

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

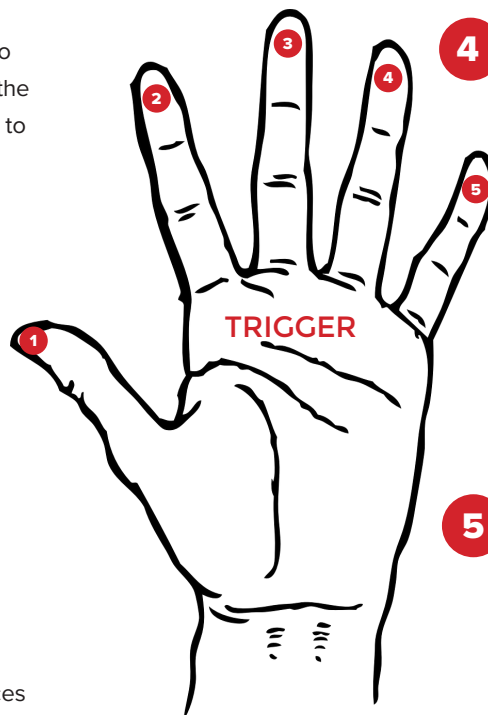
Get to know your triggers.

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?



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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.

2 THOUGHTS

Notice thoughts as “just thoughts.”

Identify your familiar thought patterns and conclusions. Don't scold yourself for these, just practice curiosity. Automatic thoughts have long roots. You can get curious about their origins. “Don't believe everything you think,” may prove a helpful motto. You can recognize your capacity to **filter your thoughts**, and even **inject new, self-supportive thoughts** into your inner experience. You could say things such as, “This too shall pass,” “My conclusions may not be 100% accurate,” or “I can tolerate my discomfort in this moment.”

1 SENSES

Notice sensations as “just sensations.”

Practice accepting the sensory signals as information. Respond with curiosity and marvel at how the body works to alert, support, and protect you. **Soften** your body, especially where there is tension, and allow yourself to just be present with your sensations.

START - AWARENESS

Practice Mindful Awareness.

Calm and center your body, mind, and spirit. From this place, observe what happens in your body, mind, and emotional world. As an observer, you can disidentify with your sensations, thoughts, and feelings. This objectivity allows you the opportunity to choose how to respond to your experiences.

3 FEELINGS

Notice feelings as “just feelings.”

Feelings, just like thoughts, pass like weather in the vast blue sky. You can invite yourself to just step back and watch feelings run through you. You can practice the skills of **allowing, tolerating, and accepting**. This practice leads to a sense of equanimity, where you can stay centered even when circumstances are difficult.

4 NEEDS/WANTS

Identify your core needs.

What need is currently disturbed in you? You wouldn't be upset if your needs were all being met. Find language for your needs so you can be a good spokesperson for them. You can **soothe** your discomfort by validating your distress and pain, giving a name to your disturbed needs and taking action on behalf of your needs. To do this skillfully, it's important to distinguish strategies from needs. A strategy is a way to get a need met. Saying, “I need **you** to _____,” is likely a strategy for getting a need met. It's best to start with, “I have a need for _____,” naming the need, and following this with a clear request in the service of your need. You might say, “Would you be willing to ...”

5 ACTIONS

Choose value-driven action.

Recognize that being triggered is an opportunity to be observant and aware of your body, mind, and emotions. It's also a chance to stand as an ally to yourself, make your needs clear, and to **take action with intention**. You can incline your actions toward soothing, self-compassion, and kindness. You can begin to see each reactive moment as an opportunity to practice rewiring your brain.



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