

Trigger Fingers: Noticing Automatic Reactions

Automatic responses are triggered when you experience a perceived threat. The threat may be physical (danger, potential injury, and such) or emotional (sense of rejection, judgment, loss, and such). Your reactions to triggers are attempts to protect itself. Very often the strategies of protection were developed as the 'best available solution' in the midst of a trauma. Updating your body system about new options of responding, especially if the trauma has passed, is often greatly beneficial.



2 THOUGHTS

Pay attention to your thoughts/conclusions.

You're probably scrambling to make mental sense of the situation and your reactivity. Automatic thoughts arise in response to past trauma and injury (often conclusions designed by a very young person) and are not always applicable to the current situation. Pay attention to your habitual patterns of thinking and the conclusions you draw. They may need to be reviewed and updated.

1 SENSES

Notice your body.

How is the activation showing up in your physical system? Is your heart racing, head hurting, throat dry, hands shaking, stomach tight, breath short? These are common physiological responses to stress or threat.

START - TRIGGER

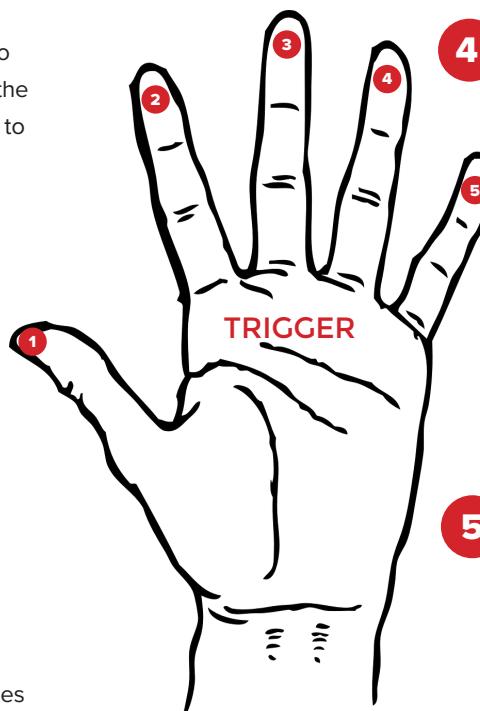
Get to know your triggers.

Make a list of the events, actions, experiences that are likely to trigger you. Typical triggers for me include:

3 FEELINGS

Pay attention to your feelings.

When triggered, you may feel flooded, overwhelmed, and unable to think clearly. This is a natural response to an activated physiological system. When you're physiologically activated, your neocortex goes off-line, yet the amygdala (emotional center of the brain) remains engaged. Primary emotions such as shock, fear, anger, and sadness come up quickly. Secondary emotions may follow. These are often judgments about your reaction or its cause. Secondary emotions result from mixing thoughts with the feelings. Common secondary responses to a trigger can include feeling abandoned, rejected, humiliated, unloved, dirty, or inadequate.



4 NEEDS/WANTS

Notice your immediate needs and wants.

The effect of a trigger is to disturb your sense of balance, and you will have a natural inclination to fix or mend the turmoil. It is common to want someone else to act in order for you to feel better. You may attempt to get others to repair things for you by saying, "I need you to... hold me, apologize, go away, promise, etc., believing someone else has the power or responsibility to solve your distress.

5 ACTIONS

Notice your reactions to being triggered.

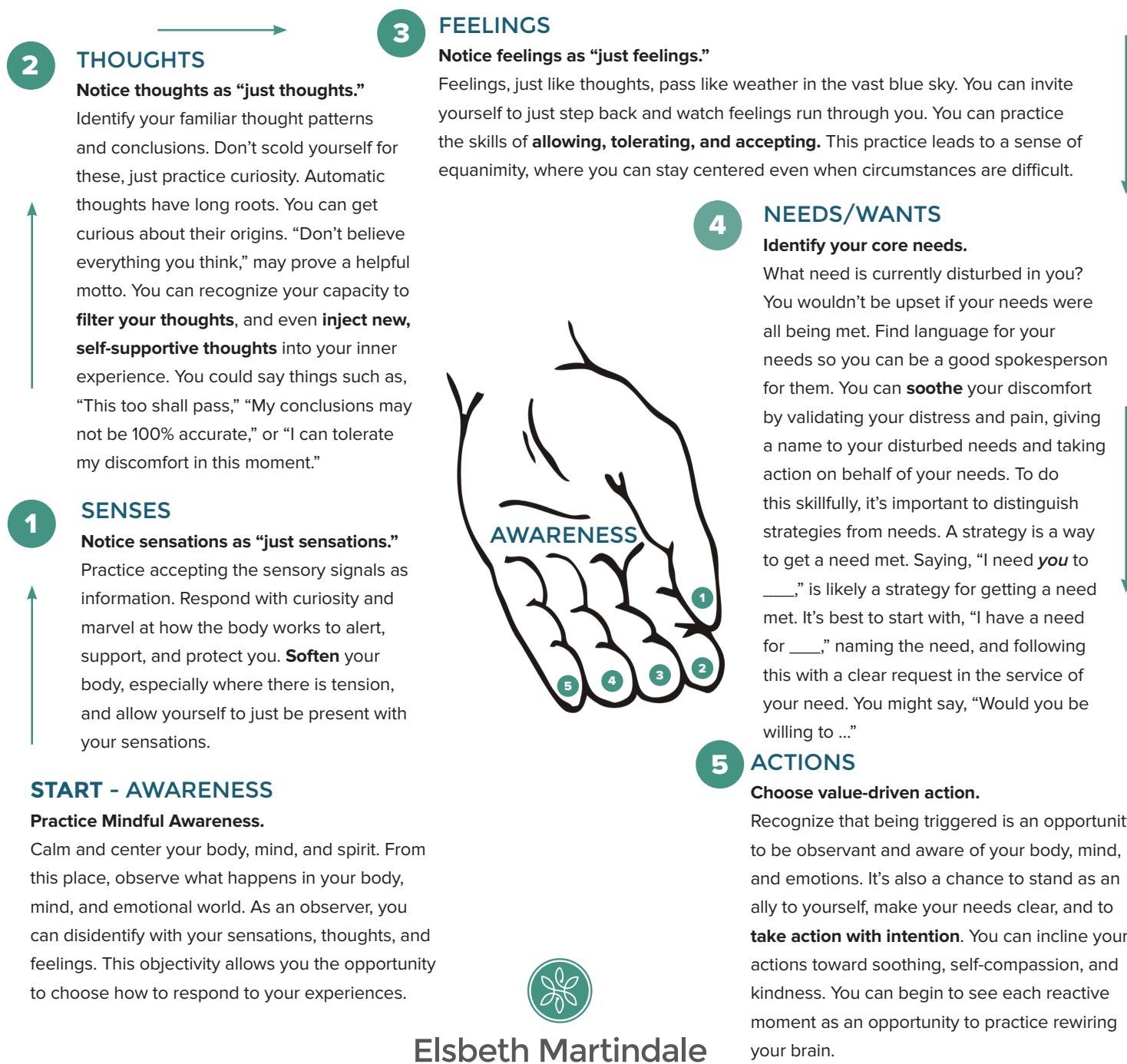
If you believe you are unsafe or threatened, you will strive to protect yourself. Defensive/protective patterns tend to be some version of fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Some patterns get set early in life and then are repeated automatically. Do you know your typical protective patterns?



Elsbeth Martindale
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Trigger Fingers: Managing Automatic Reactions

The good news is that automatic reactions can be updated and new, more effective, patterns and pathways can be formed. The tool for shifting your reactivity is Mindful Awareness. By observing yourself and your trigger reactions, you can begin to neutralize the triggers and increase your freedom for responding. Consistent and frequent mindfulness practice will allow you to watch and observe the sensations, thoughts, and feelings as they ride their way through your body.



Elsbeth Martindale
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST