

## Trigger knowledge

### What are triggers?

A trigger is something that a person could respond to in an **unwanted** way. Anything could be a trigger: a person, a place, a noise/voice, a memory etc. Trigger knowledge refers to our awareness of what could make us respond in personally unwanted ways. Being aware of our own triggers can be considered a preventative approach to the development of unwanted responses, such as anxiety.

### How do we respond to triggers?

We can respond to triggers in an unwanted way on different levels:

- **Cognitive** (thinking) level: it refers to what we think in response to a trigger.
- **Emotional** level: it refers to how we feel in response to a trigger.
- **Physiological** level: it refers to our bodily responses to a trigger.
- **Behavioural** level: it refers to what we do in response to a trigger.

### Example:

Claire received an invitation to a party. Although, one of her friends will be at the party, she thinks that she will not know anyone else there. In the past, Claire usually felt anxious in new environments and did not usually start conversations with people she did not know before.

In this example, her triggers could be:

- 1. being in a new environment
- 2. knowing only one person at the party (therefore, not knowing anyone else)
- 3. knowing that she did not usually start conversations in the past with people she did not know before.

She may experience some of the following responses to these triggers.

Emotional response to her triggers: she may feel *anxious* when she thinks about being in a new environment (she is also aware that she felt anxious in similar situations in the past; therefore, she may expect herself to be anxious). She may feel *unsafe/insecure* about knowing only one person at the party. She may feel *inadequate or not good-enough*, as her past experience may suggest to her that she is not able to talk to people she does not.

Cognitive (thinking level) response to her triggers: she may have thoughts, such as “no one will talk to me at the party” or “if people talked to me, I would not know what to say, and I will just embarrass myself”. She may also think that “I will have a panic-attack in front of everyone and people will judge me for it.”

Physiological response to her triggers: she may perceive the situation (e.g., being in a new environment and knowing that she usually did not talk to people in the past she did not know before) as a threat or danger, and she may respond to it with some symptoms of anxiety, such as *heart palpitations*, a *change in her breathing (e.g., rapid, shallow breathing)*, *feeling hot*, or *sweating*. She may also start *shaking* in her legs/arms or develop a *headache* when thinking about being at the party.

Behavioural response to her triggers: due to her thoughts and feelings related to the party, she may decide *not to go* there at the end. She may also decide to go to the party, but act in a *withdrawn* way, and attempt to ‘*hide*’ and stay *isolated* there.

### What can we do when we experience a trigger?

There is not one best way to deal with a trigger. Finding a sufficient way to deal with it could be very personal and dependent on many factors, such as the nature of the trigger, the intensity of it, or a person’s belief about their ability to cope with difficulties in general (also known as ‘resilience’). We could, however, differentiate between **avoiding** a trigger or **facing** it. Both will have advantages and disadvantages. Let’s take a closer look at these.

#### Avoidance

Avoiding a trigger means that a person will not be exposed to it and to its associated potential threats and dangers, or the person’s exposure to these will be reduced. While avoiding a trigger may be the best decision in certain situations, it may also be worth considering utilising that time away from the trigger as a temporary break that could be used to reach our ‘usual’ mindset. When we feel ready to do so, we could consider revisiting the trigger, if necessary. Please note, going back to a trigger after taking a break from it is not always necessary. For example, if a person randomly shouts at us on the streets, which we find triggering, and we decided to leave this person without any response to them, we do not have to revisit that trigger, so we do not have to find the person who shouted at us, as it may not be beneficial for us to do so.

Below are a few examples to advantages and disadvantages of avoiding a trigger.

#### Advantages of avoiding a trigger:

- avoiding a trigger could provide a temporary (short-term) relief. This temporary relief could be used to reach a more balanced mental state before revisiting a trigger, if necessary.
- A temporary relief from triggers could also enable someone to continue with a particular activity (e.g., taking a short break, instead of leaving work/school/college/university after experiencing a panic-attack).

- Avoiding a trigger could contribute to the de-escalation of a potentially problematic situation (e.g., taking a break in a 'heated' argument could result in continuing that discussion later in a calmer mindset).

Disadvantages of avoiding a trigger:

- avoiding a trigger could provide a temporary (short-term) relief – no, you read it right. A temporary relief from avoiding a trigger could have a positive or a negative impact on a person. It could be considered a negative impact when the brain will 'learn to reward' the avoidance behaviour, as that behaviour may occur more frequently after learning it (e.g., a person feeling relieved that they do not have to go back to their stressful work environment – the person may learn that avoiding work can result in a short-term sense of relief and may stay away from their workplace more frequently in the future, instead of acknowledging and attempting to address the reason for wanting to stay away from it in the first place, which could be considered a long-term solution to their difficulty).
- Learning to avoid triggers may result in a person developing an 'avoidance-pattern', which means that their automatic/default reaction to triggers and difficult situations may become avoidance, regardless of their abilities to cope with these in general.
- Learning an avoidance-pattern may contribute to a person's self-image – they may learn to think about themselves that they are not capable of coping with difficulties, which could then lead them to miss out on potentially life-enriching experiences due to the associated threats and dangers of a trigger (e.g., someone deciding not to go to a sports activity due to their anxiety, when engaging with that sports activity may cause them enjoyment; or, someone may experience anxiety when thinking about leaving their home while they also would like to meet with their friends somewhere outside of their home).
- Avoiding a trigger (by for example taking a break from it) may become a distraction without addressing a potentially important issue in a person's life (e.g., someone learning to walk away from a difficult conversation to calm down, but not reaching the point where they feel able to have that conversation).

Facing a trigger

Coping with a trigger means that a person will face it, and its associated potential threats and dangers, as and when they occur.

Below are a few examples to advantages and disadvantages of facing a trigger.

Advantages of facing a trigger:

- despite a potentially difficult experience of facing a trigger, it may lead a person to experience a sense of achievement/accomplishment, which in turn may increase their sense of competence and self-confidence.

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- An increased sense of achievement, sense of competence and self-confidence may contribute to a person's self-image - they may learn about themselves that they are capable of facing other potentially triggering situations as well, which could then lead them to new, life-enriching experiences (e.g., a person learning to manage their anxiety related difficulties in one situation may be able to apply those learnings in other anxiety-provoking situations as well).
- Facing triggers could potentially contribute to a person's further personal and professional development (e.g., having difficult, but meaningful and beneficial, conversations may lead to higher relationship satisfaction, or overcoming anxiety related difficulties at one's workplace may lead to higher job satisfaction).

#### Disadvantages of facing a trigger:

- facing a trigger could lead to temporary unpleasant experiences, such as symptoms of anxiety (although, this could help a person to learn to cope with similar situations in the future in a personally more satisfactory way).
- Premature exposure to a potentially triggering situation could result in an unpleasant experience, which could slow or prevent further exposure to that trigger (e.g., if someone wanted to overcome their fear of heights by visiting and looking out from the top floor of a very tall building, they may become traumatised by the perception of such height and would not try to visit tall buildings in the future at all; although, it may work for some to overcome their fear of heights that way).
- Premature exposure to a potentially triggering situation could also be dangerous. For example, if someone has a fear of heights and decides to address it by attempting to rush up a ladder, they may become overwhelmed by fear and anxiety in a potentially dangerous situation, risking their own safety or the safety of others (e.g., falling off the ladder). Someone in a similar situation may consider gradual exposure to a trigger, instead (e.g., walking up one rung at a time with potential support to prevent them from falling from the ladder).
- In certain situations, it may be difficult to decide whether or not facing a trigger is the right decision. If someone decides to face a triggering situation, but they end up gaining a negative experience from it, they may blame their own abilities for not being able to cope with it (as mentioned above, the unpleasant experience could also slow or prevent further exposure to that trigger). This may negatively impact on the person's self-image (e.g., reinforcing their beliefs about themselves that they are not capable of coping with difficulties, and they may not even try in the future).

#### **Trigger categories**

Below is a table with different trigger categories. Aim to think about your own personal triggers and write them down in the boxes below (remember, a trigger is something that you may react to in personally unwanted ways on an emotional/cognitive/physiological/behavioural level).

Trigger category	Your own personal triggers
<p><b>Emotional state</b> (Examples: feeling frustrated or worthless)</p>	
<p><b>Thoughts</b> (Examples: thinking that your friends only fake their friendship with you, or thinking that your partner deserves someone better than you)</p>	
<p><b>Place</b> (Examples: a specific place such as a room where you had an argument with someone, or places in general, such as busy and loud environments)</p>	
<p><b>People</b> (Examples: a specific person, such as your former best friend, or certain types of people in general, such as insensitive and rude people)</p>	
<p><b>Situations</b> (Examples: performing in front of others, or asking for help)</p>	
<p><b>Events</b> (Examples: social events, family gatherings, exams, or job interviews)</p>	
<p><b>Miscellaneous</b> (Examples: anything that does not fit the other categories, such as objects, like knives, or seeing cars after an accident)</p>	

### What could you do about your triggers?

Choose one or more of your own triggers from your trigger categories above; describe them in more detail and come up with ideas about what you could do to avoid or reduce your exposure to them (e.g., taking a break from the trigger, or avoiding it altogether), or to cope with them as and when they happen.

Trigger	Describe it in more detail	Coping through avoiding a trigger	Coping through facing a trigger
<p>Claire's example from above.</p>	<p>Claire may be afraid of going to a party because it will be in a new environment.</p> <p>She thinks that she will only know one person there.</p> <p>She may think that she is not good with talking to new people, as she did not really do it in the past.</p>	<p>Claire could reassure herself that it is not compulsory to go to the party and she is free to choose whether or not to attend it.</p> <p>If she made the decision to go to the party, she could aim to distract herself until the time of the party by, for example, focusing on her work or on her personally enjoyable activities.</p> <p>She could also remind herself that she could decide to leave the party at any point, and that she could also stay for as long as she would enjoy it.</p> <p>Once at the party, she could take short breaks from that environment by, for example, having some fresh air. She may also decide to tell her friend about feeling anxious about the party, asking that friend in advance to accompany her to get some fresh air from time to time.</p> <p>Although, it would need to be consensual, Claire and her friend could agree not to leave each other alone at the party (this way, Claire may feel less pressure to get to know and spend time with new people, or she may receive support from</p>	<p>While focusing on the positives and negatives of a situation could be equally important, Claire could attempt to encourage herself to attend the party by focusing on what she may be looking forward to about it (e.g., spending time with her friend).</p> <p>If thinking about going to the party triggered anxiety in her, Claire could practice, for example, breathing-techniques and/or mindfulness-based techniques to calm herself down. Once she feels calmer, she could revisit what she may be looking forward to regarding the party.</p> <p>She could also consider practicing role-playing exercises with someone whom she feels comfortable with (e.g., practicing how she could begin, maintain, and end conversations with others).</p> <p>She could tell someone she feels comfortable with about her feelings regarding the party.</p> <p>She could also ask her friend to aim to stay with her for a while at the beginning of the party.</p>

		her friend while doing so).	
Your example:			
Your example:			
Your example:			

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