

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Understanding Traumatic Memories and Triggers

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Break
- Topic: Understanding Traumatic Memories and Triggers
 - Introduction
 - Autobiographical Memory and Traumatic Memory
 - Understanding Triggers
 - Recognizing Triggers
 - Types of Triggers
 - Triggers for Positive Experiences
- The Store: An Exercise for Support, Strength, and Protection
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Practice The Store exercise.
 - Use the Learning to be Present exercise from [chapter 1](#) as needed.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 14.1, Identifying Triggers.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 14.2, Reflecting on Reactions to Triggers.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 14.3, Identifying Positive Triggers.

Introduction

The instability experienced by people with a complex dissociative

disorder is often related to the reliving of past traumatizing events, also known as flashbacks or reactivated traumatic memories (*Boon, 2003; Van der Hart et al., 1992*). In this chapter you will learn more about traumatic memories and how they are different from everyday, normal memories; why they are so overwhelming; and how they are related to dissociative parts of yourself. Traumatic memories are often evoked or triggered by a stimulus (trigger) in the present that is a reminder of some aspect of the original traumatizing event. You will learn more about triggers and how to recognize them. In the next chapter, you will then learn how to reduce and cope with triggers.

Autobiographical Memory and Traumatic Memory

Generally people are able to recall important events they have experienced in the past. They realize the event has happened to them and that it is not happening now. The memory is, so to speak, a part of their “autobiography.” But as you may painfully experience at times, this is not the case with traumatic memories. When you, or a dissociative part of you, reexperiences a traumatic memory, you feel as though it (or at least some aspect of it) is happening in the present.

Traumatic memories may include intense or overwhelming feelings, such as panic, rage, shame, loss, guilt, despair; conflicting beliefs and thoughts; physical sensations such as pain; visual images, sounds, and smells; and also behaviors, such as running away, fighting, freezing, or shutting down. Each of these aspects of a traumatic memory can occur simultaneously, in succession, or separately at different times. Typically, these reactions are not appropriate to the current situation, or they are far more intense than the situation warrants. You may want to return to [chapter 4](#) for a review of traumatic memories (flashbacks).

Understanding Triggers

A trigger (or reactivating stimulus) is something that bears a literal or symbolic similarity to an aspect of an unresolved traumatic experience. It may be a present-day situation, an interaction with another person, an object, or even an inner experience such as a particular feeling or sensation, a smell, or a position of your body.

Parts of you then may automatically react in similar ways as during the original traumatizing situation, that is, parts of you have conditioned reactions that you cannot consciously control.

Being able to accept traumatic experiences as your own is not easy, and it may take some time and work before you are ready. This manual is meant to offer you opportunities to learn and practice the skills you need to be able to achieve the task of fully realizing what has happened to you. In the meantime, you may find that you continue to have problems from time to time with being triggered, because some dissociative parts of yourself remain stuck in trauma-time and thus are vulnerable to reliving past experiences. Therefore, it will be helpful for you to be able to recognize triggers and your reactions to them in order to change these conditioned responses.

Recognizing Triggers

It may be hard to recognize when you are triggered unless you have an extreme reaction. But it does help to recognize some possibilities that you might be triggered:

- Your reaction to a situation seems more intense than is warranted, or it is significantly different than your usual reactions.
- You are not able to step back and reflect in the situation, but feel stuck in your reaction.
- Inner parts of you become activated to the degree that you are aware of them.
- You have a defense reaction, that is, flight, fight, freeze, or collapse.
- You seem to watch your reaction unfold, not feeling in control of it, as though another part of you is having the reaction.
- You switch to another part of yourself and lose time.
- You have a sudden flashback; these are almost always triggered by something in the present.

Sometimes you may be able to recognize the link between a trigger and the original traumatizing event. For example, a person might be aware that the smell of gasoline evokes fear and panic

because of a traumatic past experience involving gasoline. However, at other times, you may not be aware of what has triggered you. Perhaps you have no memory of the event and thus cannot make a connection with a trigger. Or even if you know about it, you may not be (very) aware of the part of yourself that has become triggered, or you may simply not understand the link between them. As we have noted, the parts of you that function in daily life are adept at avoiding parts stuck in trauma-time, as well as the traumatic memories that they hold, so you may find yourself not wanting to know why you are triggered. Unfortunately, this avoidance has serious disadvantages. When you cannot understand and accept your inner experiences, they become confusing and frightening, seemingly arbitrary and out of control. This only increases your fear of inner experiences and you then make your life ever smaller to avoid dealing with yourself (see [chapter 5](#) on the phobia of inner experience). Therefore, you need to learn to reflect on triggers and the reactions they evoke in you and other parts of yourself.

Although it may sometimes seem as though “all of life” is a trigger, it can be of great help to distinguish specific triggers. Then you can notice that not all situations are equally disturbing to you and that you have already learned to cope successfully with certain triggers.

You may be puzzled by the fact that you can be triggered at one time by a stimulus, but not at another time. Your vulnerability to triggers is determined to a large degree by your physical and mental condition in the moment. If you are more tired or spacey, sick or seriously stressed, or faced with new challenges or problems that seem overwhelming, you are more likely to be triggered. If parts of you are in inner chaos and conflict, you are very prone to becoming triggered more easily. And as you work on particular aspects of your history, the triggers related to that time may be more active for a while.

Triggers can involve an infinite variety of experiences or objects, depending on what has become associated with a particular traumatic episode. Although it is important to recognize triggers, you do not necessarily need to know at this point in time the history related to the trigger in order to cope differently. In the early stages of treatment you may not yet be ready to deal with painful memories to which they are related.

For example, if you feel panic in crowded stores, regardless of whether you know why, you can begin to help yourself with practical solutions. Perhaps you might choose to shop during times when stores are less crowded. You might make a list before you go, so that you minimize time in the store. You can help parts of you remain in an inner safe place while you shop. You might take your partner or a friend with you. We will discuss strategies such as these to cope with triggers in the following chapter, but your first task is to be able to recognize that you have become triggered and to notice your conditioned reactions, that is, your thoughts, feelings, impulses, sensations, movements, and so forth. To that end, we describe various types of triggers, which may help you become more aware of your own.

Types of Triggers

Following you will find an explanation of different types of triggers.

Time-related triggers. You may have heard of “anniversary reactions,” in which a person has a predictable and involuntary reaction on or around the anniversary of a traumatizing event. This experience is most well known in people who have intense grief reactions each year around the anniversary of the loss of a loved one. But anniversary reactions may be evoked for a wide variety of other events. At first, you may not recognize an anniversary reaction, but you or your therapist may begin to notice that you, for instance, become depressed, or very anxious, or feel suicidal around the same time each year, time after time.

Time-related triggers may also involve a time of day or a particular period of time, such as weekends or holidays (see also [chapter 16](#)). For example, some traumatized people may become increasingly fearful and anxious as it becomes dark each evening, related to overwhelming experiences that may have occurred around that time.

Place-related triggers. Many people find it hard to return to places where they were abused or had other highly distressing experiences. This avoidance can generalize to other places that remind them of the original situation, prompting them to evade more places and experiences to prevent triggering. For example, if a person had been robbed or assaulted on a bus, he or she might be

inclined to avoid all busses. And eventually, this person may come to avoid any public transportation, including trains, trams, and planes.

Many traumatized people regularly report that they are upset or overwhelmed by crowded spaces, such as shopping malls, long checkout lines, or crowded waiting rooms. Their aversion often has nothing to do with a traumatic memory, but rather they feel overstimulated and trapped, which may be similar to inner experiences they felt during traumatic events in the past.

Even though some parts may be triggered by certain places, other parts may not be; they may even enjoy, for example, riding in the train or flying, or being at the mall. These contradictory experiences may set up internal conflicts, because some parts may dismiss or even be unaware that a trigger is problematic for other parts.

Relational triggers. Relationships themselves are often triggers. Relationships and any perceived threat to them evoke the most powerful feelings in everyone, for better or worse. When you have been mistreated by others, intense feelings of abandonment, rejection, humiliation, shame, panic, yearning, and rage are often easily triggered by the minor ups and downs that are a natural part of even the best of relationships. And when a serious relational disruption occurs, it can feel catastrophic. Some parts of you may always be on guard, looking out for any cues that perhaps you are being rejected or criticized, and thus they may overlook important cues to the contrary. Others may desperately seek out relationships, not attending to whether they are healthy (see [chapters 28 and 29](#) for more about relationships).

Many patients with complex dissociative disorders rightly felt criticized, lonely, and misunderstood as children. Anger or critical remarks by a partner or a friend in the present may quickly give rise to a partial reliving of old experiences, such as intense fear of being abandoned or misunderstood, or fear that you cannot speak your mind without terrible consequences.

Internal triggers. People who have a dissociative disorder have typically learned to avoid much of their inner experience in order to avoid traumatic memories (see [chapter 5](#)). Any inner experience may be triggering, such as the sound of another part talking or yelling, certain emotions (anxiety, anger or shame, and so forth), sensations (such as pain, sweating), needs (such as wanting to be

comforted), or thoughts (such as “I wish I was dead” or “I am not happy in this relationship”).

Some parts may even provoke other parts as an internal reenactment of old experiences. For example, a highly critical part might scream that you are stupid when you are trying your best to cope with a difficult problem at work. This inner experience may be quite similar to some you may have had as a child. We will further discuss ways to deal with this type of internal triggering from dissociative parts of yourself in [chapter 22](#) on anger, and [chapter 24](#) on shame and guilt.

Sensory triggers. Body sensations are a particular type of internal trigger. These may resemble similar sensations that occurred around the time of a traumatizing event. Smells are particularly potent triggers. Other sensations include pain, the racing heart and breathlessness of anxiety, feeling too hot or cold, nausea, thirst, hunger, stomachache, the need to eliminate, or even certain body postures. Some women may be triggered by the sensations that accompany menstruation. The sense of being touched by another person may be especially triggering from some individuals.

Triggers for Positive Experiences

Triggers are usually thought of as negative, but some triggers evoke positive feelings and memories. For example, looking at pictures of a nice holiday that you enjoyed, the smell or taste of a specific food, or particular music may all evoke positive memories and feelings of contentment or warmth. Positive triggers are important because they can help you find some enjoyment and calmness in the present. In fact, your personal anchors are positive triggers that help you stay in the present.

THE STORE: AN EXERCISE FOR SUPPORT, STRENGTH, AND PROTECTION

This imagery exercise is intended to help you cope with triggers by girding yourself with resources that can help when you feel overwhelmed. Practice this exercise often, or a similar one that fits better for you, when you are feeling calm. Once you are familiar with the exercise, you can begin using it

when you feel stressed.

Imagine a store in which anything you want or need as a resource for healing can be found and taken for free. This is no ordinary store, with ordinary aisles and ordinary merchandise. This is a magical place, a special place, beautiful and comfortable. Perhaps you see it as a quaint village shop, or an old bookstore with comfortable chairs and steaming pots of tea, or a sleek high-tech store with all the latest gadgets, where espresso and lattes are available as you browse. You can envision it in just the right way for you. It is your store that you create. In your shop you feel completely at ease, wandering up and down the familiar aisles, where the lighting and temperature are just right, where all is well and just as it should be. Perhaps it is quiet, or perhaps your favorite music is playing in the background. Perhaps there is even a little stage where your favorite musicians are performing just for you. This is one store where you really enjoy lingering, choosing just the right items for your strength and protection. And indeed, there is an endless selection: shields; screens; transparent bubbles; magic stones; books of great wisdom; vials of liquid with healing properties; protective spirit or animal guides; magic cloaks of many colors, and some invisible to all but you; form-fitting, lightweight suits of armor; emotional Kevlar, and on and on. Each is an equally strong and effective protection from the slings and arrows of life, from the vulnerability of being triggered. You may choose as many as you like, and exchange them as you wish. And as you wander around, or sit comfortably in a chair, allow all parts of you to have their time in this store, because it is for all of you.

Just to practice, try out one of the special protective suits or cloaks. Just as a raincoat or waterproof suit keeps the water out and allows it to slide off of you, or just as a windbreaker protects you against icy winds, so you can imagine that you have found just the right suit of protection for yourself in your store. And allow each part of yourself that wishes or needs to have their own suits, each suit just right for each part of you. You will be amazed at how flexible and lightweight, yet sturdy and comfortable it is. You can don it in an instant, so quickly that no one notices. You can take it with you wherever you go, and wear it whenever you like. Your suit or cloak is just the right weight, the right material, the right texture and color to help you feel completely protected from head to toe, front to back, up and down, all around, where not a single chink or crack or hole will allow negative forces to gain entry, and where you are

comfortably ensconced in safety and calm. You are completely protected in body, mind, and heart. You are protected from other people's emotion that set you on edge, from triggers that might evoke you, from the stresses and strains of life and living. If you wear the suit even when you feel more tranquil and secure, it offers you extra protection, adding even more serenity, calm, and safety.

Now allow a situation to come to mind, one in which you felt uneasy or insecure. Imagine wearing your suit or cloak and walking into that situation with a sense of deep protection, confidence, relaxation. It is as though you cannot be touched by the situation, unaffected by the stress of it, yet still you feel very present because you feel safe and protected. Take your time to imagine yourself in the situation with this protective suit. And be aware that at any moment, you may make adjustments to your suit or return it to your store and find another. When you are ready, you can return to your store. Look around once again, taking all the time that you need to be familiar with every aspect of it. This is your store. You can return whenever you need or want. It is there for each part of you whenever it is needed. And when you are ready you can return to the present, feeling strong and serene, supported and safe.

Homework Sheet 14.1

Identifying Triggers

Choose a time when you were recently triggered. Reflect back on the situation and answer the questions below, as you are able. This reflection will help you become more aware of yourself and what evokes you and other parts of you. If this exercise evokes too much for you, simply stop and practice a grounding or relaxation exercise. It is essential to pace yourself. Discuss with your therapist how you might be able to learn more about triggers without becoming overwhelmed.

1. Where were you and what were you doing when you were triggered?
2. Describe the trigger, if you know.
3. What was your inner experience of being triggered (for example, feeling like you were out of body, anxiety or panic, visual or auditory flashbacks, nausea, loss of time)?
4. If you lost time, what is the last thing you can recall (for example, a sound, smell, image, thought, feeling)?
5. Are you aware of any specific parts that may be involved? If so, please describe what you understand about that part of yourself.
6. If you were with someone, what, if anything, might have been stirred up for you in the relationship (for example, you felt hurt, angry, invisible?)
7. Note the date, season, and time of day when you were triggered, if you have a sense that the trigger may be time related.

Homework Sheet 14.2
Reflecting on Reactions to Triggers

In the chart below, choose a time each day this week when you have been triggered (if you have). Do not focus on any traumatic memories at this point, but only your reactions to them. As you reflect on the experience, answer the questions below as best you are able. If you are not being triggered, that is wonderful! You may then use this chart to describe previous examples of being triggered.

	What triggered you, or a part of you?	What did you think and feel?	What was your physical reaction (fight, flight, freeze, collapse?)	What resources or help would you need to respond differently in the future?
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Homework Sheet 14.3

Identifying Positive Triggers

Make a list of positive triggers and what they evoke for you. Use these experiences in your daily life to help you feel better and more grounded.

Examples

1. ***Positive trigger:*** snowfall
Reaction: a feeling of pleasant excitement and fun memories of playing in the snow
2. ***Positive trigger:*** the smell of freshly baked bread
Reaction: a feeling of comfort, of having pleasant and basic things in life
3. ***Positive trigger:*** a funny joke or movie
Reaction: laughter, feeling grounded, a feeling of being lighter for a time

1. Positive trigger:

Reaction:

2. Positive trigger:

Reaction:

3. Positive trigger:

Reaction: