Understanding Personal Emotional Triggers

Trauma impacts each person individually. Specific events may trigger deep, powerful and personal emotional reactions that test your built-in resilience. Understanding your personal triggers and how to prepare and recover when you experience them plays an important role in maintaining overall resilience and continuing to perform both safely and effectively. Understanding emotional triggers is also an important element of peer support as it creates sensitivity amongst team members to recognise and support those experiencing them.

Why do we have emotional reactions to triggers?

Emotional triggers consist of thoughts, feelings and events that seem to ‘trigger’ an automatic response. The word ‘trigger’ is important here: it might seem as if the emotional reaction is completely involuntary, but the truth is that this reaction, like everything else that we do, is a choice. Learning how to identify our personal emotional triggers is the first step to taking control over how we choose to respond.

The amygdala is an almond-shape set of neurons located deep in the brain's medial temporal lobe. Shown to play a key role in the processing of emotions, it triggers your emotions faster than your conscious awareness. These organs protect you from harm by interpreting subconscious hints of danger to trigger lightning-fast responses. The amygdalae react to negative events in many ways. The knee-jerk responses of these organs cause you to overreact to the world around you. The amygdalae remember the things you felt, saw and heard each time you have a painful experience. Subliminal hints of such stressful events (even photos) will cause the organs to set off attack or escape routines. Those motor routines trigger evasive actions or internal turmoil. Before you know it, you will become angry or try to avoid the situation. Angry, defensive or fearful internal voices will nag you if you cannot solve the issue. The amygdalae will overwhelm you with responses to real and imaginary threats for a lifetime unless you consciously take control of their knee-jerk responses.

Unmet needs and emotional triggers

Some of the most common needs you have will trigger an emotional reaction when you feel as though you aren't getting or will not get one of these needs met:

- Safety
- Peace
- Comfort
- Control
- Order or balance

Emotional responses and triggers

To ultimately feel a sense of control of your emotions, you must first be able to recognise and anticipate which situations are likely to trigger an emotional reaction. You can then begin the
process of learning how to regulate your emotions. This is how you can start turning emotional reactions into emotional responses. It's also easier to recognise these types of responses in others once we can recognise them in ourselves.

For example: love can be triggered by thinking about your significant other or feeling unconditionally accepted by an important other, joy by hearing beautiful music or experiencing success, sadness by rejection or having a loved one die, fear by being alone in a scary place or thinking about a past trauma, anger by being criticised or mocked or finding out someone betrayed you, interest by starting an exciting new project or seeing something complicated and wondering how it works and guilt by lying to someone or saying something hurtful to another person.

**Emotional self-awareness card**

Being able to talk about your thoughts, feelings and what you are going to do, constructively considering your self-awareness, creates clarity, empowerment and direction. This simple tool can be used with others to help with communication.

Become aware of:

- **Your thinking**: 'What I am thinking about is…'
- **Your feelings**: 'What I am feeling about this is…'
- **Going forwards**: 'Going forwards, I'm going to…' or, 'Going forwards, what I'd like for you to consider is…'

**Five steps to managing triggers**

1. Accept responsibility for your actions.
2. Recognise that you are having an emotional reaction.
3. Identify what triggered the emotion.
4. Choose what you want to feel and what you want to do.
5. Shift your emotional state.
   - **Relax**: breathe and release the tension in your body.
   - **Detach**: clear your mind of all thoughts.
   - **Centre**: drop your awareness to the centre of your body just below your navel.
   - **Focus**: choose one keyword that represents how you want to feel in this moment. Breathe in the word, and allow yourself to feel the shift. Stop trying to manage your emotions. Instead, choose to feel something different when an emotion arises. This is how you gain emotional freedom.

**Identifying your triggers**

- Maintain a journal.
- Ascertain what triggers emotions.
- Get acquainted with your emotions.
- Recognise the chain of emotions.
- Check your reactions.

**Addressing your triggers**

- Amend your way of life. Take time off.
- Be open-minded.
- Set borders.
- Be optimistic.
- Seek professional help and communicate with family and friends.
What is trauma?

- Exposure to an event directly as a victim or witness.
- Indirectly learning or hearing about a traumatic event.
- An extreme stressor that may impact individuals and disrupt the entire workforce.

Initial reactions to trauma

- **Physical**: muscle tremors, sweating, need for washroom, nausea, hyperventilation, muffled hearing, disorientation, light-headedness
- **Cognitive**: difficulty making decisions, short-term memory problems, poor concentration, difficulty communicating feelings and needs
- **Emotional**: feeling overwhelmed, anxiety, self-doubt, fear, numbness, anger, sadness.

Improve your self-care

- Avoid big life changes or snap decisions but encourage yourself to make smaller, daily decisions
- Maintain your routine as much as possible
- Understand that everyone reacts differently to trauma
- Give yourself permission to feel anxious, sad or angry
- Limit use of alcohol, cigarettes or coffee
- Take time to rest, exercise and eat a well-balanced diet
- Spend time with others that care
- Seek professional assistance, if needed.

Barriers to asking for help

- What will my buddies think?
- I don’t need help.
- Everybody gets stressed out sometimes.
- I should be able to handle this.
- Will this be kept confidential?
- Nothing will help me.
- Who would I talk to anyway?
- I don’t have time for this.

Be a calming presence to others

- Focus on immediate needs.
- Be innovative in helping.
- Educate and give appropriate information.
- Use everyday words, not jargon (no puns, sarcasm, irony or cynicism)

Stay emotionally fit by doing regular check-ups

- Exposure to trauma is an occupational hazard.
- Know the signs when trauma is taking its toll on you.
- Research tells us that the effects of trauma are cumulative.

Developing a buddy system

- Get to know each other.
- Keep an eye on each other.
- Set up times to check-in with each other.
• Offer to help with basic needs, such as sharing supplies and transportation.
• Monitor each other’s workloads.
• Communicate your buddy’s basic needs and limits to leadership.
• Make your buddy feel 'safe' to speak up.

Improving mental health
• Mind your body.
• Volunteer.
• Relax more.
• Associate with positive people.
• Eliminate bad habits.
• Ask for help when needed.
• Do more of what makes you happy.
• Set life goals.
• Keep a diary.
• Communicate more.

Responder self-care techniques
• Schedule an emotional fitness exam annually.
• Work in teams, and limit the amount of time spent working alone.
• Write in a journal.
• Talk to family, friends, supervisors and teammates about your feelings and experiences.
• Practise breathing and relaxation techniques.
• Maintain a healthy diet, and get adequate sleep and exercise.
• Know that it is okay to draw boundaries and say 'no'.
• Avoid or limit caffeine and alcohol.