

What is a Trigger?

A “trigger” is a trauma reminder. It can be a feeling, smell, place, topic, or anything that engages our nervous system and causes a survival response. It is a surprise emotion, a memory that our body holds, one that may feel like it comes out of nowhere.



A trigger tells our body that danger—or something we perceive as dangerous—is close or here. Sometimes it actually is; however, we can also be triggered when we are perfectly safe. Our body just may not know that, even if we cognitively know that nothing bad is happening. Our body often reacts to stimuli first, and then we process what’s going on with our brain. When we are triggered, it can be really helpful to identify why, knitting a story together for ourselves so that we feel more in control, and also to foster compassion for the part of us that is triggered.

For a non-trauma related example, if you get food poisoning from eating fish, and you walk past a restaurant cooking some, you may suddenly feel sick to your stomach and find yourself walking faster. Your body is like, “Hey, I remember this smell. The last time I smelled this we got really sick. Get the heck out of here.” Our stomach feels sick as a signal to not eat, to protect oneself by not engaging with the act that led to getting sick in the first place. We might feel the urge to get away from the smell and place, which is a flight response. Even though this isn’t where you got food poisoning. Even though this fish might be safe.

You have a body memory of eating fish, then getting sick. Your body relives that memory at any fish reminder and will try and keep you safe from the same pain you felt before when you got sick.

Our body may react differently to different triggers depending on where we are that day. We may react differently to the same triggers than others. It all has so much to do with our personality, how we were raised, and our life experiences.

Getting triggered could mean going into a fight or flight response (heart racing, tons of stress hormones being released into the body) which can also bring up feelings of anger, or the sudden feeling that you need to leave where you are. This is when our sympathetic nervous system kicks

into action. This is the part of our nervous system that developed to keep us safe out in the wild, so when we saw a predator our body could either determine it was worth the fight to try and win, or our best bet was to run away.

A trigger can also take us into dissociation or freeze, the nervous system drops into engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. We feel disconnected, “not here,” checked out. Physically we may feel nothing, or like we’re existing outside of ourselves. This is our body’s last resort. If in the wild the fighting and running didn’t work, or we determined we couldn’t get to safety that way, we crashed into this response and played dead.

All of these reactions are our bodies trying to protect us. Any reminder of something bad that has happened to us calls our nervous system into action. The nervous system is literally programmed to keep us safe. Framing it in this way can help us feel less shame (which just triggers more survival responses) and helps us understand why our bodies are reacting how they are, which ultimately helps us feel more in control.

To learn more about how to cope with triggers, check out tips [here](#).

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Resources:

Life After Trauma by Rosenbloom & Williams
Trauma & recovery by Judith Herman
C-PTSD Workbook by Ariella Swartz
Trauma & The Body by Pat Ogden