

A man with a beard is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. His right hand is raised to his face, with his fingers covering his eyes. The background is a dark, textured wall. The overall mood is contemplative or distressed.

**‘I’m feeling
really triggered’**

A man with a beard is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. A hand is resting on his shoulder, suggesting support or a moment of reflection. The background is dark and out of focus.

‘I’m feeling *really* triggered’

What are triggers and how can you manage them?

You may have heard of the term “trigger warnings” or “getting triggered” by another person before. But what does being triggered actually mean?

Trauma is defined as any experience in which a person both perceives a threat to their wellbeing and feels out of control, helpless, and endangered. Emotional triggers are people, words, opinions, situations, or environmental situations that provoke an intense and excessive emotional reaction within us due to past trauma. The term ‘triggered’ dates back to World War I when psychologists were trying to make sense of shell shock and war neurosis. In the new colloquial sense, pop culture uses the term to describe anything that is mildly irritating. But feeling triggered is much more than that.

Being triggered is like having an alarm go off in your body. At that moment the person who has been triggered is transported back to a moment of trauma. For survivors of sexual violence, this might be a moment of abuse. For others, it may be the moment of the car accident they were involved in or the time they were assaulted. For many, living through a pandemic has caused long-term emotions of anxiety, fear, lack of control, and panic, as well as fear of death, all of which can result in trauma.

Triggering isn’t always what they show in movies, like when a car backfires and the returned veteran suddenly thinks he is in the middle of a bombing. Most of the time, triggering looks a lot more subtle and you may be experiencing your own personal triggers without knowing it.

When a person is triggered they often have a complete grasp on reality, but they may experience unnecessary and unwanted intrusive thoughts or feelings that don’t reflect the current situation. The triggered person may not even realise that a shift has happened, or that they’re not 100% present.



So, what can we do to identify our triggers and help to manage them?

Try to remember the last time you had an intense negative emotional response, out of the blue. This could be anger, loneliness, fear, sadness, shame, or emptiness. Try and trace back where this feeling came from, a comment made by a friend, a song, a certain smell. Once you've identified what triggered this emotion it will make it easier to address it at the moment next time it bubbles to the surface.

When you start to feel yourself being triggered in the moment, try **Shira Gura's S.T.U.C.K method**:

Stop

First, **STOP** and bring your attention to something real in the present moment (such as noticing your breath).

Tell

Next, **TELL** yourself what you are feeling (such as: "I am stuck on anger").

Uncover

UNCOVER your beliefs about what is triggering you. Look out for words such as: need, should, always, never, and other generalisations. For each belief, ask yourself, is this 100% accurate?

Consider

Then, **CONSIDER** other perspectives. Stretch your "consideration muscles" and allow any and every other kind of viewpoint to be possible. Then, choose at least one and take it on. Finally, remind yourself that it's **OK** you got stuck in the first place.



In time, your automatic reaction to negative situations can become present-moment awareness. Offering yourself kindness and remembering that the power to heal your life is always available in the present moment, the situations that once triggered you lose their explosive potential.

Below are some further tips on how you can build a great mental health hygiene regime to manage triggers and foster good mental health.

Mindfulness

While very fashionable in 2021, mindfulness isn't just a fad. It's been around for 2500+ years and helps us put some space between ourselves and our reactions, breaking down our conditioned responses.

Journaling

Journaling can help to reduce stress, improve immune function, boost your mood and keep your memory sharp. Try and write down your thoughts and feelings for 10 minutes at the end of each day.

Exercise

I know, it sounds boring! But everyone recommends it for a reason. Exercise increases your levels of feel-good endorphins as well as neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which can help your mood. And on a cognitive level, exercise can shift your attention away from anything that is currently on your mind.



Set boundaries

Repeat after me!

- I have a right to say no without feeling guilty.
- I have a right to be treated with respect.
- I have a right to make my needs as important as others.
- I have a right to be accepting of my mistakes and failures.
- I have a right not to meet others' unreasonable expectations of me.

Support system check-in

It's important to connect. If you don't feel like you have a support system you can count on at the moment, jump on TalkCampus to connect!

TalkCampus

TalkCampus is a free to download app where you can talk with other students from around the world about the ups and downs of life. Your student email address will give you free access, just download TalkCampus from the app stores.