

An emotional trigger is anything — including memories, experiences, or events — that sparks an intense emotional reaction, regardless of your current mood.

Emotional triggers are associated with [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

Knowing what your emotional triggers are (and how to deal with them) is a key component of good [emotional health](#).

Just about everyone has some emotional triggers, though these might look a little different from person to person.

They might include reminders of unwanted memories, uncomfortable topics, another person's words or actions, even your own behaviors.

Common situations that trigger intense emotions include:

- [rejection](#)
- [betrayal](#)
- unjust treatment
- challenged beliefs
- helplessness or loss of control
- being excluded or ignored
- disapproval or criticism
- feeling unwanted or unneeded
- feeling smothered or *too* needed
- insecurity
- loss of independence

A key step in learning to recognize your triggers involves paying attention when situations generate a strong emotional response.

Beyond surging emotions, you might also experience some [physical symptoms of anxiety](#), like:

- pounding heart
- upset stomach
- shakiness or dizziness
- sweaty palms

When you notice these signs, stop to consider what just happened and the response it activated.

Say you spent the afternoon deep cleaning your apartment and rearranging the living room. When your partner gets home from work, you wait excitedly for them to comment.

Instead, they head to the kitchen for a snack and then settle onto the sofa without saying a word.

You're disappointed that your hard work went unacknowledged, and you start to get angry and frustrated. You can hear your heart pounding and your jaw clenching. It takes everything in you not to snap and say something like, "Notice anything different?" or "I can't believe you're so oblivious!"

Try following these feelings back to their origins by thinking back on other situations that made you feel what you're currently feeling.

Maybe it suddenly seemed as if you were a teenager again, trying to make the house look perfect to earn approval from an indifferent parent who traveled often.

When the emotional trigger (your partner's indifference) fired, you're transported back to that time in your life, when you felt like nothing you did was good enough.

Sometimes, the connection isn't quite as clear, so you may have to do a bit more digging.

When strong emotions come up, don't try to ignore them or fight them back. Instead, approach them with curiosity to get more insight on what may have triggered them.

Do any patterns stand out? For example, relationship discussions might bring up envy and frustration related to your fear of being alone.

Once you've identified your emotional triggers, you might think, "Well, that's easy. All I have to do is avoid those situations."

It's not really that simple, though. You can't avoid or escape from every difficult situation life throws at you. And it's pretty much a guarantee that unpleasant emotions *will* come up occasionally.

In other words, you're better off scrapping that getaway plan and preparing yourself to deal with any triggers that might come up in your day-to-day life.

Here are a few pointers to help you respond.

First, remind yourself that it's totally OK to feel whatever you're feeling in that moment. Sad, angry, afraid, mad — triggers can evoke plenty of emotions, and that's normal.

But before you can begin working through those emotions, you have to accept them. Denying or [ignoring what you feel](#) generally only makes it worse over time.

It can help to remind yourself of the differences between the past and the present, but do so with compassion for yourself, not judgment.

Say a coworker picks up your book and asks, “What are you reading?”

If this makes you recall classmates who used to tease you and hide your books, you might feel anxious and annoyed and want to snatch the book away.

Instead, acknowledge that, while circumstances in the past may have caused pain and led you to feel that way, those circumstances aren’t repeating right now.

This reminder can help you [take back control](#) and actively choose another response, such as briefly summarizing the book or following up with a question about what they’re reading.

Physically leaving can help you avoid emotional overwhelm. If you can, excuse yourself to take a short break. This can help you avoid an instinctive reaction you might regret later.

Once on your own, try some [breathing](#) or [grounding exercises](#) to calm down and soothe yourself.

The goal here isn’t to completely avoid the circumstances that triggered your emotions. You’re just giving yourself a chance to cool off so you can handle the situation more productively. Once you feel more relaxed, you can return to the situation with a clearer head.

Generally speaking, most people in your life don't try to make you feel bad on purpose. Some of their actions or words that upset you could even be a byproduct of *their* emotional triggers or other factors you aren't aware of.

Your partner who walked in and didn't realize you'd completely changed the living room? Perhaps they got some bad news or had a rough day and needed some space to decompress before talking about it.

Everyone has unique emotions bubbling under the surface at any given time, and you may not know what's going on unless they tell you.

It's also easier to misinterpret behavior or intent when you don't know someone well. This makes it even more important to consider their perspective.

When someone else's actions trigger your emotions, opening up may help you avoid a similar situation with them in the future.

Take a minute to find your calm, if necessary, and then try using I-statements and other [healthy communication skills](#) to address the situation:

- Instead of slamming your desk drawer and yelling, "Where did **you** **put** my tape?"
- Try calmly saying, "**I feel** frustrated when you take my things without asking and don't return them."

In some cases, it may help to challenge the other person to practice better communication.

If [silent treatment](#), passive-aggressive behavior, or unkind or sarcastic remarks are emotional triggers for you, try a polite, "What's on your mind?" or "Sorry, I'm not sure what you mean by that."

Short-term coping strategies can help you get better at dealing with specific emotional triggers as they come up, but that doesn't mean you have to just get used to living with them.

There are several ways to go about addressing the root causes of your emotional triggers, which can help them have less of an impact over time.

[Mindfulness exercises](#) help you learn to pay more attention to what you feel and experience in the present.

Boosting mindfulness skills can help you become more aware of the emotions that come up throughout the day. Being more in tune with your feelings can make it easier to both understand what triggers them and find helpful ways to cope.

[Research from 2019](#) suggests mindfulness meditation can help improve your ability to process and regulate emotions.

Other types of [meditation](#) can also help you learn to focus your awareness and find an inner calm, even when faced with difficult or unwanted feelings.

[Learn how to start a regular meditation practice.](#)

When it comes to managing emotional triggers, much of the work lies with you. Other people don't bear responsibility for your reactions. They are, however, responsible for their actions, which might trigger your emotions.

Here's an example:

One of your friends is [cheating](#) on their partner. When they first mentioned it, you told them hearing about the infidelity made you uncomfortable. Although you asked them not to share further details, they keep bringing it up, even after you restated this boundary. You feel angry, upset, and disappointed — by the cheating *and* their lack of respect for your [boundaries](#).

People who seem to want to push your buttons intentionally will often continue doing so, no matter how many times you ask them to stop.

[Healthy relationships](#) involve mutual consideration and respect. The alternative — a [relationship](#) where your emotional needs are regularly disregarded — often ends up harming you more than it benefits you.

Regularly tracking your emotions in a [journal](#) can help you recognize specific patterns, such as emotional triggers and times of greater vulnerability.

Maybe you notice you find it pretty easy to keep your cool when your boss critiques your work, but the same can't be said when you feel like your partner doesn't want to spend time with you.

This information can guide positive change. Your usual response to this trigger, which is shutting down, usually only makes you feel worse. Instead, you resolve to [start a conversation](#) with your partner next time these emotions come up.

Emotion regulation is a difficult skill to master for most people, and it's not always easy to identify triggers on your own.

Your instinctive reactions to certain triggers can become so deeply ingrained in your behavior that you may not even realize how your reactions cause harm. If you're too close to your triggers to recognize them and address their effect on your interactions, therapy can help.

Therapy provides a safe, non-judgmental space to identify triggering situations and explore potential reasons behind your triggers.

A therapist can also:

- help you practice using more productive communication strategies to express emotions in any situation
- offer guidance and support as you work to heal the source of your triggers

Learning to recognize and manage your emotional triggers can take some time, but this effort can pay off in some major ways when it comes to your relationships and overall well-being.

Unpleasant events can provoke strong reactions in anyone, but when you can manage triggers effectively, you'll find it easier to navigate tense situations without unnecessary distress.