

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · No. 06

Reading your own dashboard.

Every man's engine sends warning signals before things go wrong. The trouble is nobody taught us to treat them as signals — most of us got trained to push through, and pushing through works right up until the highway breakdown. Five lights, what each one looks like, and the early action menu for every one.

The five lights, in depth

LIGHT	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	EARLY ACTIONS (PICK ONE, UNDER TWO MINUTES)
Short fuse	Small things landing like provocation — traffic, the kids' noise, a slow checkout. Minor friction hitting like insult means the system is already hot.	Three slow exhales · name what's actually underneath (“that's dread, not the traffic”) · step outside for sixty seconds
Running on empty	Flat, not tired. Can't be bothered with things you used to enjoy. The battery light — and the one men explain away the longest.	One tiny act of the old you (the playlist, the drive, the bench press) · text one mate · say the light's name out loud
Overheating	Body tense all day: jaw, shoulders, chest buzzing. The body signals stress before the mind admits it — constant tension is data, not normal.	Sigh × 3 · drop the shoulders and unclench the jaw on purpose · ten minutes of hard movement
Sleep	2am wakeups, racing head on the pillow, dread mornings. One of the earliest and most reliable lights there is.	Park the loop (one line, one daytime slot) · phone out of the room tonight · same wake time tomorrow regardless
Withdrawing	Dodging mates, off the group chat, going through the motions. In men, struggle often looks like disappearing rather than breaking down.	Reply to one message honestly · say yes to the next low effort invite · tell one person it's been a rough stretch

Why early matters: a light at flicker costs two minutes to act on. A light ignored for a month costs a blow up, a flat spot or a 2am ceiling — and those are the versions everyone else sees. The men who come through this process strongest aren't the ones who never light up. They're the ones who read their dash early.

Two rules for reading yourself honestly

Flat counts. “I don't feel anything” isn't an absence — it's Running on Empty, and it goes on the dashboard like every other light. Anger is usually the bodyguard. Under most flares sits fear, grief, humiliation or helplessness; naming the real one measurably settles the system. “That's grief, not rage” is a sentence that does real work.

Roadworthy provides psychoeducation, mentoring and community grounded in positive behaviour support and psychology research on Australian men. This resource is general information, not clinical treatment or legal advice. If things are heavy right now: MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78 or Lifeline 13 11 14, any hour. Dads in Distress 1300 853 437. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 000. Family violence support: 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732).

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · TOOL

The monthly dashboard audit.

Once a month, five minutes, same date each month. Rate each light for the month overall, note the earliest you caught it, and set one action. Print a stack; the pattern across months is the real readout.

LIGHT	THIS MONTH: STEADY / FLICKER / ON / REDLINE	EARLIEST CATCH	NEXT MONTH'S ONE ACTION
Short fuse			
Running on empty			
Overheating			
Sleep			
Withdrawing			

Month: _____ The light that needs the most attention next month: _____

The rule of two, monthly edition. Any light at ON two months running, or REDLINE in any month, means act now while acting is easy: tell someone, book the GP, or call MensLine 1300 78 99 78. Pulling in for the service is the system working — not failing.

Part of the free Roadworthy self guided program — the full seven module Under the Hood series is at roadworthydads.com.au, along with the rest of the Steady Dad guides.