

Trauma Triggers and Memories—Overview



Trauma Triggers are reminders of traumatic events. Everyone has their own unique things that trigger them. Triggers can be people, places, or situations. Thoughts, emotions and sensations can also trigger trauma memories.

Triggers can be something **specific** tied to the memory of the traumatic event (*like bridges, the smell of fuel or feeling afraid*) or something **general** (*like being in a crowd*).

You can be triggered when you expect it, or a trigger can come out of the blue.

- Getting triggered can set off upsetting emotions such as: ***Fear, Anger, Sadness, Guilt, and Shame.***
- Getting triggered can set off physical sensations such as: ***Racing heart, Shortness of breath, Sweating.***

The Importance of Understanding Triggers

The circumstances surrounding the traumatic event, including sights, sounds, smells, and thoughts, may have become connected in your day-to-day thinking **with the trauma itself**. During your deployment, these connections helped you survive. The sights, sounds, and smells helped you to recognize signs of danger and react more quickly. But many of the things that signaled danger in the war zone, which “trigger” you now, are harmless back home.

Your body can become stressed and you can have strong emotions just by **thinking** that you are under attack. Now that you are home, and safe, the steps below aim to “disconnect” old reminders from your brain’s danger circuits. This can help ease the way the reminders affect your mood, relationships, health, work, concentration, or general functioning. You can ease the impact that reminders have by retraining yourself to recognize when in fact you are safe, even if your habit has been to tell yourself that you are in danger.

Identifying Your Trauma Triggers

Trauma triggers are **highly individual**. So, you will have to put some time and energy into determining what triggers *you*. Using a **Trigger Record** can help in identifying your triggers.

Coping Once You’ve Been Triggered

The **Trigger Record** and the **RID Tool** can help reduce the negative effects that trauma triggers have on you.

Trigger Record:
Just by paying attention to a behavior, you can change it!

Use the **RID Tool** when you are triggered:

Step 1: **Relax**

Step 2: **Identify the trigger**

Step 3: **Decide your response**

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Preparing for Triggers That You Expect to Face

Sometimes you know beforehand that you are going to be in a situation that may have triggers that remind you of your traumatic experience(s). The **PLAN Tool** is a strategy to manage situations that you anticipate will be difficult.

Step 1: **P**repare for the situation

Step 2: **L**et go of your worry

Step 3: **A**ccept that you will experience distress and it is possible to manage your reaction

Step 4: **N**ote all of your coping skills and helpful resources

Tools for Reducing the Distress that Trauma Triggers Cause for You

If you feel ready to deal directly with a trigger, ***try to remain in the presence of the trigger*** until you feel less distressed by it. Here is the idea: don't leave the situation until you feel that the trigger is not as powerful as it was when you first confronted it. This will retrain your brain. Your brain will learn to tolerate the trigger. Your brain will learn that you are ***not in actual danger***, and your response to the trigger will gradually weaken.

In order to do put these tools and recommendations into practice safely and effectively:

1. Actively talk yourself through the situation.
2. Use relaxation or breathing skills while you are dealing with the trigger.

