



## What are triggers?

We all have emotional triggers. Perhaps someone makes an off-hand comment about how you look, your new project at work, how you seem a little tired lately, or a comment about someone you care about. Suddenly you feel a bit off-center, perhaps anxious, angry, guilty or sad.

## Where do triggers come from?

All of us have triggers of some kind. It could date back to a negative experience you had as a child. Perhaps you were bitten by a cat, and have what seems like an irrational fear response to petting your neighbor's cat.

Perhaps you had a history of abuse or neglect in your life and now you distrust certain individuals or people who resemble them physically or in the words they say. Sometimes that can be represented by an eerie feeling in a location, or from a smell or sound that causes a trigger reaction.

These emotional triggers can cause heaps of anxiety, depression, and yes, burnout.

An emotional trigger around whether you are "good enough" or "smart enough" can cause you to work extremely hard, yet feel you can never succeed.

## Knowing our triggers

When we can recognize our triggers we can begin to work with them. Only you can heal your triggers, but the good news is you **CAN**.

Give yourself a little time and think back to times when anger, fear, jealousy, sadness or other emotions came up for you and you weren't totally sure why.

Use the worksheet on the next page to identify some of your triggers, and then what your reaction to that trigger is. **Below are a few examples**, but *make this exercise your own*. For now, let's keep this simple, don't go into something deeply traumatic, instead, think of smaller instances that left you feeling, well, **TRIGGERED**.

TRIGGER	REACTION
Someone blaming you for something you didn't do	Anger, guilt, blame someone else, frustration
Someone trying to push you into something	Overwhelm, anger, agree even if you don't want to
Your child throws a temper tantrum in front of your mother	Embarrassed, frustrated, looked down upon, not a good mother
You hear a car screech around a corner	Urge to run, fear, hot flush on your skin



**Complete your worksheet below and then come back for review**

**Note:** Please record only as many triggers as your are comfortable with. The entire page has been provided should you wish to make copies for future exercises.

TRIGGER	REACTION



## How triggers work

When an emotional trigger hits us we actually respond with our bodies before our cognitive mind reacts. The bodily sensations kick in and that signals our amygdala to decide what to do next.

Should we run?

Fight?

Freeze?

It's a primal instinct that we may think is totally unnecessary, but it's there, under the surface driving what we do. We feel compelled to respond in a particular way. If we are reactive to this we may do so in a less than optimal way.

**If we are mindful of what's going on, though, we can *respond*, rather than react.**

With a little training, we can signal our cognitive mind, the prefrontal cortex, to calm the amygdala and bring reason back.

## Practice

In order to understand this, I want to take you through a short practice. Choose something that is a trigger for you to work with. Now, this shouldn't be something too traumatic, just something you can manage to bring back to your memory.

These triggers take us over very quickly, so we are going try to slow it all down and bring our awareness to what happens in a safe setting, where we can gain some familiarity with these signals and practice a new response. This can help us respond more skillfully next time and prevent escalation.

Let's take a couple of breaths and get settled. Close your eyes if you're comfortable with that.

Focus on your breathing in and out, and even the pause in between. Feel your body expanding with the breath, your body settling into the chair.

Now bring your trigger to mind. Take yourself back to when this happened in your mind. Really bring yourself fully back to that moment.

Where were you?

Who or what is involved?

What happened? Try to bring back the feeling you had at that moment.

What do you feel in your body?

Pay attention to the physical feelings in your face.

Your neck

Your jaw

Your chest

Even your belly

We feel emotions in many places.



How deep is the sensation?

How would you describe it?

Hot, cold, soft, hard?

Just notice, what's here, right now, what emotions go with this?

Is it hurt?

Anger?

Frustration?

Fear?

Just stay here for a moment and experience the moment.

What is here?

Now reflect for a moment on the thoughts of the situation. As an observer, without following the memory trails, just note the thoughts that come up.

Is it anger?

Self righteous?

Hopeless?

Are they victim thoughts?

Blaming?

Whatever those thoughts are, just note them and let them go. You may notice that thoughts connect to an emotion and amplify it. If you find yourself caught up in a thought, just let it go and go back to observing. Breathing in and out naturally, noticing thoughts, emotions and awareness.

When you see you can let these go now, you can also see you don't have to react to them at all. **You have a choice.**

Let's return to just the breath now, feeling your body breathe. In and out, feeling a sense of calm returning. If you still have some residual emotion, try this:

**Make a tight ball with your fists, squeeze the muscles hard, hold, then unfold your hand and release it.**

**Shake out your fingers.**

**Now let's take one good deep breath, and let go.**

How was that for you? Visualizing works differently for everyone. Let me know if the comments, or message me, I'd love to know.

Next we'll take this another step in learning how to respond to our triggers.



## Presence of mind

When we are triggered, our bodies actually respond before our cognitive mind realizes it, and we have a moment, just before we let the amygdala drive the bus, to bring ourselves back to center.

## Joe's triggers

Let's see how that works in practice. Joe's presentation started well and then boom—he got triggered by his boss pointing out a small flaw. His heart was racing, his face a little flushed, and there were flashes of **frustration** • **self-blame** • **anger** going through his head.

If Joe has awareness of what's happening to him right now, he can take action to calm the rush of emotions and calm his amygdala .

When we regulate our selves, we are bringing our prefrontal cortex, the cognitive area of the brain, into action to tone down the amygdala. For example:

When our child trips and spills a glass of milk on the floor. We use our prefrontal cortex to hold back the urge to yell at her.

Our prefrontal cortex allows us to take a more rational approach, because our rational mind knows it's simply an accident. Practicing this next exercise will enable us to respond more effectively to these instances.

## Stop

When we feel an emotional trigger, the first thing to do is to **stop**. Do not react for just a split second. Honestly, if this is all you do, it is a huge step in the right direction.

## Breathe

The second step is to **breathe**. One breath, bringing your attention to it, even just for one breath, helps settle your mind on something neutral, and deep breaths also activate the parasympathetic nervous system, calming your body as well as your mind.

**If you'd like, put your hand on your chest or your belly.**

**Take a deep breath in, and slowly out. Feel your hand moving with your body, pushed up and down.**

**Full breaths from your diaphragm.**

## Notice

The third step is to **notice**. Notice, is anything different in your body now? Your neck and shoulders? Tension? Temperature? Just notice what's happening in your body right now.

These first 3 steps help settle your body and your mind, allowing the rational part of your brain to be in the forefront.

## Reflect

The next step is to **reflect**, and create context for what's happening. Is there a history that causes this reaction? Self-perceived inadequacy or fear of failure? Expectations or hope? If so, is that adding fuel to the flame? Take a moment to look from the other person's perspective. What is their motivation? Without judging or condoning their behavior, acknowledge that just like you, they want to be happy, and whatever they do, they do because they feel it will help them in some way. Without judging if the feeling is right or wrong, just recognize this perspective on what's happening right now.



## Respond

The last step is to **respond**. How could you respond in the wisest, kindness and most effective way? You don't need to do it, but think of what is right for you. **Now you are in a position to decide what to do next from a place of awareness.**

So to reiterate, we:

**STOP**

**Breathe**

**Notice**

**Reflect**

**And**

**Respond**

(SBNRR for short)

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## In the moment

It's an extremely simple process, but I'm sure you're already thinking, "Poor Joe! He can't do all that while on stage in front of the board!"

And you're right. It takes some practice with this to be able to do it with one breath under pressure. I suggest you practice this when you have something a little less urgent, like that spilled glass of milk. Or you may have had an argument with a friend. Later, when you have time, bring the feelings back up, and practice SBNRR by yourself. Take each step slowly and see how you feel when you reach the end.

Over time you can develop the skills to do all or part of this practice when you feel an emotional trigger coming on. And remember, if you don't do anything else, when you feel triggered, **STOP** and take **just one breath**.

## Good triggers

There are positive triggers too. You see someone you care about smile and that triggers emotions in you. You smile back. You smell your favorite spaghetti sauce on the stove. You get hungry, and anticipate how good that's going to taste!

This exercise has been shared with the National Wellness Institute with the permission of mindfulness and emotional intelligence coach Janet Fouts. Find her at [Janetfouts.com](http://Janetfouts.com)