
SURVIVOR SUPPORT



WORKING THROUGH TRIGGERS

A trigger¹ is a traumatic memory. Most of the time when people have memories, they know it's a memory and not really happening again (if you want to test this, try to remember what you did last Wednesday. Pay attention to how your brain knows what day it is today and that you are remembering something from Wednesday). A trigger is different. A deep, instinctual part of the brain holds onto memories of the trauma. When that part of the brain thinks the trauma might happen again or gets scared, it puts the whole body on high alert, and bypasses the slower, thoughtful parts of the brain. It's kind of like a fire alarm is pulled inside of you, by a part of you that can't tell the difference between a birthday candle and a big blaze. When a survivor is triggered, they feel like the trauma is happening again. They might get confused about where they are, what year it is, who they are with, or even how old they are. Smells or sounds connected to the trauma might come back to them.


1 Nowadays, many people use the word 'trigger' to mean 'upset.' This is problematic, because it muddies and weakens the original and true definition as explained in this worksheet. If this is confusing to you, you might prefer to use 'traumatic memory' instead of 'trigger' or a word that makes sense to you.

One of the actions of healing from childhood sexual abuse is identifying what triggers you and learning skills to calm your brain down so it doesn't keep pulling that fire alarm. For most people, this is scary and it makes them want to stay away from the thing or person that pulled the trigger. However, for most people, staying away from things that trigger isn't possible or staying away stops them from living full and happy lives. Lots of survivors of childhood sexual abuse are triggered by ordinary things and experiences, such as beds, blue eyes, the sound of a TV news broadcast, or the smell of fresh-cut grass. It's pretty hard to set up life so that a person never experiences such things. More important than the practical difficulties of avoiding all triggers, working through triggers and healing them can lead to more happiness and less worry.

Take a moment and think about your immune system—this is the coordinated structures of nerves and natural chemicals in your body that tell you when you are physically hurt or sick and try to fix it. When you have a cold, for example, you sneeze, get the sniffles, and maybe have a fever. Those symptoms, while unpleasant, are not actually what's wrong. What's wrong is that you have a virus. Those symptoms are evidence of your body's efforts to stay safe and get healthy. The body heals when we take care of the virus instead of focusing on the symptoms.

Now imagine that you have another immune system, or a new layer on your physical immune system. This holistic immune system is made of your emotions, thoughts, spirituality, and body. It is here to help you stay safe and find health (as you define it) in your whole being. When you experience a trigger, it is unpleasant, but the trigger is not actually what's wrong. What's wrong is that you were sexually abused as a child and the effects of that trauma can linger for years. The trigger is pointing towards that harm, and it is evidence that part of you is trying to stay safe and get healthy. The whole self heals when we care for ourselves instead of hiding from the triggers.

If you can see your triggers as part of your holistic immune system and pay attention to them, you can start to heal the hurt underneath. It is possible to lessen the triggers' effects, or even eliminate them. It's not always easy, but it is possible. You have survived the worst thing that can happen to a person. You are brave and strong for surviving what you did. And now, you can draw on your bravery and strength to work through what your triggers are trying to tell you.



These steps¹ can help you activate your holistic immune system and act in your power.

1. Notice. Notice when you are triggered, and notice that what is happening is a trigger. What triggered you? What physical sensations do you feel? What emotions are you experiencing? What memories or thoughts come up?
2. Stop and breathe. Stop what you're doing. Take a break from the situation.
3. Choose. Consider your choices of coping mechanisms. Which options are best for this particular trigger? Do you have what you need to enact a choice (for example, you need a sound system of some kind if you want to listen to music as your coping strategy. Deep breathing, on the other hand, requires no tools). Don't be afraid to try new coping strategies, or to use several at once.
4. Engage. Engage in your coping strategies. Stay present, as much as you can.
5. Return. Return to what you were doing before the trigger, or return to Step 1 as needed.

¹ Adapted from Haines, Staci (1999). *The survivor's guide to sex: how to have an empowered sex life after child sexual abuse*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, Inc.

MY COPING TOOLS AND RESOURCES

The people I can call any time I'm scared, upset, or triggered:

Things that help me feel safe or comforted:

My coping skills

The skill:

To use this skill, I need these people or things:

My notes:

Things I want to remember or tell myself on bad days:

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August 2022

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Graphic and Publication Design by Norio Umezu Hall, RSP, and Laura Chow Reeve, Radical Roadmaps

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K040, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this product are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U. S. Department of Justice.

