

Triggers and Wounds

Have you ever been in a conversation and all of sudden, **you can't remember what you were even talking about?**

You're gone from the conversation, maybe *out in left field* and really emotional...

Someone said something that really ticked you off or triggered an emotional reaction and you just struggle to get back into the conversation.

Why? It is probably diffuse physiological arousal (dpa) and all you have left is your reptile brain.

What do when you are *emotionally flooded* and your heart rate approaches 100 beats per minute and your brain is less and less under your control, then your neocortex just shuts down?

Exercise: *Pay attention to how your body feels when you are overwhelmed by emotion and have your goal to be able to get your heart rate down to 80 or below within 25 minutes. "Self soothe" is, in essence, the same thing as relaxing, comforting yourself and calming down.*

See how long it takes you to get back to your baseline heart rate.

Do this repeatedly so that when you are triggered, you can quickly recover. The next step would be to not get triggered in the first place, by healing your emotional wound. If you are triggered, that means there is a wound that has not healed.

Practice: Do this when you feel yourself not breathing deeply or when you find yourself feeling overwhelmed.

If you intervene earlier in the process, you will find that you have more success. If you wait too long in the process to do something to manage your emotions, it is significantly harder.

Practice: Plan how you will do this, short term recovery- to 80 or fewer beats and longer time if it is really tough.

What is the sequence of concrete specific observable behaviors you will do to get your heart rate down to 80 beats?

Rehearse your plan mentally. Get in ten repetitions.

What did you do well? Revise the plan as needed to get it done.

Give your partner positive feedback: "One thing I thought was really effective was..."

Practice until you can do it without consciously thinking about it.

You won't get good at this if you do not practice it on a regular basis for a minimum of a month.

Can you imagine when you find yourself getting upset or triggered and being able to recover within twenty five minutes?

How wonderful would that feel?

You could repair the relationship much faster and get back to enjoying your day.

Homework

Prompt yourself or your partner with "What if we tried that relaxation technique we learned on the CD (YouTube)" or "Let's see if we can reduce our heart rate."

How many seconds does it take you to go down by 5 beats per minute? (practice, repeat and measure your progress)

Imagine I broke my pinky. She comes along and wants to hold my hand and my pinky has not yet healed.

If she held my other hand, no pain. If she holds the hand with the broken pinky, she has not done anything wrong, yet it really hurts.

She is not to blame for holding my hand.

It still hurt, because a wound was there (the pain is telling me that the wound is still unhealed. Holding my hand should not hurt. The fact that something that does not hurt, currently hurts, means that I have a wound that is not healed).

It works the same way with emotions. Blaming the person who hit your trigger by accident is not fair.

If they did it on purpose (no mind reading or making assumptions) that is another story.

If you know you have a wound, it is your responsibility to heal it. Ask them to avoid the wound while you heal it, but it is your job to heal the wound, not for people to walk on eggshells around you.

Homework

Consider looking at the wound that got hit.

How were you triggered?

Make a list of your triggers. Look for the pattern, please.

Was someone unfair or unreasonable, in your eyes?

Did someone do something that reminded you of something from your past?

Abusive behavior is a separate category, by the way. A trigger implies that there is a past association and you are reacting to something due to the past, not due to current behavior. Bad behavior is bad behavior, not a trigger.

One by one walk through them and **lean into the trigger** to desensitize.

Leaning in is the opposite of avoiding or distracting.

Feel the emotions, acknowledge them and allow yourself some self-empathy and self-compassion.

Some people benefit from picturing themselves as a five year old and feeling the pain of the wound.

What would the current age you say or do to soothe the five your old you, who is in pain?

Feel the pain and allow the pain to evaporate. Relax yourself back to your baseline beats per minute. Then do the next trigger.

Do each trigger for a full month until it is no longer an effective trigger for you.

You could probably do up to three triggers a day if you have spare time.

Don't do it half-heartedly.

Doing one or two thoroughly will help motivate you. It is rewarding to get back power over your life. Be amazed at how last month that same thing might have set you off and now, nothing.

If you know Emotional Freedom Technique, or bilateral stimulation, these are remarkable with eliminating triggers.

Yes, something that is currently a trigger can go away.

In EFT, tap the points while thinking about the painful trigger/wound and your body relaxes. Over time, the relaxation response overrides the negative emotions. It is no longer hijacking your emotions.

Prevention: Take care of balance in your life. When you are balanced, you are harder to trigger. Your physical needs, social, emotional, mental, work, family, spiritual, get down time, drink enough water, sleep, eat, do breathing and relaxation techniques, meditate, attend to your romantic relationship, laugh and play etc

Picture This

Stop reading for a minute and imagine a conflict that may have led you into DPA (Diffuse Physiological Arousal- when your heartrate goes above 100 bpm and you have lost access to your neocortex).

You may not have been aware of your heart rate, or of your stress hormones, but certainly you've experienced a time when you couldn't focus on whatever the argument was about.

Maybe your skin got blotchy. Or tears formed in your eyes. Perhaps you just stopped talking and shut down.

Maybe you said the same thing over and over again or your argument becomes suddenly disorganized.

For me, the tell-tale sign that I'm in DPA is that my back starts to sweat. I slur my words and stutter. I'm lucky that my indicator is so obvious. You might need to pay more attention.

You must learn to pay attention. How does it feel when your BPM is 80, 85, 90, 95? Pay attention to your body and what is happening inside. Be aware of your body and you have more power to intervene.

If you don't, you'll waste a lot of time stuck in futile conversations.

Have you ever gone running with a friend?

How easy was it to carry on a *meaningful* conversation?

Chances are, if you were really running, and your heart rate was high, it was nearly impossible. The fact that your heart rate is elevated at or above around 100 BPM means that you simply cannot process *complex* social interaction. Feelings and making meaning are more complicated.

When your heart rate gets up to 100 BPM in a relationship setting, that's called flooding.

If you're not paying attention, flooding leads to erratic communication.

Erratic communication leads to the Four Horsemen. The Four Horsemen leads to emotional disengagement and eventually to dissolution of the relationship.

As you respond, think about how people with emotional intelligence do it.

They walk away earlier in the situation, don't say the damaging words, they know the consequences of losing their temper and tell their partner they (themselves) need space to calm down and initiate the conversation when they are done.

They might talk with someone else to help them get perspective on the situation.

"This is my responsibility. No, she did not make me angry. My old wound is not fully healed and that is on me, not her. She is not to blame for my emotions. I am responsible for my emotions, my triggers and my wounds."

Predicting Triggers and Preparing For Them

Usually, when this happens, the person has no idea that what they said hit a nerve.

Some people talk about them as landmines and mine fields. If you know where the mines are, you can help your partner avoid them for now. Long term, though, is removing the mines.

Someone rings your doorbell, pushes the button and it registers as "ding dong." If you remove one of the wires, the next time they push your button, it doesn't make a sound.

You would prefer they not push your buttons and yet you now have freedom from a response. You are not waiting for them, you have control. Just because they push your buttons, doesn't mean you have to respond. You are no longer a puppet.

A trigger is a conditioned response.

It is not logical or rational or present based. You can condition a different response if you are conscious of your trigger.

The next time you find yourself out of control or having a reaction that is too strong for the situation, consider whether you've been triggered. Look at the overreaction and what got triggered.

ASK YOURSELF- What did this current situation remind you of from your past?

What would it take for you to heal this, now that you are aware that you are still hurting from your past?

Can you just feel the emotions without running away, without avoiding, without distracting yourself? Just feel for 15-20 minutes or so.

Don't escalate the feelings, just feel them until they naturally evaporate. That heals the wound.

Soothing Strategies:

Let it go - can you acknowledge the feeling and release it?

A common trigger for people is when someone they love is angry at them. That is hard to tolerate "because in the past when someone was angry with me..." (fill in the thought).

Sport Psychology

Now, play it through in your head a few times (visual helps and make sure you feel the feelings) without you reacting strongly. **Train your brain to respond rather than over react** to this stimulus.

Condition your brain to take it at face value, rather than read into it or take it personally.

Repeat this a few times (I suggest at least ten repetitions and then retest the trigger) until it no longer has a negative emotional component. As you visualize it, you have to feel the emotions or it is not going to work.

Then imagine it ending a better way, with success. Your choice of metaphor: Be free of this trigger, take the wire off the button, remove the landmine from the minefield...

More Coping Skills

Reconciliation of thought- how do I reconcile this current thought with what happened years or months ago (original triggering event)?

Disputed thought- ask yourself "Is this true?" "Is there evidence to support this thought?" It is an automatic thought, which does not mean it is real.

Radical acceptance- maybe the strategy is to simply go with, "It is what it is."

Avoid it- there are some triggers that can be avoided without making them stronger.

Bilateral stim- use the thinking and the feeling parts of your brain, simultaneously and watch your emotions balance out. How? Tap your hand to your thigh and your other hand to your other thigh and alternate in a rhythm- like playing the drums. It looks silly and is highly effective.

Predicting relapse- anticipate, predict and prepare for yourself to feel triggered and because you can predict it, you can rehearse how you would like to respond.

Reassure- what could you say to yourself to reassure yourself about this issue? Some of the self-talk strategies will come in handy.

Self-talk Strategies:

- I hold myself accountable
- I am responsible for my feelings
- This is not easy
- There is no quick fix
- There will be problems and struggles
- These are all true simultaneously

Got a Trigger That Isn't Going Away? Talk to a Counselor or play it through in your head:

- Do I need to take this personally?
- Does it matter?
- Is my perspective the only perspective available to me?
- Who cares?
- Can I get some distance from this?
- What would it take for me to soothe myself, calm myself right now?
- Do I have a chip on my shoulder about this?
- What would it take for me to reassure, or validate, myself?
- Name it. What is the trigger?
- What triggered you and what did it trigger you to say to yourself?
- Where did you feel it in your body?
- What did it look like?
- What image came to mind?
- Can you breathe into the middle of the pain?
- What did you do when you felt the pain?

Imagine being conscious of your top three triggers and taking the time to understand them, learn from them and let them help you grow. The next time someone pushes your button, you don't respond the same way- you've grown.

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Consider walking through this right now in your head.

Create a picture in your brain of someone hitting that particular button.

You feel triggered and begin to respond and then you catch yourself and soothe yourself instead of overreacting.

Feel how much confidence you have.

Feel the sense of satisfaction you have in gaining some mastery over it. The feeling doesn't control you; you have a choice in how to respond instead of a knee jerk reaction.

Long Term Solution

How do you relate to a trigger? A wound is hit and a long standing association triggered. No one did anything wrong, necessarily, and there is pain. Feel the pain and it goes away. Avoid the pain and the situation gets worse. Stir the pot and it gets worse. Go through it, not around it and watch how much more courage you have. You are braver.

A "Trigger", by definition, it is an over- reaction to the present stimulus.

Ask yourself the following questions to grow from this trigger:

- Am I attempting to avoid legit pain?
- Am I stirring the pot and adding drama?
- Am I pretending it is not stressful?
- Am I frustrated by the situation or a person?