negative stress reaction.

Quick Tip: If you find yourself stuck in a stressful situation, focus on your breathing. Stress causes us to take quick, shallow breaths from our chests. Sometimes a simple method of stress-reduction is to take ten deep breaths.

In addition to the physical signs, there probably are mental and emotional signs :

- constant worry over past, present, or future choices

- pessimism or dread
- loss of motivation
- loss of enjoyment of pleasurable activities
- poor concentration
- poor memory
- short temper
- unusual increase in swearing
- obsessive thinking—replaying over and over the insensitive words or actions of others
- resentment

USE THE HALTS MODEL TO WATCH FOR SIGNS

Since the list of stress-based symptoms could be nearly endless, it might be helpful to examine your life through the lens of the HALTS model, which I've adapted from AA. Each letter represents a category of stress warning signs.

H for Hunger — Hunger or craving to indulge in an addiction to a *substance* (food, alcohol, illegal or legal drugs), or *compulsive behavior* (irresponsible spending, gambling, sexual promiscuity, pornography, or others).

A for Anger — Anger from resentment, hate, bitterness at yourself, other people, or things like confrontations, your workload, interruptions, disappointments, health problems, financial difficulties, insurance conflicts, excessive paperwork, or playing “telephone-tag hell” with companies.

L for Loneliness — Lonely thoughts of being neglected or unappreciated by your spouse, children, coworkers or supervisors, church people, neighbors, friends, or others.

Thinking, “No one really cares about me. Nobody really listens or even wants to listen to me, because they all have their own agendas, motives, and self-interests at heart, not mine.”

T for Tiredness — Exhaustion from working too many hours at too fast a pace. Tiredness can result from not taking enough breaks from your work for hobbies, exercise, and entertainment. Tiredness sometimes expresses itself as being overwhelmed—from tackling too many or too big tasks or biting off more than you can chew.

S for Self-pity — Stuck in a pity party: “I don’t deserve this raw deal, this illness. I keep trying, but things will never get better. I continually fail. No one understands me. I’ll never beat this addiction, this bout of depression, this toxic person’s influence. I’ll never make the impact on the world that I’ve always wanted to. I’m washed up, useless.”

Successful stress busting means taking a frequent inventory of your HALTS—your reactions to people, places, and situations—and how your responses to them are affecting you physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

With practice, these on-the-spot observations will become a healthy habit. If you are undergoing one or several of the HALTS warning signs, it’s a strong indicator of a physical or psychological response to some kind of friction.