



## Five Hidden Triggers in Relationships

**1. The respect trigger:** Dismissing your partner's complaints or opinions. Nothing does more damage to the integrity of your relationship than not taking your partner's concerns seriously. A single shrug propels a speeding torpedo directly into the hull of your partner's esteem for you, and it's not easy to remove shrapnel and repair twisted steel. No matter how minor or irrational the issue seems to you, ignoring or minimizing, cutting your partner off mid-sentence, countering with your own complaint or opinion, or worst of all calling your partner crazy will trigger the feeling that you don't respect your partner. It doesn't matter if you do respect your partner. And it doesn't matter what you did yesterday to show it. Bring that up, and you'll trigger a follow-up explosion, because now you want credit for your generous, loving, and selfless gift. Also, be aware that offering to make amends or fix a problem without fully hearing the problem has the same effect as dismissing the problem. And sometimes, a minor problem doesn't require a response—only a patient, listening ear and acknowledgment of your partner's feelings. Similarly, you can allow space for opinions you don't share and refrain from debating them. Dismissal triggers a predictable, destructive pattern of dysfunctional communication that worsens conflict by attempting to avoid it. The best way to avoid the respect trigger is to equate respect with listening and realize that you don't have to agree to respect your partner's position.

**2. The value trigger:** Coming across as inconsiderate. As with the appearance of impropriety in politics, your being perceived as selfish or inconsiderate, even if you're not, is all it takes to blow a fatal hole in your relationship. If there are little or big things you do—or don't do—that leave your partner feeling your needs and satisfaction always come first, you're doomed. These actions or omissions may make no difference to you, but they make all the difference to your partner. Being forgetful, inattentive, or unconcerned with your partner's emotional state, failing to give recognition, or taking anything your partner does for you for granted triggers the feeling that you don't value or appreciate your partner. And there's no point in staying where you're not valued. Your partner's reaction—frustration, anger, even rage—may seem disproportionate to the seemingly minor triggering event. But you're not the judge of how devalued your partner feels, nor have you factored in the cumulative impact of dozens or

hundreds of devaluing incidents. And if you are considerate in some or even many areas, you're blind to the idea that you could be inconsiderate elsewhere. The best way to avoid the value trigger is to reframe your decision-making. Instead of asking yourself, does this matter to my partner, ask yourself, does my partner matter to me?

**3. The resentment trigger:** Shirking responsibility and dumping it on your partner. No one wants to be married to or live with a grown child, especially if you're raising or have already raised your kids. Temper tantrums are an active-aggressive way of acting out feelings common in toddlers, but the adult responsibility dump constitutes a quiet form of classic passive-aggressive behavior. If you consistently leave all the heavy lifting—emotional, financial, and social—or even all the lightweight stuff to your partner, don't be surprised if you eventually get a barbell dropped on your head. Whether you claim ignorance, deftly praise your partner as being better at things you'd rather not do, or make no overt demands but brim with silent expectations, you're causing frustration and triggering resentment in your partner for always having to be the responsible killjoy. In addition, your partner will resent you—and your happiness—as you have all the fun. Responsibility is rarely shared 50/50 in relationships, but both partners must come to the table and contribute. If you frequently hear the words, “Step up to the plate,” and you're not on a baseball diamond, it's time to change your game. The best way to avoid the resentment trigger is to stop thinking about what you can get out of and start putting in as much as you get out.

**4. The stagnation trigger:** Repeating mistakes and not learning or growing. Relationships thrive on growth and evolution, and successful relationships don't look the same as they did 10 years ago or even 10 days ago. When one partner stagnates, the other grows apart simply by continuing to grow. No one likes to be criticized, but just as a parent's job is to instill values and raise a civilized adult, a partner's job is to challenge you and help you grow into your best self. If you repeat the same mistakes, or dig your heels in and resist change, you trigger fear in your partner that the relationship is stagnating, and your partner begins to push you to start growing. And you start to feel pain. You can avoid that pain by withdrawing inward. But the pain of growing and emerging from your shell is nothing compared to the pain of losing your partner when he or she seeks growth and fulfillment elsewhere. The best way to avoid the stagnation trigger is to adopt the practices of self-improvement and relationship improvement. Ask yourself each day, how can I be just a little better, and how can I make my relationship just a little better, too.

**5. The despair trigger:** The quadruple whammy. When the first four triggers are set off consistently, dysfunctional patterns of conflict such as the endless argument take root and begin to corrupt your relationship dynamic. Essentially, everything goes to shit. You can't put your finger on the moment your partner gave up on you

and stopped trying, because there often isn't a single moment but an accumulation of moments that erode hope. While the reaction to stagnation is intense frustration and fighting fiercely for change, the reaction to the sinking feeling that things are never going to change is despair and quitting. So you trigger despair in your partner when you prove, through inaction, that things are not going to get better any time soon, if ever. When despair sets in, your partner begins replacing the together time you need for intimacy with solo activities, and the next stage is often emotional or even sexual infidelity. The calculus is this: There's nothing but misery for me here, so I might as well make myself happy. No, you're never responsible for your partner's emotional withdrawal or cheating (remember, triggering is not causing), but despair leaves the need for happiness and fulfillment unmet, and unmet needs are relationship kryptonite.