

Triggers

A colleague who specializes in PTSD once told me that it was no use trying to learn what all ones triggers were because there are so many that we couldn't possibly learn them all. His advice was to focus on other ways of dealing with PTSD. I think there is a lot of truth to what he says except for his conclusion that we shouldn't try to learn our triggers. There are a lot of triggers and we couldn't possibly ever learn them all. On the other hand the more we understand about our triggers, the better chance we have of heading them off. This same therapist on another occasion, told me that "all roads lead to Rome" meaning that we should be open to using any and all avenues available to us to gain our objective of overcoming the effects of our PTSD. Well one of those roads to Rome is learning our triggers. Okay! It's not the royal road to recovery, but it is a help and as such should not be discarded.

So what is a trigger? A trigger is anything that reminds us, consciously or unconsciously, of some aspect of our trauma. Honestly, it could probably be almost anything. I tried to think of something that would never be a trigger for anyone. But everything I thought of, I could immediately think of a way that it might be triggering for someone. I tried to think of something placid, tranquil and unchanging, and I thought of the moon. Well! Forget that! The moon is obviously a major trigger. Luna means moon. Lunatic means... well you get the point. The connection between a trigger and a trauma can be very direct and obvious or very indirect and obscure. It could be as direct and obvious as a person looking exactly like our perpetrator. It could be as indirect and obscure as a fear of bridges because I crossed a bridge on my way to the hospital. Never mind that I crossed bridges a thousand other times on my way to a thousand other places.

Another way of thinking about triggers is that they are clues. By way of example there was the client who was triggered by her husband running the clothes washer at night. She told him and herself that the noise bothered her. He couldn't understand this, as it wasn't noisy. And she herself didn't quite believe her own explanation. It wasn't until she did some trauma journaling as part of her therapy that she realized that this trigger had to do with her stepfather running the washer to cover the possible sounds of his molesting her. In this case, understanding the history helped to identify that the washer was a trigger. It can also go the other way, where recognizing that something is a trigger can help piece together a part of the history. Either way, the challenge is to make these connections between past traumas and current triggers. Often times, when we make these connections, the triggers involved lose their power over us. That is exactly what happened in the case of this client. Her husband running the washer at night no longer bothered her.

It is helpful to think about what might trigger us. It is helpful to recognize that there is always a possibility that we may have been triggered whenever we find ourselves being reactive. We should ask, "I wonder if something has triggered me?" It is good to think about what was going on just before we started getting reactive. There is a good chance that the first thing that comes to mind when we ask this question is the right answer. Sometimes our reactivity is very subtle

and unless we are paying attention to triggers, we are very apt to rationalize away our reactivity. For example, sometime when we meet someone new, we have an immediate dislike for him or her without giving ourselves a chance to get to know the person. Chances are this dislike is because we have been triggered. Something about them consciously or unconsciously reminds us of our trauma.

The difference between a trigger and a normal reaction is that a trigger always has a tie to our trauma history. A trigger is an abnormal reaction based on our trauma history, but we have lived with this history for so long that we don't have a good read on what is and is not normal. It is helpful to have people we can confide in who can be objective and help us sort out trauma reactions from normal reactions. This can be a close family member, close friend or a professional such as a trusted teacher, doctor, member of clergy or therapist.

The faster we get at recognizing triggers when they occur, the better off we are. If we recognize a trigger before it starts to affect us, we don't have to go into a reactive state. If we recognize that we have been triggered when we find ourselves being reactive, we can have a chance to get out of our reactive state. Even if we only figure out the trigger after the fact, we have a better chance the next time to head off a reaction and avoid some unnecessary unpleasantness.

Desired Outcome: To become more conscious of our triggers and better able to identify them and use them to help us understand the connection between our trauma and our current behavior.

Discussion Starters: Are there times when I feel that I have over-reacted, become very emotional, tranced out, or become extremely angry that may be related to my triggers from my childhood trauma? Where do I feel it when I get into a "bad space" or a triggered place? Do I feel it in my stomach, do I get light-headed, does my heart race, fists clench, teeth grind, or do I feel numb? When do I surprise myself and not get upset about things that normally would trigger me? What do I understand about my triggers and how has this knowledge helped me? How can I determine when I've been triggered vs. when I am having a normal response? As I think about the concept of triggers, what new insights do I have about my triggers? What new connections can I make between my triggers and my trauma history?