

Navigating a Trigger

A Self-Care Mastery Guide

What is a Trigger?

A *trigger* is any stimulus, external or internal, that activates a distressing emotional response. It might be a smell, a memory, a tone of voice, a facial expression, or even a fleeting thought. Triggers are often connected to past trauma or painful experiences and can launch us into emotional states that feel disproportionate to the present moment.

The Nervous System's Response to a Trigger

When triggered, your nervous system may shift from a regulated (ventral vagal) state into a defensive survival mode. This can manifest as:

- **Fight or Flight (Sympathetic Activation):** Mobilizing to confront or escape the perceived threat
- **Freeze or Collapse (Dorsal Vagal Shutdown):** Immobilization when escape or defense feels impossible
- **Ventral Vagal (Safe/Social/Regulated):** Steady and calm

These are evolutionary survival responses governed by your autonomic nervous system.

Physiological Changes by State

Ventral Vagal State (Safe / Social / Regulated)

- Steady, calm heart rate and breath
- Warm hands and feet (good circulation)
- Functional digestion and healthy appetite
- Relaxed muscles and open, upright posture
- Engaged facial expressions, expressive eyes
- Balanced energy and alert presence
- Emotional state: calm, grounded, joyful, curious
- Capacity for meaningful connection and communication




Sympathetic State (Fight or Flight)

- Rapid heart rate and shallow breathing
- Muscle tension, clenched jaw or fists
- Digestive slowdown (nausea, dry mouth)
- Dilated pupils and tunnel vision
- Sweaty palms, restlessness
- Racing thoughts, irritability, panic, or anxiety
- Posture: braced, alert, ready to react

Dorsal Vagal State (Shutdown / Collapse)

- Slowed heart rate, shallow or held breath
- Low energy, heaviness, numbness
- Cold extremities, slumped posture
- Digestive shutdown, no appetite
- Disconnection from surroundings or self (dissociation)
- Emotions: sadness, despair, emptiness, tearless crying
- Withdrawal from social interaction

Nervous System State Comparison Chart

State	Heart Rate	Breathing	Muscles/Posture	Digestion	Energy	Emotions	Connection
 Ventral Vagal	Calm, steady	Deep, rhythmic	Relaxed, upright	Normal	Balanced	Calm, connected, curious	Engaged, empathetic
 Sympathetic	Fast	Shallow, rapid	Tense, braced	Reduced	Hyper-alert	Fear, anger, anxiety	Reactive, defensive
 Dorsal Vagal	Slow	Minimal or held	Slumped, limp	Suppressed	Numb, shut down	Numb, despair, dissociation	Withdrawn, disconnected

How to Navigate a Trigger: Step-by-Step

1. Recognize and Name the Trigger

- Pause and observe what just happened
- Name the feeling: “I feel anxious,” “I feel dismissed,” etc.
- Identify what the trigger might be connected to

2. Ground in the Present Moment

- Use your five senses: What do you see, hear, feel, smell, taste?
- Try the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique
- Place your feet flat on the floor and feel your body supported

3. Regulate the Nervous System

- Deep belly breathing (inhale for 4, exhale for 6-8)
- Humming, singing, or toning to stimulate the vagus nerve
- Gentle movement or stretching
- Cold water on the face or holding an ice cube

4. Self-Validate and Reassure

- Remind yourself: “This feeling is valid. I am safe in this moment.”
- Affirm: “My nervous system is responding as it was designed to. I can return to calm.”

5. Integrate the Experience

- Journal: What did this trigger teach me?
- Reflect on past patterns and what needs healing
- Share the experience with a trusted friend, therapist, or coach

Tools for Continued Resilience

- Develop a daily self-care routine to keep your nervous system resilient
- Practice nervous system mapping: Learn to identify early signs of dysregulation
- Use body-based therapies (yoga, breathwork, somatic practices)
- Create a support system: trusted people, grounding objects, nature, pets

Final Thoughts

Navigating a trigger is not about eliminating them but responding to them with curiosity and compassion. Triggers are invitations, clues that point toward where your healing is still needed. With practice, each trigger becomes an opportunity to return to your center with greater wisdom and resilience.
