

Coping with Triggers

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



When we are triggered (click here to see [blog](#) post on what a trigger is) our body needs help understanding that we are actually safe/safe enough after being reminded of a traumatic event. Sometimes, we are triggered when another experience retraumatizes us and unburies past pain (for example, being a sexual assault survivor and getting cat called on the street).

Our brains, nervous systems, and relationships with ourselves, and with others, are our best resources in these moments.

Here are some ways to cope with triggers using both our brains and our bodies:

How to tell your brain you're safe again:

During a trigger or traumatic moment, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) of our brains (which is the area where we do our critical thinking) shuts down. That's another reason why it's super hard to determine your level of safety during a trigger or “choose” what kind of reaction you have. Something we can do in the moment or directly after a trigger, especially once we have re-established safety, is to re-engage the PFC.

Say the current date and locate yourself within this moment, including people you are with or places. For example: It is August 19th, 2019. I am in my home where I feel secure. I am with a loving partner who helps keep me safe and isn't abusive.

This helps our brain connect back with the present moment. Hearing this, once, twice, 30 times can ground us in the present and reassure every part of us we are no longer back when the trauma happened.

Name five things you see, four things you feel (sensory not emotional), three things you hear, two things you smell, one thing you taste.

Again, this grounds us in the present moment. It also reconnects us to our senses, which can get overwhelmed during trauma reminders. It forces us to count which is a more critical thinking action, inviting the PFC gently back online.

Read, write, do work that feels fulfilling or engaging.

Any mental action asks our PFC to come back online. Feel out what is possible in these moments, maybe trying some of the above first to stabilize, and then experimenting with asking your brain to do a little more. Reading an engaging book or working on a project can bring us back to other parts of our lives that may not include our trauma. Here, we can feel our other identities, other than survivor, come back to us. “I am also a reader!” “I am also a programmer!” “I am also a writer!”

How to tell your nervous system you're safe again.

When our nervous system kicks into action during a trauma reminder it either goes into the sympathetic state of fight or flight or drops us into the parasympathetic response of freeze/submit. Our nervous system interprets information first, before our thinking brain can make a story or remind us that what we have been through isn't happening again. We may have to calm or reactivate ourselves depending on where our nervous system takes us to protect us. It's really important to keep in mind with all of this that the purpose of these survival responses is to keep us safe. When we can be in awe of our bodies instead of judgmental and ashamed, we invite more opportunity for healing and feeling powerful.

Complete your stress response cycle.

As described in Emily & Amelia Nagoski's book [Burnout](#) (which is an incredible resource) when we are triggered, our body begins a stress response cycle. This means that our nervous system has jumped into action and released stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. To go back to the example of being cat called, this can happen on your way to work, and then instead of getting to process what has happened—not only emotionally, but physically—we have to just keep on going, onto the next thing. When we create time and space for our bodies to release the stress energy and hormones, it tells our body we don't need to be in a survival response anymore. We can complete the cycle with any action that feels releasing. This is different for everyone, but below are some suggestions.

Physical movement to release stress hormones.

People often suggest exercise to survivors as a way to heal. However, exercise culture comes with so much body shaming and expectations. People also go through the motions of exercise without understanding what's happening inside of them or why they should be utilizing that coping technique. Physical movement releases stress hormones. When we feel like we have extra stress hormones in our body, or feel super checked out from them, movement can be a helpful tool. It moves some of those stress hormones through our bodies and brings us back into ourselves. Finding the movement that works best for you is a process. It is highly recommended that you choose something that makes you feel good about yourself in the process and not something that will add on top of everything else feelings of not being good enough.

Tapping

EFT Tapping is a therapeutic technique that invites the calming (not frozen) part of our parasympathetic nervous system to kick back in. Taking your pointer and middle finger and tapping rhythmically under the collarbone is a

movement to complete our stress response cycle we can always utilize. Often, we aren't able to get to a movement class or center at any time in the day, so to have movement with us that feels releasing and grounding is useful. Experiment with tapping different patterns, different areas of the body, and with different intensities. Here we connect with our internal sense of what we need or feels good through listening for what our body is asking for.

Breath

Our breath is another coping tool we always have with us. Experiment with what kinds of breath feel releasing or grounding during or after a trigger. There is "box breath" where you inhale for 5 seconds, hold for 5 seconds (when we hold our breath, we tell our bodies we are in control), and release for 5. "Fire breath" is very releasing, which includes inhaling through the nose deeply and then exhaling through the mouth making a loud noise through the back of the throat. This is also a helpful way to experiment with taking up more space with the breath, as many marginalized people are taught to be quiet and small. Counting the breath, whatever kind of breath, invites the front of our brain to join in too, as discussed above. Having breath awareness is very grounding, just to notice how you are breathing with curiosity and not shame.

Connection with ourselves & others

When we connect with anything inside or outside of ourselves (our friends, partners, the earth, pets, our inner child) we activate a part of our nervous system that brings us back into the safe window, where we are feeling and thinking, but not too much or too little. Feeling connected, watching people's faces respond and the loving tone of their voice, cuddling with an animal, all of these signal to our bodies that we are cared for and can come back into the present moment.

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