

Triggers



What are triggers?

A trigger can be anything that makes us remember a past memory, positive or negative. Sometimes triggers can set off a flashback, which is a memory of the past that intrudes into the present, making the trauma seem as if it is occurring right now. Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people.

The person may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that they think trigger flashbacks. They will react to this trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

What are triggers?

Oftentimes triggers relating to sight and sound are most common, with triggers relating to touch, smell, and taste less common, but equally as impactful. A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma. Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes. The following is a sampling of examples of potentially triggering things/senses/situations:

Taste

Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (i.e. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco.)

What are triggers?

Sight

Often it's someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits, or objects related to the trauma; situations where someone else is being abused; objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place; places or situations where the abuse took place.

Smell

Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume); any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol.)

What are triggers?

Sound

Things that sound like anger (raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking); things that sound like pain or fear (crying, whispering, screaming); anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds the survivor of the abuse (sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing); anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice); words of abuse (cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used.)

Touch

Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (certain physical touch, standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you)

All of these examples are common triggers for survivors of sexualised violence, but by no means are all of the triggers you might experience.

Triggers are unique from person to person, but they universally make people feel the same: scared, anxious, angry, and unsafe.

How do triggers form?

Researchers aren't entirely sure how or why the brain forms triggers. The brain encodes traumatic memories differently than it records non-traumatic memories. Traumatic events often live just outside of conscious memory. However, our brain and body keep a record of the threatening experience. To try and avoid future harm, our brains connect the fight-or-flight response to trauma reminders — like a specific smell, sight, or sound. So when we're exposed to a trigger, we react as if we're under threat.

Here is a general and basic overview of how a trigger might form:

How do triggers form?

Experience

An event or situation occurs that provokes a strong emotional response. This could be anything from a traumatic event to a very joyous occasion.

Association

Over time, certain stimuli (such as sounds, smells, places or people) become associated with that emotional experience. This is often an unconscious process.

Memory

The brain stores these associations in memory. This is why certain triggers can evoke such strong emotional responses, even if the event happened a long time ago.

How do triggers form?

Triggering

Later, when you encounter the same or similar situation, they can trigger the same emotional response that was associated with the original event. This can happen even if you're not consciously aware of the connection between the situation and the original experience.

Not everyone is equally susceptible to emotional triggers. Some individuals are more prone to being triggered due to several contributing factors.

Potential causes of emotional triggers

Past experiences

Those who have endured trauma or significant stress in their past are more likely to be susceptible to emotional triggers. The brain's response to similar situations may intensify due to the emotional imprints left by past events.

Personality traits

Certain personality traits may influence how individuals respond to stimuli. For example, people with high levels of neuroticism may be more prone to experiencing negative emotions, while those with high levels of emotional resilience may be better equipped to handle challenging situations without being strongly triggered.

Potential causes of emotional triggers

Coping mechanisms

The effectiveness of an individual's coping mechanisms can influence their susceptibility to emotional triggers. Those with well-developed coping strategies, such as mindfulness, problem-solving, or seeking support, may be more resilient in the face of triggering situations.

Mental Health

Individuals with mental health conditions, such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or mood disorders, may be more susceptible to emotional triggers. These conditions can amplify emotional responses and make it challenging to regulate emotions effectively.

Potential causes of emotional triggers

Environmental factors

The environment in which a person is raised and lives can also contribute to their susceptibility to emotional triggers. Factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and cultural influences can shape how individuals perceive and respond to emotional situations.

Genetics

Evidence suggests that genetic factors play a role in emotional regulation. Some people may be predisposed to certain emotional reactions due to their genetic makeup.

What does it feel like to be triggered?

When someone is triggered, it means that they're having a strong, uncomfortable emotional reaction to a stimulus that wouldn't ordinarily cause that response. While triggered, people may panic, feel overwhelmed, cry, act out, withdraw, or react defensively.

Trigger symptoms often include:

- Feeling scared, panicked, anxious, or unsafe.
- Elevated heartbeat, sweating, and difficulty breathing.
- Feeling like you have no control over your emotions.
- Urge to run away, escape, or other avoidant behaviour.

What does it feel like to be triggered?

- Rumination or negative, automatic thoughts.
- Inexplicable or unpredictable changes in mood.
- Anxiety or panic attacks.
- Physical tension, like clenching the fists or jaw.
- Flashbacks of stressful or traumatic events.
- Delayed outbursts of anger or sadness.

Any of these symptoms can arise in response to the triggering situation. However, what makes triggers so tricky to identify is their highly individualised nature.

It is impossible to create an exhaustive list of triggers but over time you can begin to see the relationship between cause and effect and once identified, it's easier to spot.

How do you recognise your triggers?

There are different types of triggers, but they all share one thing: they're unexpected. A triggering event can be anything from a stressful encounter at work to a fight with your partner. Sometimes, it can even be something as small as a change in routine. Whatever the trigger may be, it's important to know how to recognise it.

Here are some ways to recognise when you might be triggered:

Notice how you feel

Do you feel anxious and overwhelmed, or are you having trouble calming yourself down? Pay attention to these symptoms when they arise, particularly if they feel sudden or unrelated to your circumstances.

How do you recognise your triggers?

Something is bothering you

Is there something that's suddenly weighing on your mind? If it's a major issue, your concern might not be out of the ordinary. But if it's a routine occurrence that's got you stressed, there might be more to it than meets the eye.

Listen to yourself

We've all had times when we can't seem to stop venting about a particular issue. We think we've put it out of our minds, but when we talk about it, we feel worked up all over again. If you find that you can't stop rehashing a particular situation, something about it may have you triggered.

How do you recognise your triggers?

Check your feelings

Trigger reactions are notoriously explosive. If you find that you're having an outsized reaction (or many of them), pay attention. You may not be reacting to the situation at hand but to an underlying stressor.

How do deal with triggers

There isn't really a “cure” for triggers. All we can do is identify when we're upset, try to understand why, and manage our emotional reactions.

At its heart, triggers are a reaction to past trauma. Our emotions — and our emotional triggers — alert us to perceived threats in our environment.

Awareness and mindfulness are key to understanding why we feel threatened and dealing with those triggers in a healthy way.

Here are 5 steps to recognise when you're feeling triggered and keep the feeling from taking over:

How to deal with triggers

Memorise your reaction

Every emotion has an accompanying physical sensation.

When you're upset, you likely feel it in your stomach, chest, or neck. Your mind may go blank, or you may have any of the other above-mentioned symptoms. But chances are, it'll feel largely the same each time.

Once you recognise that feeling, you'll more easily identify it as a trigger.

That knowledge empowers you to move away from "reaction mode" and into self-care.

How to deal with triggers

Take a break

It's never a good idea to respond immediately when you're feeling triggered. Take time away from the situation to process your emotional response. Once you practice recognising when you're triggered, you can start developing coping mechanisms to deal with them.

Even if you can't step away from the situation altogether, there are a few in-the-moment practices that might help.

Deep breathing can be done just about any time, anywhere. If you're in a stressful conversation, you can try rephrasing and restating what you just heard to the other person. That gives you time to slow down and begin thinking through your response.

How to deal with triggers

Understand the feelings

Acknowledging your feelings is essential. Take time to listen to your feelings without judging yourself for feeling that way. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotion you're experiencing without trying to suppress it.

A particular event may trigger some people, while a certain type of person or situation may trigger others. If you're not sure what your triggers are, it can be helpful to keep a journal. This option will help you identify patterns:

Trigger	Severity (1-10)	What happened in my body?	What happened in my mind?	How did I reset my body?	How did I reset my mind?
E.g. Too many people	E.g. 6	E.g. tension in my chest, sweaty, heart rate elevated	E.g. Started to feel trapped, worried I couldn't get away	E.g. Breathing exercise, squeezed my thighs	E.g. Reminded myself that I'm safe, that it's only a trigger

How to deal with triggers

Understand the feelings

Or try journaling, when you feel triggered about the situation, in response to the following prompts:

- What am I doing?
- What's my environment?
- What am I thinking?
- What am I physically feeling?
- What am I emotionally feeling?
- Is there a pattern?
- Is there a memory attached?

How to deal with triggers

Take care of yourself

Being triggered isn't a fun experience, and it can be emotionally exhausting. Because this type of stress can involve such intense physical reactions, taking care of your basic needs is critical. Symptoms of hunger, dehydration, and physical exhaustion can trigger — or exacerbate — trauma responses.

Here are some ideas for self-care:

Physical self-care

- Exercise
- Healthy Eating
- Sleep
- Hydration
- Spend time outdoors
- Declutter your space

How to deal with triggers

Mental and emotional self-care

- Mindfulness and meditation
- Journaling
- Read a book
- Listen to music
- Spend time with loved one
- Set boundaries
- Take a social media break
- Try a new hobby

Other self-care ideas

- Get creative
- Try a new recipe
- Go for a drive
- Watch a film

How to deal with triggers

Practice mindfulness and meditation

Engaging in mindfulness and meditation can help you develop self-awareness to better understand your thoughts and emotions without judgment. Mindfulness allows you to observe your triggers and emotional responses without being overwhelmed by them. Regular meditation practice can enhance your overall emotional resilience and ability to stay present in the moment.

Incorporating mindfulness into everyday life:

- Mindful breathing
- Mindful walking
- Mindful listening

How to deal with triggers

Practice mindfulness and meditation

Meditation:

- Find a quiet space to sit or lie down.
- Focus on your breathe paying attention to each inhale and exhale.
- Acknowledge distractions. Thoughts and feelings will arise, don't judge them simply acknowledge them and then bring your focus back to your breath.
- Be patient, mindfulness takes practice.

Other mindfulness techniques:

- Body scan meditation - bringing your attention to different parts of your body noticing sensations.
- Gratitude practice - appreciate the good things in your life, big and small.

How to deal with triggers

Develop a grounding routine

Having a grounding routine can also help bring your focus back to the moment. Grounding is the process in which you bring your awareness to the present moment when you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or having a flashback. The following simple strategies are examples of grounding:

- Breathe: Breathe in and out slowly and from your stomach, not your upper chest. Count to 4 as you breathe in and again as you breathe out
- Engage your senses: turn on loud music, hold an ice cube, count colors in the room, smell your favorite perfume, eat something with a strong flavor
- Move vigorously (jump up and down, stomp your feet, go for a run/walk, exercise)

How to deal with triggers

- Feel your arms, legs, and torso – squeeze to bring awareness to them.
- Hold onto a safety object – find an object that reminds you of a time you felt safe, calm, peaceful, and happy; observe it's features and the memories associated with it.
- Tell yourself, "This is not happening now. This happened in the past. It is just a memory. I am safe now."
- Do the 5 Senses Exercise:

What are 5 things you can see right now?

What are 4 things you can feel right now?

What are 3 things you can hear right now?

What are 2 things you can smell or taste right now?

What is the day, month, and year right now?

How to deal with triggers

Establish healthy boundaries

Identify and communicate your boundaries with others.

Setting clear boundaries can prevent situations that trigger negative emotions. Learning to say no when needed, expressing your needs, and communicating assertively can promote healthier relationships and reduce encountering triggering situations.

Identify your boundaries:

- Reflect on your needs and values, what are your emotional, physical and mental limits?
- Recognise what behaviours, requests or situations you will tolerate and what you won't.

How to deal with triggers

Communicate your boundaries:

- Be clear and direct - Use 'I' statements to express your needs and feelings.
- Be specific - Clearly explain what you need and why.
- Be respectful - Communicate your boundaries in a calm, neutral tone even if you're feeling frustrated.
- Start small - practice to build confidence and comfort.

Enforce your boundaries

- Be consistent - follow through on your consequences.
- Be prepared to say 'no'.
- Be prepared for discomfort - this is normal if you are used to putting others feelings first.
- Be willing to adjust - be sure to communicate this.

How to deal with triggers

Build a support system

Cultivate a strong support network of friends, family or support groups. Having people you can talk to about your experiences and emotions can provide validation and perspective. Sharing your feelings with others and receiving empathy can help in processing and coping with emotional triggers.

Remember these strategies may work differently for each person, and it's essential to find what resonates best with you. Combining multiple approaches can enhance the effectiveness of managing emotional triggers. If trauma is a significant factor, consulting with a mental health professional is particularly important for guidance.

It can help to have a set of go-to self-care practices you can draw on when you need to calm down. If you feel comfortable, share them with a friend or family member.