

What is a Trigger?

A trigger is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.

Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback. She/he will react to this flashback, trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

The senses identified as being the most common to trigger someone are sight and sound, followed by touch and smell, and taste close behind. A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma. Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes.

Sight

- Often someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits or objects (i.e. clothing, hair color, distinctive walk).
- Any situation where someone else is being abused (i.e. anything from a raised eyebrow and verbal comment to actual physical abuse).
- The object that was used to abuse.
- The objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place (i.e. alcohol, piece of furniture, time of year).
- Any place or situation where the abuse took place (ie. specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings).

Sound

- Anything that sounds like anger (ie. raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking).
- Anything that sounds like pain or fear (ie. crying, whispering, screaming).
- Anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (ie. sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing).
- Anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (ie. whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice).
- Words of abuse (ie. cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used).

Smell

- Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (ie. tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume).
- Any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (ie. food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol).

Touch

- Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (ie. certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you).

Taste

- Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (ie. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco).

The Triggering Effect

(Triggers - memories, behaviors, thoughts, situations that jeopardize recovery.)

Triggers are specific memories, behaviors, thoughts and situations that jeopardize recovery - signals you are entering a stage that brings you closer to a relapse. The process is much like riding a roller coaster that loops over itself. Once the roller coaster car gets to a certain spot in the track, a threshold is met, there is no turning back, and it starts the downward loop - a relapse.

Just as gravity has a motivating effect on a roller coaster, brain chemistry has a similar effect motivating triggers. When people use substances or engage in escape behaviors, the brain releases neurotransmitters such as adrenaline and dopamine that trigger the brain's pleasure/reward center; or it may release serotonin which lessens anxiety and depression. With repetition of the drugs, alcohol, or other addictive behavior, the brain's reward center overrides the cognitive, rational thinking part of itself. Addiction hijacks the brain. The reward/pleasure center holds captive the thinking center. Science also indicates that stress alters the way we think.

It is very likely you have heard your husband, wife, partner, mother, father, boss, a friend, your attorney or even a judge say, "*What were you thinking?*" The answer is: you weren't thinking.

The science of addiction indicates that the inability to recognize the impact of your behavior, the willingness to risk what is significant in your life, and in this case, the quick lapse into old behaviors in spite of good intentions appear to be connected to brain chemistry.

The good news is that the brain has plasticity. That means, in treatment and recovery practices, you can learn skills to calm the brain's emotional responses and reactivity area. You can learn to avoid triggers that activate the emotional area, and you can learn to enhance the decision-making area so you can rationally think through decisions, rather than respond impulsively and from such a strong emotional basis. But it takes time for the brain to be rewired, and it gets rewired with the repetition of new skills and new ways of thinking, hence, I strongly urge ongoing involvement in aftercare and other support systems.

Willpower alone is not a defense against relapse. Recovery is achieved, maintained and enjoyed through a series of actions. Learn to identify your triggers and, with each, identify a plan that anticipates and deescalates the power of the trigger. With that, your reward is another day of sobriety with endless possibilities.