

Triggers, Flashbacks and Nightmares

What are Triggers?

A trigger is a person, place, feeling or thing that immediately induces a stress-based physical or emotional response based on a past traumatic experience. The mind perceives triggers as a threat and causes a reaction like fear, panic, or agitation. Think of the reaction to triggers as a defence mechanism: The memory of the traumatic event places you right back into the experience, which causes your walls to go up against the perceived threat in an attempt to protect yourself.

Triggers can be internally generated by feelings of stress, anger or sadness, or have causes rooted in the external environment.

Internal Triggers

- Anger
- Memories
- Loneliness
- Feeling vulnerable or abandoned
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Tension
- Feeling out of control
- Pain

External Triggers

- Break-up or end of a relationship
- News
- Anniversaries
- Smells
- Specific places
- Witnessing another accident or similar event
- Holidays
- Arguments
- Seeing people that remind you of the event

- Movies or books that remind you of the event

Safety planning

Think Ahead - Before you go out, think about whether or not you might encounter some triggers. Identify what those triggers may be and how you can avoid them.

If you can't avoid your triggers, come up with several methods of coping with them.

Learning how to identify and cope with triggers is an important first step in putting together your safety plan. Some common external triggers include:

Seeing people or places that remind you of your trauma –
Anniversaries – Holidays – Smells

Write Down a List of Emergency Numbers

Social support can be an excellent way of coping with symptoms.

Identify Ways of Coping

"coping cards," notecards you can carry with you that take you through a particular coping strategy. Write down, step-by-step, what you would need to do to cope with distress using a particular coping strategy, such as deep breathing or grounding. Take these cards with you wherever you go. Then, when you are experiencing distress, take out the card and go through each step.

Identify Early Warning Signs

Take a time to learn about and write down the early warning signs that a trigger may be coming on. Often symptoms don't suddenly occur, but are, in fact, preceded by warning signs which may include:

Changes in how you think - Changes in your mood - Changes in your behaviour

Enlist the Help of Others

If you are going someplace where you know there may be triggers, consider having someone you trust contact you several times throughout the day to see how you are doing and whether or not you need any support. Check-ins like these will make sure that help is not far away should you need it.

CRISIS PLAN

I know I'm triggered when I notice:

Some good ways to distract myself are:

Things that help me when I feel this way are:

Ways to keep myself and my space safe:

Some safe people I can reach out to are:

1

2

3

Other resources I can use to get myself care:

1

2

3

CRISIS TEXT LINE:
text HOME to 741741

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Triggers



Trigger: A stimulus—such as a person, place, situation, or thing—that contributes to an unwanted emotional or behavioral response.

The Problem

Describe the problem your triggers are contributing to. What's the worst-case scenario, if you are exposed to your triggers?

Trigger Categories

Just about *anything* can be a trigger. To begin exploring your own triggers, think about each of the categories listed below. Is there a specific emotion that acts as a trigger for you? How about a person or place? List your responses in the provided spaces.

Emotional State	
People	
Places	
Things	
Thoughts	
Activities / Situations	

Tips for Dealing with Triggers

- Oftentimes, the best way to deal with a trigger is to avoid it. This might mean making changes to your lifestyle, relationships, or daily routine.
- Create a strategy to deal with your triggers head on, just in case. Your strategy might include coping skills, a list of trusted people you can talk to, or rehearsed phrases to help you get out of a troublesome situation.
- Don't wait until the heat of the moment to test your coping strategy. *Practice!*

Triggers



In this section, you will develop a plan for dealing with your three biggest triggers. Review your plan regularly, and practice each of the strategies.

Describe your three biggest triggers, in detail.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

Describe your strategy for *avoiding or reducing exposure* to each trigger.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

Describe your strategy for dealing with each trigger head on, when they cannot be avoided.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks usually happen suddenly, without warning. They are vivid memories of a traumatic event that feel like they are happening now. You may re-experience what you saw, heard, smelt, felt and your body's reactions, such as a fast heartbeat. They can last from seconds to hours.

What do flashbacks feel like?

Flashbacks feel different for different people. They can happen at anytime, even when we're feeling happy. They can be very scary and distressing as you re-experience your trauma and it can feel like it's really happening. You may see what happened as single images or like a film, hear sounds or words, or feel as though you're being touched. You might be able to smell or taste something linked to your trauma and your body might react the same way by your heart beating fast or sweating. Flashbacks can make you feel vulnerable, anxious and scared. They can leave you feeling isolated and not wanting to talk to anyone. You might experience intense feelings of anger, shame or numbness.

Why do we have flashbacks?

Current theories:

Flashbacks happen because our brains tend to store information about traumatic events in a different place to normal information. It is as if they have filed away trauma in a cabinet marked 'here be monsters'. Our brains can refuse to take us to the trauma cabinet when we want to go there, when we are trying to deal with them. Then our brains will open the cabinet and let out information as flashbacks, when we do not want them. Normally, information about what has happened to us in the past is stored so that when we remember it, we are aware that it happened in the past, not now. Because trauma information is stored differently, we do not have that sense of the past when we recall it.

You have a flashback when your brain has recognised similarities between your current situation and your experience of sexual violence.

Your fight or flight response is triggered and your body reacts instinctively and causes the same reactions that kept you alive during the last time your life was in danger. This theory suggests flashbacks are an attempt to get you to repeat your previous life-saving behaviour.

Managing flashbacks

Tell yourself you are having a flashback. You are not losing control. Flashbacks are a temporary and natural reaction to surviving trauma.

‘Ground’ yourself in NOW. Take a look around and note what is happening. What can you see and hear? Tell yourself your name and the date and time. You could keep an elastic band on your wrist and ‘ping it’ to bring yourself back to the here and now. Or, you could carry a pebble, a hankie or key-ring in your pocket which you can hold or rub when you have a flashback.

During the flashback, let part of yourself stay in the present, whilst allowing yourself to remember the past. Take long deep breaths and focus on your breathing as the memory emerges. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe.

If you can, try not to fight the flashback. This may be very difficult. But if you try to distract yourself or ignore the memories, they may become stronger as they try to emerge.

If you are able to speak with your partner (if you have one) about your experience of sexual violence, you may be able to explain to them about flashbacks and agree in advance what you wish to happen if a flashback happens during intimacy. If you experience a flashback during sex, your partner may be able to help ground you, saying your name and letting you know you are safe. It is OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories. Your partner should respect your choice and support you. If you are unable to disclose your experience of sexual violence to your partner, perhaps it would still be possible to talk about what you are or are not comfortable with sexually.

If you have a flashback when you are out and about, try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel safe. If you cannot go to a safe place try to

focus on your breathing: taking long slow breaths will help. Remind yourself that you are not being hurt now; that it is in the past.

Process your flashback. If you feel up to it you can write about your flashback or talk to a friend.. This can help get it out of your mind. Keep a list of people you can contact.

It may help in the short-term, to avoid things which you know can trigger your flashbacks (although you cannot control when they occur). But be careful about this as it can lead to you limiting yourself. This can get in the way of living the life you want and deserve. With support, many survivors find that they are able to predict their flashbacks and their effect. Often, talking about the flashbacks, and more generally about your experience of sexual violence, can help. Although you can never make it so it did not happen, it is possible to heal from sexual violence.

Flashbacks can be very tiring. It may take hours or even days before you feel OK again. After a flashback, take time for yourself. Try to do something that makes you feel good such as having a relaxing bath or listening to your favourite music.

Flashbacks – Self-Monitoring Record

Flashbacks are unwanted memories of things that have happened to you. They can occur in any of your senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste), and can make you feel like the event is happening again in the present moment.

Trigger <small>Describe the situation that triggered your flashback</small>	Flashback <small>What was your unwanted memory of?</small>	Emotions & body feelings <small>What did you feel? How strong was that feeling? (0–100%)</small>	Responses <small>What did you do? How did you cope with those feelings?</small>	Consequences <small>What was helpful or unhelpful about responding in that way?</small>
<p>• Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?</p> <p>• How was this situation similar to your trauma?</p>	<p>Flashbacks can be like pictures or films in your mind. You might experience sounds, smells, tastes, or feelings of touch.</p>			

What are nightmares?

The trauma of sexual violence may lead to nightmares. These are more than simply ‘bad dreams’. You may feel that the attack or an aspect of the abuse is really happening to you in your sleep. If you experience nightmares regularly, it is likely that you will be apprehensive about sleeping. Try to remind yourself that nightmares are an effect of the abuse you experienced. It is possible to develop ways of reducing the nightmares and of coping with the after effects. It can be helpful to try to understand the nightmares as part of your recovery. Your brain is recalling images or sensations which it needs to process before moving on.

Nightmares may be an intense expression of the body working through traumatic experiences, so intense that the nightmare causes the sleeper to wake up. Nightmares may also represent a breakdown in the body’s ability to process trauma.

Long-term, repetitive nightmares are linked to difficulties in reducing the brain's fear response combined with chronic hyperarousal. The fight-flight-freeze response can remain activated long after a traumatic experience has ended.

Many neuroscientists and psychologists believe that dreams help to integrate our experiences into long-term memory, a process called memory consolidation. When our experiences are traumatic, dreams may reflect the body's attempt to cope and learn from these situations.

Managing nightmares

Remind yourself that nightmares are not real. They are very distressing but they are a memory of what happened; they are not happening now.

Keep a diary of when you have nightmares to see if there are any patterns. Do your nightmares have the same images or content? Talking to someone about these can help take the image or event out of your head. This may help you feel more in control. If you can see patterns to your nightmares, you may be able to develop ways of changing or coping with these.

When you wake from a nightmare try to 'ground' yourself in the present. There are many ways to do this.

- Remind yourself that the nightmare is not real, but that it is natural to feel fear and stress. Notice your environment and try to establish a routine that you find soothing and can rely on if you have a nightmare, either through the night or in the morning. Some people find it helpful to practise relaxation techniques, to have a warm drink, listen to music, to write down their feelings, read, have a bath, call a helpline, speak to someone they trust.
- Practise relaxation techniques, deep breathing, yoga, or anything that helps you reduce stress and anxiety.
- Develop a safe place image – a place in your mind which makes you feel safe or comfortable. Imagine the feelings, the sounds, the temperature and the sights. It could be real or from your imagination. Practise visiting this safe space when you are feeling good, so when you need it, you can go there.

You can try *The Dream Completion Technique* by Justin Havens to overcome nightmares. This technique has been used with many survivors of PTSD and has proved a successful way of overcoming nightmares. If it doesn't work first time, keep trying, [Learn how to stop PTSD nightmares with Dr Justin Havens \(extended self-help version\) - YouTube](#)

Improving sleep habits

Try not to go to bed until you feel tired. It can help to avoid taking naps during the day and to take regular exercise (not within 4 hours of going to bed).

Check your sleeping arrangements. Think about comfort, temperature, light and noise levels. If you have something special which you find comforting – a pillow, a teddy or a photograph – take this to bed with you or have it close by in case you need it.

Learn to de-stress before bed, for example by having a warm bath and a milky drink. Try to eat early - well before you go to bed - and avoid rich, spicy or sugar-rich foods, red meat and cheese.

If you self-medicate with alcohol or drugs - prescribed or illegal - it may feel as if they help in the short-term. But, over time they can become problematic. It may be helpful to seek medical advice or to find other ways of coping. Even moderate drinking and smoking can affect your quality of sleep.

Other things that can help to build into your routine are:

- Trying to get rid of difficult thoughts by writing them down or drawing images which play on your mind
- Trying to interrupt unwanted thoughts with activities or positive thoughts about a person or place
- Practice a relaxation technique before you go to bed. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe. Consciously tense and relax your muscles, in turn: start with your toes and work up.

- Mindfulness is a technique that helps you to focus on the present moment - your breathing, your thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness helps you to observe your thoughts and feelings without judging yourself and to become more aware of any changes in how you see or feel about yourself. Mindfulness can help to relax you before sleeping or if you wake up from a nightmare.
- Try out complementary remedies. Yoga, meditation, homeopathy or herbal remedies, such as lavender, may help.
- Don't try to force sleep. It will only make you feel more anxious. Try keeping your eyes open instead and, as they start to close, tell yourself to resist. The more you try to stay awake, the sleepier you'll become.
- Do not stay in bed. If you cannot sleep, get up after 20 minutes and go through your relaxation routine again.

Grounding techniques

Help control the symptoms of triggers by turning attention away from thoughts, memories, or worries, and refocusing on the present moment. They work by ridding your body of excessive energy, calming and slowing down emotions you are feeling and calming your mind, to allow you to connect back with yourself in the present. Grounding techniques are very personal so you may find some work better than others. They become easier with practice.

They can be broken down into the following 3 areas. You may find you are drawn to a certain type of technique.

Mental - These techniques help you to refocus your thoughts.

Physical - These techniques help you to feel physically grounded and connected to your body.

Soothing - These techniques help you to feel calm, safe and relaxed.

Mental techniques

5-4-3-2-1 - This technique helps you to focus your attention on the present:

- Name 5 things you can see.
- Name 4 things you can feel ("my feet on the floor").

- Name 3 things you can hear (“traffic outside”, “birds singing”).
- Name 2 things you can smell.
- Name 1 thing you can taste.

Alphabet game - Pick a category (e.g. ‘food’) and think of an item for every letter in the alphabet (e.g. apple, banana, crisps... etc).

Concentrate on a mental task - Complete a tricky mental task or calculation. For example:

Go through your times tables (3 x 2 is..., 3 x 3 is..., etc).

Say the alphabet backwards.

Do some challenging sums (19 x 21 = ...).

Imagery - Visualize something that stops you from focusing on your unwanted thoughts or feelings.

For example you could imagine:

A big STOP sign; Changing the ‘TV channel’; ‘Turning down the dial’ on your emotions.

Use an anchoring phrase

Describe who you are, how old you are, the date today, the time, where you are now.

For example, *“My name is Emma, I am 57 years old. Today is Monday 23rd March, it’s 10am, I’m sat at my kitchen table.”*

You can keep adding details until you feel better. *“My tea is warm. I can hear the breeze outside. It’s my day off today.”*

Imagine yourself leaving the painful feelings behind -

Visualize: Gathering the emotions, balling them up, and putting them into a box. Walking, swimming, biking, or jogging away from painful feelings. Your thoughts as a song or TV show you dislike, changing the channel or turning down the volume — they’re still there, but you don’t have to listen to them.

Physical techniques

Breathe - Pay attention to your breath. Inhale through your nose and out through your mouth. [Box Breathing Technique - YouTube](#) Place your hands

on your tummy. Watch as your hands move up and down as you breathe.

Touch a grounding object - Try carrying a small object in your pocket wherever you go – for example a small stone. Touch or grip this when you feel overwhelmed or triggered.

Dig your heels in - Concentrate on putting your weight into your heels. Remind yourself that you are physically connected to the ground. Stamp your feet if that helps. You could try it barefoot on a soft carpet or rug.

Tense and release - Try clenching and releasing your fists. You can also tense up your entire body and focus on slowly releasing it, from the forehead, jaw, shoulders right down to your toes.

Touch or grip objects - Touch or grip different objects around you. Think about how they feel. Or try gripping onto your chair as hard as you can.

Wiggle and stretch - Stretch your arms and legs. Try wiggling your fingers or toes.

Savor a food or drink - Take small bites or sips of a food or beverage you enjoy, letting yourself fully taste each bite. Think about how it tastes and smells and the flavours that linger on your tongue.

Take a short walk - Concentrate on your steps — you can even count them. Notice the rhythm of your footsteps and how it feels to put your foot on the ground and then lift it again.

Put your hands in water - Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels on your fingertips, palms, and the backs of your hands. Does it feel the same in each part of your hand? Use warm water first, then cold. Next, try cold water first, then warm. Does it feel different to switch from cold to warm water versus warm to cold?

Soothing techniques

Happy place - Think about a place you can relax, feel safe and be happy. It can be real or imagined. This could be a tropical beach, a cosy room with a log fire, high up on a mountain overlooking the world.

List positive things - Write or mentally list four or five things in your life that bring you joy, visualizing each of them briefly.

List favourites - List three favourite things in several different categories, such as: foods, trees, songs, movies, books, places.

Plan a treat - Think about a soothing, relaxing treat for later – for example a bubble bath, a nap under your favourite blanket, or nice meal.

Coping statements - Repeat coping statements to yourself or write them down.

For example, *“I am strong”, “I have done this before”, “This too shall pass”*.

Safety statements - Repeat safety statements to yourself or write them down.

For example, *“I am safe now”*.

Self-kindness - Repeat kind, compassionate and encouraging statements to yourself or write them down.

For example, *“I matter”, “I am having a tough time but I will get through this”, “I am trying hard and doing really well”*.

Picture the voice or face of someone you love - If you feel upset or distressed, visualize someone positive in your life. Imagine their face or think of what their voice sounds like. Imagine them telling you that the moment is tough, but that you’ll get through it.