Triggers: What Happens Before the Reaction?

Understanding what activates me, what it sets in motion, and what I can do next

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START HERE

A trigger is something that activates a strong emotional, physical, mental, or behavioral response. It may be obvious, such as seeing alcohol, receiving bad news, or having an argument. It can also be subtle, such as feeling ignored, hearing a certain tone of voice, remembering something embarrassing, feeling successful, or simply having an uncomfortable thought.

The trigger itself is only the beginning. What matters is what happens after it.

A Trigger Is a Cue, Not a Command

A trigger can help explain why I reacted strongly. It does not automatically determine what I have to do next.

Why Triggers Can Feel So Fast



The amygdala is part of the brain's threat-detection network. It can rapidly tag a cue as emotionally important and help launch a survival response before slower, more deliberate evaluation catches up.

That speed is useful when danger is real. Learned associations, however, can also set off the alarm when something resembles past danger, stress, or relief.

The amygdala is not simply a “fear center,” and it does not act alone. The prefrontal cortex helps add context, weigh consequences, and choose what to do next.

PAUSE + ORIENT → CONTEXT → CHOICE

When I say something "triggered me," what usually happens next?

What reactions tend to become automatic for me?

Triggers Are More Than People, Places, and Things

Some triggers come from the environment. Others happen entirely inside us.

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MAP THE SIGNAL

The phrase "people, places, and things" is useful, but triggers are broader than that. Some come from the environment. Others happen entirely inside us.

EXTERNAL TRIGGER TYPE	Something outside of me activates the response. People, places, alcohol or drugs, money, work stress, social media, conflict, celebrations, bad news, being alone, times of day, old environments.
INTERNAL TRIGGER TYPE	Something happening inside of me activates the response. Anxiety, anger, loneliness, boredom, shame, resentment, excitement, self-doubt, intrusive thoughts, memories, cravings, physical discomfort.
RELATIONAL TRIGGER TYPE	Something within a relationship activates the response. Feeling rejected, criticized, ignored, controlled, misunderstood, abandoned, disrespected, unwanted, or not appreciated.
STATE-BASED TRIGGER TYPE	My physical or emotional condition makes me more vulnerable to reacting. Hunger, exhaustion, poor sleep, illness, pain, overstimulation, stress, withdrawal, being overwhelmed, too much unstructured time.
RECOVERY-SPECIFIC TRIGGER TYPE	Something challenges the recovery structure I am trying to build. Seeing others drink or use, unexpected money, reconnecting with old friends, romantic conflict, overconfidence, stopping support, travel, celebrations, or thinking, "Maybe I can handle it now."

Which type of trigger tends to affect me most strongly?

What triggers do I repeatedly underestimate?

Are there triggers I usually notice only after I have already reacted?

The Trigger Chain

Triggers often feel instantaneous, but there is usually a sequence between what happened and what I eventually did.

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FOLLOW THE CHAIN

1 TRIGGER

What happened?

2 MEANING

Examples: "I am being rejected." "Nobody respects me." "I cannot handle this." "I deserve some relief."

What did my mind immediately tell me the situation meant?

3 BODY / EMOTION

What happened physically and emotionally?

4 URGE

Examples: drink, use, leave, argue, shut down, isolate, seek reassurance, control, scroll, eat, gamble, or escape.

What did I suddenly want to do?

5 ACTION

What did I actually do?

6 CONSEQUENCE

What happened afterward? Did the action solve the problem, temporarily relieve it, or create another one?

The most useful question is not only, "What triggered me?"

Where in this chain could I interrupt what is happening before the consequence arrives?

What Am I Actually Reaching For?

The behavior often makes more sense when I understand what I am trying to change, get, or escape.

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FIND THE FUNCTION

Alcohol, drugs, anger, reassurance, avoidance, control, isolation, sex, food, work, spending, scrolling, and other behaviors can all serve a function. Understanding the function does not make every behavior healthy. It helps identify what the behavior is trying to accomplish.

RELIEF

I want the discomfort to stop.

ESCAPE

I do not want to think about or deal with this right now.

CONTROL

I need the situation or another person to change so I can feel okay.

REASSURANCE

I need proof that I am okay, wanted, valued, or safe.

NUMBNESS

I do not want to feel what I am feeling.

CONNECTION

I feel alone and want closeness, attention, or belonging.

STIMULATION

I feel bored, flat, empty, or restless and want to feel something different.

Go Underneath the Urge

What feeling am I trying to change?

What am I hoping the behavior will give me?

How long does that relief usually last, and what does it cost me afterward?

What could meet the actual need without creating another problem?

Not Every Trigger Needs the Same Response

The goal is not to treat every trigger as something to avoid.

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CHOOSE THE RESPONSE

Some situations should be avoided. Some need limits. Some require preparation. Others eventually need to be tolerated without escaping them.

AVOID	LIMIT	PREPARE	PRACTICE
When exposure is unnecessarily dangerous, especially in early recovery.	When I cannot or should not completely avoid it, but I can reduce exposure or add boundaries.	When the trigger is predictable and a plan can be made before I am activated.	When the discomfort is part of ordinary life and avoiding it forever may keep it powerful.
What do I have no good reason to expose myself to right now?	**Where do I need stronger limits or boundaries?**	**What situation do I need to plan for in advance?**	**What do I eventually need to learn I can tolerate without escaping or reacting impulsively?**

One Important Question

Am I protecting my recovery, or am I avoiding something I eventually need to learn how to handle?

My Trigger Response Plan

A useful plan should be simple enough to remember when I actually need it.

BUILD THE PLAN

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My Early Warning Signs

BODY	THOUGHTS	EMOTIONS	BEHAVIOR
What changes physically?	What starts repeating?	What rises first?	What do I start doing?

When I Notice a Trigger

1	NAME IT	What is happening? What triggered me?
2	SLOW IT DOWN	Do I need to breathe, walk, leave temporarily, drink water, eat, rest, pray, write, or give myself time?
3	CHECK THE STORY	What am I telling myself this means? Do I know that is true?
4	IDENTIFY THE URGE	What do I want to do right now?
5	FIND THE NEED	What am I actually looking for underneath that urge?
6	CHOOSE THE NEXT ACTION	What action protects the life and recovery I am trying to build?

The goal is not to create a life with no triggers. It is to build enough awareness, support, and practice that a trigger no longer gets to decide what happens next.

My Personal Plan

Three triggers I need to take seriously:

Three things that reliably help me slow down:

People I can contact before I make the situation worse:

One action I know I should not take while highly activated: