

COPING WITH TRIGGERS



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Embarking on a journey of self-discovery and healing, this text is a comprehensive guide to coping with triggers and reclaiming control over your daily life. Whether you're ready to confront traumatic memories or simply seeking ways to manage triggers, the strategies outlined here provide practical steps for reducing their impact. By fostering inner cooperation and support, you'll gradually build the resilience needed to distinguish the past from the present, ultimately creating a path towards healing and self-empowerment.



REDUCING OR ELIMINATING TRIGGERS IN DAILY LIFE

Regardless of whether you are ready to directly cope with your traumatic memories, you must still deal with being triggered in ways that interfere with your daily life. In the following sections we describe specific methods to cope with triggers.

1. Eliminating or Avoiding Triggers

When you become more aware of your triggers, you may temporarily eliminate or avoid certain objects or situations, and thus become triggered less often. This should be a temporary measure only, until you are able to resolve what is being triggered. Otherwise you will feel the need to restrict your experiences more and more. But once you are triggered less often, you can begin to work on your skills and resources so you can overcome what is upsetting you. Temporarily stow away, give away, or throw away objects in your home that trigger you, or example, photographs, art, a particular blanket, a knick-knack, a book.



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It is important to remind yourself and other parts of you that a particular object or situation does not have to overwhelm you the rest of your life. You and other parts can learn to be less reactive in the present as you begin to feel safer and calmer. It might be helpful to remind all parts of you that the object or situation is reminiscent or representative of something painful from your past, but it is not dangerous itself.

When you are not able to eliminate a trigger, you might temporarily avoid it. For instance,

■ If you are triggered by seeing someone drunk, avoid places where such people are likely to be found (parties, bars, pubs, weekend nights in the city).

■ If a part of you is terrified of crowded areas, you can choose to shop at times when stores are likely to be less crowded, while you are working with that part to overcome the fear of crowds.

■ If a part of you is afraid of the dark but you want to see a movie, you can choose to watch a DVD at home instead of going to the theatre.

Again, these are only meant to be temporary solutions, until such time that you can approach and handle the cause of being triggered more adaptively. You can also have empathy for these parts of you instead of being angry or frustrated with them, and assure them you are taking their needs into account as well as helping them gradually overcome their fears or concerns.

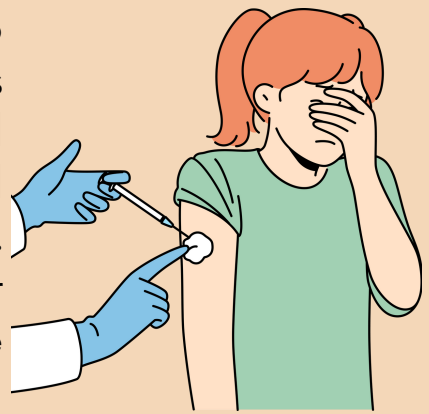


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2. Anticipating Triggers

If you anticipate that you might be triggered by a certain situation that cannot be avoided, you can plan ahead to cope with it effectively. For example,

perhaps you need to make an appointment to receive a flu shot, but some part of you is terrified of shots. You may find the crowded waiting room intolerable, and feel exposed and vulnerable when visiting a doctor. Nevertheless, you need your influenza shot for your health, so this is not a situation to be avoided.



You can prepare yourself by reflecting with all parts of you to discover what you need to cope. You can calm and reassure parts inside that you are getting medication that keeps you healthy: You, as an adult, will make sure nothing bad will happen. You might take time before the appointment to help parts of you go to an inner safe place, or you might imagine allowing them to stay at home, and only adult parts that can distinguish the past from the present of yourself should go to the appointment. Some people may have inner helper parts that can calm and reassure, but it is doubly effective if you can join with these helpful parts in reassuring all parts of you. You can use your own imagination to help vulnerable parts in this way until they are able to heal.

Above all, do not ignore parts of you that are triggered by acting "tough" and belittling these parts of yourself. You run a far greater risk of losing control or switching than when you anticipate what you need. In addition to inner preparation, you might also ask for the support of others when you are faced with a situation that triggers you.

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In the aforementioned example,

you might ask someone to go with you to the doctor—someone who will keep talking with you to help you stay present. You can ask to make your appointment the beginning or end of the day, or immediately after lunch, so you can be in and out without spending too much time sitting in the waiting room.



3. Imaginal Rehearsal

All too often, when people imagine an upcoming situation, they imagine themselves failing or being overwhelmed. That is, they imagine a negative outcome. Imaginal rehearsal is the opposite: You imagine yourself being completely successful, walking through the situation step by step (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). Many people find it helpful to imagine successfully negotiating through a challenging situation ahead of time. You may begin by imagining that you are watching yourself. For example,

- Imagine watching yourself walk into the doctor's office feeling calm and adult-like.
- Imagine being able to reassure yourself if you begin to feel anxious.
- Imagine being wrapped in your protective suit or your favorite colors, and not even feeling the injection.
- Imagine that all parts of you feel perfectly safe in the present.



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- Imagine that all parts of you feel perfectly safe in the present.
- Imagine having all the support you need.
- Imagine supportive people being with you, encouraging you, cheering you on.

After you have successfully “watched” this scenario, imagine it from your own perspective. Imaginal rehearsal is more successful when you share its purpose with all parts of you, and as many parts as possible can participate.

4. Recognizing Options

Often when people are triggered, they feel trapped and helpless. Recognizing that you have options is essential to feeling more control and choice. You might be surprised at the choices you do not realize that you have. And you are only limited by your own creativity! For example,

continuing with the example of the flu shot, if you become too triggered, give yourself the option of leaving if parts of you become too afraid. Or give yourself the option of walking outside to calm down or allowing the nurse to help you calm down. Give yourself the option to either watch or avert your gaze when you get the shot: whichever helps you more. Give yourself the option of being assertive and asking the nurse or doctor to tell you every step of the procedure ahead of time, so you will know what to expect and can be a part of deciding how and when the injection is given.



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5. Neutralizing the Effects of Triggers

You can learn to create distance from the emotional and physical experience of being triggered. Usually this method involves imaginal techniques that you have already learned in this manual. For example,

you can use an inner safe place in which parts of you can be protected from the overwhelming experiences of being triggered. Parts of you may voluntarily go to sleep in their safe place if you anticipate a time when you may be triggered, so that only adult parts aware of the present need cope with the situation. You can use The Store exercise and imagine having on a special suit or

cloak, or a shield that triggers cannot penetrate. Or try The Tree or The Healing Pool exercises to immediately calm all parts of yourself if you become triggered.



6. Distinguishing the Past From the Present

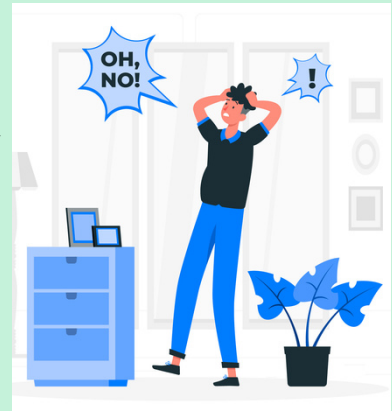
It is essential for all parts of you to learn to distinguish between here and now and then and there. For example,



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A particular knife or fork from the kitchen or the color of the living room wall in the present may remind you of a painful experience in the past, but it is not the same knife or fork or the same living room.

Of course, before you can make a distinction between the past and present, you must be aware that you are in the here and now.



The more quickly you can ground yourself, the easier it will be to cope with triggers. You may also find it helpful to carry a small object, such as a beautiful small stone, as a tangible reminder of being in the safe present. As soon as you touch it, you can immediately feel yourself become more present.

Once you are present, you will find it helpful to describe the differences between an experience in the past and present in detail, to actually say it out loud to yourself, and to keep reminding all parts of these differences. For example:

The green color on the wall is the same as in the past, but the wall, the room, the house, the city, the year, and even I am not the same as in the past. The only similarity is green, only paint. I am not there, I am here. I can see the pictures on the wall that are different than in the past. The carpet on the floor is different. When I look out the window, I see the scenery of the present, which is different from the past. This green wall reminded me of something that I am not yet ready to handle. I will put that memory in a safe place and contain it until I am ready.

This repetition gradually helps all parts to notice these differences, instead of only focusing on what is similar to the past.

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It is particularly important to pay attention to differences when a person in the present reminds you of someone from the past with whom you felt uncomfortable or unsafe. For example,

if a friend becomes irritated with you in the present, you or other parts of yourself might automatically react with fear because an angry person was dangerous in the past. However, you notice that your friend's voice is not raised, and he is not screaming or cursing. He is speaking to you respectfully, and you know his intentions toward you are good in general. His body language shows no

indication that he might be physically violent. These are cues that tell you this interaction is different from the past.

Draw the attention of all parts of you to these cues and bring them back again and again to these cues in the present. In this way all parts of you can learn that although an aspect of the present might be similar to the past (irritation or anger), many other aspects are different enough that you can learn when it is safe. You are teaching parts of yourself the early beginnings of reflection about the motivations and intentions of others in the present.



It is also helpful to notice what is different about you, that is, you are an adult, not a child. You are stronger, have more wisdom and experience, and have supports and resources that you did not have as a child

7. Inner Orientation, Cooperation, and Support

You have begun to experience times of being able to orient parts of you to the present, help parts cooperate for your well-being as a whole person, and share mutual inner support.

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These skills are essential in helping you overcome the effects of triggers. When inner parts feel more trusting of each other to attend to, care for, and respect one another, they will feel calmer and less afraid and chaotic. When they are helped to become more oriented to the present, they can reflect more on their inner experiences. And when parts can cooperate, for example,

To help other parts remain in an inner safe place without disturbance or to avoid situations in which you may be triggered, all parts of you will feel better. Some degree of inner cooperation is already present when you talk inwardly to all parts of yourself, when you remind them of the safe present, when you create inner safe places, when you practice relaxation exercises, and when all parts of you pay attention not only to what is similar to the past, but more important, to what is different.



This inner cooperation and support can grow exponentially over time, as you will see. People with a dissociative disorder often know at some level, or in some part of themselves, which situations are best avoided or how a triggering situation might best be handled. Inner dialogue and reflection among parts about the best approach to situations is helpful, and it must go beyond merely telling all parts to “just do it.” You are a team and must work as a team. Be compassionate with yourself and all parts inside; and help them to engage cooperatively with you as often as you are able. Of course, we are aware that inner cooperation, communication, and support take time to develop and are not always easy to achieve. It may not always seem clear or obvious how you can accomplish these skills. Be patient with yourself and all parts of yourself.

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HOMework SHEET 1


IDENTIFYING TRIGGERS AND COPING STRATEGIES

In this homework , choose a time when you were recently triggered and reflect back on the situation and answer the questions below, as you are able. This reflection will help you again practice identifying triggers but also to become aware of what coping strategies you

might already use. If this exercise evokes too much for you, simply stop and practice a grounding or relaxation exercise.



1. Where were you, and what were you doing?

An illustration of a person with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. They are standing with their hand to their chin in a thinking pose. Above their head are two question marks.

2. Describe what triggered you, if you know.

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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)?

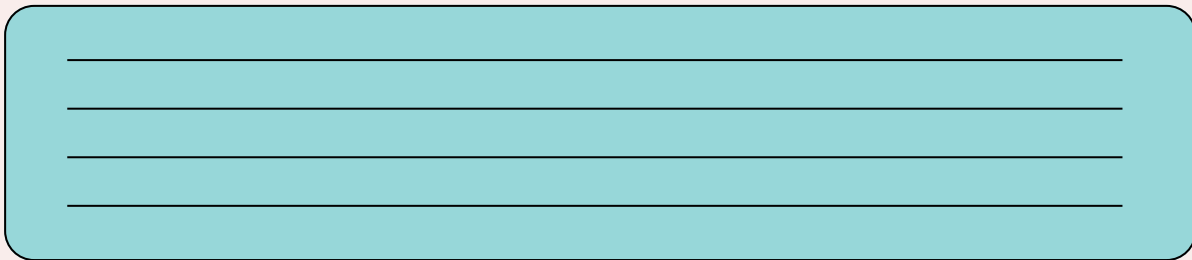
4. If you lost time, what is the last thing you can recall (for example, a sound, smell, image, thought, or feeling)?

5. If you are aware of specific parts of yourself that were triggered, describe their experience as best you can.

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?)

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7. Describe what you did to cope with being triggered at the time, and what you did afterwards. You may have used some of the coping skills discussed in this chapter or others. You may even have coped in ways that were not healthy. Do not judge yourself; simply describe what you did.



HOMEWORK SHEET 2

SKILLS TO COPE WITH TRIGGERS

Choose a time when you were recently triggered and reflect back on the situation and answer the questions below, as you are able. This reflection will help you become more aware of how you might employ some of the skills you have read about in this chapter. If this exercise evokes too much for you, simply stop and practice a grounding or relaxation. Refer back to the chapter as needed. You will be using one or more of the following skills:

-  Eliminating or avoiding triggers
-  Anticipating triggers
-  Imaginal rehearsal
-  Recognizing options
-  Neutralizing triggers

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Distinguishing the past from the present

Inner orientation, cooperation, and support

1

Describe an object or situation in the present that triggered you recently.

2

Describe the reactions of you, or other parts of you, to the trigger (for example, feeling like you were out of body, anxiety or panic, visual or auditory flashbacks, nausea, loss of time; being frozen or collapsed).

3

If this trigger can be eliminated or avoided, describe how you could accomplish that for the future (for example, avoiding violent movies, putting away a photograph or book; deciding not to visit a particular place).

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4

If you were to anticipate this trigger in the future, how might you prepare for it? For example, helping parts be in an inner safe place, using images of protection, or practicing imaginal rehearsal.

5

Describe in retrospect any options you had but did not realize that you had at the time you were triggered (for example, you could have left the situation, called a friend for support, oriented parts of yourself to the present, or calmed and reassured them, but you did not think of it).

6

Practice protective imagery (for example, from The Store exercise) and containment strategies for the feelings, sensations, and memories that are evoked when you are triggered.

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7

Describe the differences between the trigger in the past and its present-day context, for example, the bed is similar, but the room is different; the beard on a man is similar to the past, but it is not the same man.

8

Describe any inner orientation, communication, cooperation, and support you were able to accomplish when you were triggered. If you were not able, describe what stopped you and how you might support your inner parts in the future.

