



Creating a Trigger Toolkit

Triggers, events or situations that cause us to involuntarily recall emotions or memories associated with our trauma, are a common occurrence in the lives of most trauma survivors. Everything from a scent; like the aftershave an abuser wore, to a specific date; such as the date of the horrible car accident, can send memories and emotions flooding into our brain.

It's important to pause a moment and differentiate between a trigger and autonomic nervous system activation. Nervous system activation causes a fight, flight, or freeze response that is generally quickly resolved. For example, if someone in traffic swerves unexpectedly and almost hits you with their car, your nervous system may become activated but will quickly go back to calm.

A trigger, however, is subconscious and lightning fast. Some triggers can result in the activation of the nervous system, but not every trigger does so. Some triggers only result in emotional and/or memory responses which can be distressing. But not every trigger results in nervous system activation.

It is difficult to stop triggers from happening. Sometimes we can anticipate a trigger, such as the date of the car accident or a family holiday celebration where our abuser will be. At other times the trigger couldn't have been anticipated and takes us by surprise. In our online survivor community, we call those "Ninja Triggers".

Triggers can feel overwhelming, whether we knew they were coming or they took us by surprise. The best way to handle triggers is to have an array of coping strategies developed ahead of time, before we're in the middle of a flood of feelings and memories, which severely limits our logical thinking and problem solving.



Developing a Trigger Toolkit now ensures that when we are triggered we only have to pull out our fully stocked tool kit and select the coping strategy that best fits the situation we are in.

Trigger Toolkits contain five categories of coping strategies:

- **Grounding:** these interrupt the overwhelming feelings and thoughts swirling around inside our heads by shifting our attention to our bodies which helps us feel calmer, more focused and more in control of ourselves
- **Resolving:** these address the underlying cause of particular triggers so that they are no longer a source of our being triggered in the future
- **Affirming:** these directly impact the way we talk to and think about ourselves and our triggers, making it easier for us to feel in control of our triggers rather than being at their mercy
- **Distracting:** these strategies do not resolve or change our response to a trigger. Instead they shift our focus from the emotional and physical response to the trigger onto a calmer, emotionally neutral situation or event. This effectively starves our trigger response and it dissipates without our attention
- **Self-Soothing:** these are strategies we can implement to soothe and calm the distress caused by a trigger

Because different triggers elicit different responses, we need a variety of tools in our Trigger Toolkit. Some will work on every situation, but not all of them will work on all situations.

The most important thing is to have a wide variety of types of tools so that we'll easily be able to access a tool for any kind of trigger. Let's look at an array of different tools you can include in your Trigger Toolkit for each strategy category.



I suggest choosing ONE strategy for a toolkit. This can be one strategy total or one from each category.

Choose strategies that you will be most likely to remember and use.

Grounding:

- Take deep, slow breaths from your gut rather than your chest
- Start counting the number of red things in the room around you
- Go outside and focus on feeling the air and sun on your skin
- Rinse your hands with cold water or hold ice cubes until they melt
- Run your hands over a rough surface, like bricks or a tree trunk
- Fire up your iPod and sing along with songs you know
- Count backwards from 88
- Actively play with a pet or engage with animals
- Carry a talisman with you – a small item – that you can grasp tightly in your hand when you need it
- Eat something and focus on the flavors, scents and feel of the food in your mouth
- Trace your hand onto a piece of paper and fill the handprint full of names of things you can touch around you

Resolving:

- Address the feelings/events behind your trigger in therapy
- Write about your triggers and the emotions behind them
- Share your triggers in community with other survivors, allow them to help you work through the feelings and circumstances underneath the triggers



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Affirming:

- I'm stronger than any trigger
- I deserve to be supported and helped when I feel sad and alone
- I am safe now and the past cannot harm me
- I am lovable and deserve to be treated well
- I can treat myself with kind, gentleness in these hard moments
- I am powerful
- I have many choices on how to cope with these feelings

Distracting

- Watch a movie that makes you laugh
- Exercise with your music turned up
- Play a game with your children or a friend
- Get out of the house and do something active with friends: bowling, laser tag, hiking, bike riding
- Hang out with friends who make you laugh
- Engage in an activity around the house that fully engages you: scrub the kitchen floor, re-organize the craft closet or tool chest
- Do some craft projects or engage in a hobby that you enjoy
- Bake, cook and create something incredibly good for you
- Read out loud
- Do a puzzle that requires your full attention: cross words, a game app on your phone, Sudoku



Self-Soothing:

- Curl up with a cup of tea and a warm blanket to rest
- Light candles and put on soothing music
- Pamper your body: give yourself a manicure, pedicure or facial
- Meditate or pray
- Take a warm bath
- Visualize yourself living your highest and best life – build that image in your mind and return to it often to fill in details

These are only a small sampling of the possible coping tools you can develop and keep handy in your Trigger Toolkit. Experiment with what works for you. Get rid of tools that don't work and hone those that do. Be alert for ideas and suggestions for other tools so you can continually update and add to your list of coping strategies. In time you will assemble a highly effective toolkit that provides you with everything you need to both eliminate and cope with any triggers that you encounter.