

What Are Triggers?

A trigger is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.

Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback. She/he will react to this flashback, trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

The senses identified as being the most common to trigger someone are sight and sound, followed by touch and smell, and taste close behind. A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma. Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes.

SIGHT TRIGGERS:

Visual cues, such as specific objects, scenes, or even colors, can trigger memories and emotions related to a traumatic event.

- Often someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits or objects (clothing, hair color, distinctive walk).
- Any situation where someone else is being abused (anything from a raised eyebrow and verbal comment to actual physical abuse).
- The object that was used to abuse
- The objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place (alcohol, piece of furniture, time of year).
- Any place or situation where the abuse took place (specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings).

SOUND TRIGGERS:

Auditory cues, like particular sounds or noises, can be powerful triggers.

- Anything that sounds like anger (raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking).
- Anything that sounds like pain or fear (crying, whispering, screaming).
- Anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing).
- Anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice).
- Words of abuse (cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used).

SMELL TRIGGERS:

Olfactory cues are closely linked to memory and emotions. Smelling a certain scent that was present during a traumatic event can transport an individual back to that experience.

- Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume).
- Any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol).

TOUCH TRIGGERS:

Tactile cues, such as textures, temperatures, or sensations, can also trigger responses.

- Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to, during, or after the abuse (certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you).

TASTE TRIGGERS:

While less common, taste cues can trigger memories and emotions as well. Certain tastes or flavors associated with a traumatic event could potentially evoke distressing responses.

- Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (certain foods, alcohol, tobacco)

It's important to understand that sensory triggers are highly individual and can vary from person to person based on their unique experiences and sensitivities. For individuals with PTSD or other trauma-related conditions, sensory triggers can lead to symptoms like anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, and intense emotional distress. Therapy, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy, can help individuals manage their reactions to these triggers and reduce their impact on daily life.

For those around individuals who may be affected by sensory triggers, it's important to be understanding, patient, and supportive. Creating a safe environment and avoiding unnecessary exposure to triggering stimuli can contribute to the individual's well-being and recovery.