

## What it is

A series of articles, practical tools and suggestions for managing one's emotional triggers

## What it can do

This tool can help leaders, consultants and coaches:

- Understand the phenomenon of emotional triggering and its negative impact on their effectiveness
- Gain greater understanding about their own emotional sensitivities
- Develop capacity to more quickly recognize when they're been triggered
- Learn a powerful practice for skillful self-management when triggered
- Deal more effectively with others who are triggered

## How it works

The Managing Your Triggers Toolkit includes the following articles, best practices and tools:

1. *How Triggers Disrupt Our Clarity*
2. *Getting To Know Your Triggers*
3. *What To Do When Triggered: The 4-Step Practice of State-Shifting*
4. *How To Know You're Triggered*
5. *The Art of State-Shifting: 13 Tools for Recovery*
6. *Meshing: How To Stay Centered in Triggering Situations*
7. *What To Do When Others Are Triggered*

You can download the articles in this toolkit, and many other tools for transformation, at: [atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)

*This is the 1<sup>st</sup> article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit.  
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[atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

All human beings have emotional hot buttons.

Something happens. A person says something to us. We read an email. All of a sudden, it's like a button has been pushed, and we are grabbed by intense emotional reactions. We were feeling fine a moment earlier, but then certain kinds of events happen and, in a millisecond, we're upset, thrown off balance, and irrational. We may find ourselves acting out of control in ways that are extremely unskillful – even damaging – to ourselves and others.

We call this phenomena **triggering**. Triggers are events that tend to catapult us instantly into highly emotional reactions, often way out of proportion to the event itself. After we calm down, we may look back and regret things we said or did while in this altered state of reactivity.

When triggered, our capacity to think clearly and to act wisely is seriously impaired. If you look at the “mistakes” you’ve made – the things you later regretted saying and doing – many of these were impulsive reactions from your hot buttons being pushed.

The ability to master our emotional reactivity is a core competency for leaders.

### **What is triggering?**

Most of the time, our neo-cortex – the seat of reasoning in our brain – can help monitor our reactions and choices of how we speak and act. When triggered, control of our reactions is seized by a part of the brain called the amygdala.

The amygdala is an almond-shaped group of neurons located deep in the medial, temporal lobes of our brain. It is part of our limbic system and plays a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions. The amygdala also regulates the fight/flight response.

The fight/flight response serves an important evolutionary function. When danger is sensed, the amygdala signals our body to release massive amounts of stress-related hormones and peptides. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase to give you extra energy, blood is diverted to your arms and legs to provide more power, you perspire more to prevent overheating, your muscles tense to allow you to attack or flee. Because rapid response is critical in these life-threatening situations, the amygdala receives signals and reacts milliseconds before our cortex has a chance to process information.

While these responses are very useful in life-threatening situations, you can see the problem this response presents in our everyday lives. These primitive neural systems cannot distinguish between emotional threats to our ego and the threat of death to our body. When someone does or says something that triggers our emotional wiring, our body reacts as if our life were threatened. Our limbic system responds with the full range of flight/fight

response before our rational mind has a chance to assess what's happening. Our body is now under the control of a level of "intelligence" designed to protect us in the age of dinosaurs.

When triggered, we're basically incapable of dealing with the situation at hand. We usually make a mess. Then, when the rush of hormones subsides, we realize too late that we reacted inappropriately.

### **Where do triggers come from?**

Our triggers are very personal – what triggers us may not trigger someone else at all. They arise out of our life history. Remember, the amygdala not only initiates the fight/flight response; it forms and stores memories associated with emotional events. Our responses seem out of proportion with the triggering incident because of the stored memories of past experiences that come flooding up.

Let's look at a common example of triggering. Imagine someone with authority making a dismissive comment regarding your work. Some of us may not have a problem with this kind of remark, and it rolls like water off a duck's back. But others of us will get triggered. We respond either with "fight" – get defensive, begin to argue or get angry – or we head towards "flight" and shut down. The intensity of our reaction is not just about this person and this remark. It's about a lifetime of similar experiences, perhaps going all the way back to feeling very young, hearing our father's voice expressing disappointment in our grades, and being flooded with all the old feelings of not being good enough in his eyes.

We focus on the person and their remark as the source of danger. But the real threat is what we carry inside. Our triggers evoke powerful chains of emotions and memories, usually tracing back to our childhood. Our triggers may be birthed in the common traumas of growing up: not feeling valued by a parent, being the youngest child who was left out, being held back in school, being rejected by peers, or the impact of an emotionally absent parent. For others, the chain leads to more dramatic woundings, such as the death of a family member, divorce, a traumatic accident, alcoholism in the family, emotional or physical abuse

In addition to individual experiences of trauma, members of socially oppressed groups are often subject to a lifetime of woundings due to their social identities. This helps to understand the phenomenon of micro-aggressions. The incident in the present is experienced as deeply wounding to someone who has been hurt again and again from living in a social system which has fundamentally denied their worth.<sup>1\*</sup>

Triggers may also be cultural. For example, if you were an Asian teacher teaching for the first time in the relatively laid back environment of an American seminar, you might be shocked and insulted when confronted with participants sitting on the floor with the soles of their feet pointed towards you. (In many Asian countries this would be a sign of extreme disrespect.)

It doesn't take much to hurt sensitive young beings. This initial shock to our system becomes a template upon which other hurts get layered, until there is what we call a *core wound*. The core wound is so sensitive, so painful, that we will do whatever we can to avoid

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1

feeling it. It is the stimulation of this wound that causes the amygdala to interpret the trigger as a life and death situation and initiate the fight/flight response.

Triggers may seem minor and harmless to those who don't carry the same wounds.

A person fails to say 'thank you'. Someone speaks before we finish our sentence.

A person doesn't get back to us. Our roommate's clothes are left strewn on the floor. Our partner is late from work and doesn't call.

A trigger can be as slight as a frown or a tight tone of voice. Depending on our wiring, any of these might trigger an emotional reaction.

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To learn more about your own triggers, see the 2<sup>nd</sup> article in this series:  
*Getting to Know Your Triggers*

### **What can we do about getting triggered?**

We don't choose to have the reactions we have. Triggering happens too quickly for our rational mind to intercept the amygdala's command to activate the fight/flight response.

But we *do* have choice about what happens next. Even though we're triggered, we can undertake a discipline of learning how to manage our own state of being.

Understanding the phenomenon of triggering and knowing our own triggers is an important first step. Without awareness, we are at the mercy of our triggers. With awareness, we begin to have the possibility of making different choices about what we do when triggered.

What's most important is that we focus our attention in the right direction. In the moment of triggering, our attention is riveted on the seeming cause of our trigger. We think we know what the problem is . . . *it's totally about the other person or the external event!*

We need to train ourselves to recognize that the intensity of our reaction is not caused by the triggering event. These feelings, our core wounding, our conditioning, already exist. A trigger is a response just waiting to be stimulated, like an accident primed to happen.

In reality, we may or may not need to do something to respond to the actual event that triggered us. But, when we're triggered, we're unable to assess what's needed, much less act in an effective way.

It is possible to learn how to manage our own reactivity in ways that limit the collateral damage that comes from acting when we're triggered. It is a critical discipline for leaders and all those seeking to contribute to creating a better world.

To learn the powerful art of state-shifting, see the 3<sup>rd</sup> article in this series:  
*What to do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting*

*This is the 2nd article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit. You can download the articles in this series at: [atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

In order to better manage our own emotional triggers, it's important to:

1. Be aware of the things that tend to trigger us, and
2. Understand the deeper feelings that are being triggered and where they come from. Why do certain things cause me to react so strongly? And what from my past is being reactivated?

## ASSIGNMENT #1 – Listing My Triggers

On the page that follows, make a list of all the things in your life that tend to trigger you, both at work and at home. These are the external events that cause you to have instantaneous, strong emotional reactions seemingly out of proportion to the triggering event.

VERY IMPORTANT: The list should be of the actual events – not your interpretation of the events. This is more challenging than it may seem. Our reactions to certain stimuli are so quick and so habitual, that we have trouble separating what actually happened out there vs. what I think and feel about what happened.

For example, someone might write down: *“I get triggered when John disrespects me.”* The problem is, *“John disrespects me”* is not an observable external event. It is an interpretation of something that John apparently does. What's the actual behavior of John that triggers this person? It's when John begins talking before this person has finished speaking.

At Robert's dinner table in his family of origin, people talked over each other all the time. He doesn't experience someone talking before he's finished as being disrespectful. Judith, however, felt overwhelmed by similar repartee at her family's dinner table and gets triggered when this happens. So, as you are making your list, **make really sure that you are writing down observable events in the real world, not your interpretations.** This takes real attention. Imagine you are a Martian anthropologist studying this peculiar life form called Homo sapiens. The events on this list should all be things that the anthropologist could see actually happening or not happening.

Note that a trigger might be an *absence* of a behavior, e.g.

*“When my teammate fails to acknowledge my contribution to our proposal.”*

Here are some more examples of distinguishing observable events from our interpretation of events:

Observable event:	A number of my colleague's assignments are coming late.
The interpretation that causes the triggering:	<i>She's not committed to the project.</i>
Observable event:	He sometimes disagrees with me in staff meetings.
Interpretation:	<i>He's undermining my authority.</i>
Observable event:	My boss offers me positive feedback less often than I would like to hear.

*My boss doesn't appreciate my contributions.*

My partner goes to work without cleaning the breakfast

*My partner is a slob.*

## THINGS THAT TRIGGER ME

Make a list of all your triggers, both at work and at home. Make sure that you are listing the observable event and not your interpretation of it. Use additional pages, if needed.

[illegible]

After you've completed your list, go back and test each one to make sure you have written only the observable event – not your interpretation of it.

## ASSIGNMENT #2 – MAPPING MY TRIGGERS

Triggering happens very quickly: a stimulus and then what seems like an instantaneous response. But in actuality, there is a whole chain of associations and reactions that occurs within the moment of triggering.

The very first response is like an impulsive attempt to try to refute, push away or escape the triggering stimulus. Hopefully we keep our mouth shut, because the inner reactions are often things like.

*"F\*\*k you!"*

*"The hell with this!"*

*"I give up!"*

*"That's the stupidest thing I every heard."*

*"I quit!"*

Triggering can be thought of like an elevator shaft. The top floor is our very first reaction to the triggering event. Under this first reaction lies a second floor – a deeper, typically more vulnerable feeling. And beneath, there are several more floors, each with a deeper, less readily accessible emotional and/or physical feeling. Finally, we come to the basement, usually a core shock or wound often tracing all the way to our childhood. This core wound is so sensitive, so painful, so threatening, that we're desperate to avoid feeling it. The stimulation of this wound helps cause the amygdala to interpret the trigger as a life and death situation and initiate the fight/flight response. The core wound is what drives the whole pattern of getting triggered.

Here's a typical example:

<b>The trigger:</b>	<b>Someone tells me I didn't do something right at work</b>
<b>Initial reaction (top floor):</b>	<b>I feel defensive, and try to deny it.</b>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> floor down:</b>	<b>A weak, sick feeling in my stomach. Feeling anxious. What if she's right? What if I blew it?</b>
<b>3rd floor down:</b>	<b>If she's right, then I'm not good at what I do.</b>
<b>4th floor down:</b>	<b>If I'm not good at what I do, then I'm not worthy</b>
<b>5th floor down:</b>	<b>If I'm not worthy, then I'm not loveable.</b>
<b>Basement (core wound):</b>	<b>If I'm unlovable, then I'll be completely unloved and alone. It almost feels like, "What's the point in living?"</b>

### Tracing it back:

Once we have identified the whole pattern and the core wound, we next want to examine how this sensitivity has recurred throughout our life, in other contexts and other relationships. We trace it back through time, looking for what appears to be the origin of this pattern – back to the earliest memory or memories of having felt this way.

*To continue with the example above:*

As I look back in my life, the pattern of feeling defensive about my performance has been a recurring theme. It's played out not only at work but also in my love relationships. My earliest memories of this pattern are of coming home from school with 3 A's and a B, and my father's only reaction was, "*What happened that you only got a B?*" I grew up feeling that I could never do it well enough for him and that anything less than perfect wasn't O.K. His love felt conditional on my performance.

### The Map

To help make these connections clear, your next assignment is to literally draw a representation or map of your trigger associations. For our example, this might look like:

#### Someone says I did something wrong.

No, I didn't!!!

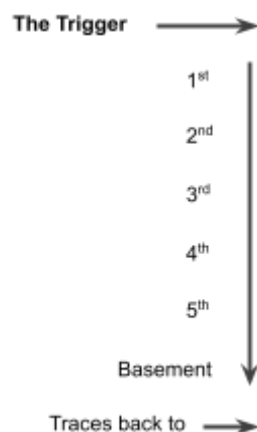
Sick feeling in stomach. Anxious.

I'm not good at what I do.

I'm not worthy

I'm not lovable

I'm not loved and all alone.





## ASSIGNMENT #2

Pick one of your most significant triggers.

Draw a map of what happens in your mind/heart/body when you're triggered. Your picture does not have to be as linear as the example shown here, but it should include:

- The triggering event
- The first, instantaneous reaction (the actual first thought/feeling that comes up, whether or not you would ever express it)
- The deeper feeling under that (going down the elevator shaft)
- The deeper feeling under that
- The deeper feeling under that
- And so on, until you come to the core wound at the bottom of the elevator shaft

Once you have done this, go back through your life to other times, places and relationships where you have experienced similar patterns of feeling. Keep going back until you arrive at what seems like the earliest memory/memories you have of this pattern. It might be one particular memory or a series of experiences from a particular time in your life. Show this on your map.

## **MY MAP**

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## The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting

All of us get triggered. Our emotional hot buttons get pushed. Our ability to think gets disrupted by the flight/fight response. The things we do and say when we're triggered almost always make situations worse.

This is a major problem for leaders and those that follow them. As leaders, when we're triggered our potential to do damage is magnified by the power we wield. We're out of control. We have no capacity to gauge our impact. The goals we work so hard to achieve can be undermined. People can be hurt.

We don't have a lot of choice about whether or not we get triggered. Our triggers wire deeply into our upbringing and our life history. But we *do* have choice about what happens next. We can learn how to manage ourselves when we're triggered.

As leaders, we must train ourselves to refrain from acting when in a triggered state. We don't want to wield our power until our neo-cortex has re-established control. In the words of the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tsu:

*"Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?  
Can you remain unmoving until the right action shows itself?"*

Managing our own state of being should be a core competency for all leaders. And, a powerful tool for developing this mastery is the 4-step practice of **state-shifting**.

## What Is State-Shifting?

**State-shifting** is the practice of learning to consciously shift our energy out of our triggered state and helping our neo-cortex to re-establish control. As leaders, we want to learn to do this as quickly as possible, so that we can respond appropriately to triggering situations.

The essence of the state-shifting practice is cultivating a discipline of not acting when triggered, then using any one of a number of tools to bring ourselves back to a state of balance and inner clarity. The practice helps us achieve better results and avoid the collateral damage that usually comes from acting when triggered.

There are four steps to the state-shifting practice:

- |               |                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b> | <b>Name it.</b>                  |
| <b>Step 2</b> | <b>Take space appropriately.</b> |
| <b>Step 3</b> | <b>Shift your state.</b>         |
| <b>Step 4</b> | <b>Deal with the situation.</b>  |

Let's look at each of the four steps.

## Step 1. Name it.

Step 1 is the key step – **Name it**. Identify what's happening. Say to yourself, *"I'm triggered."* Until you do this, you're helpless. Your amygdala, a primitive part of the brain not capable of rational thought, is in control.

Unfortunately, simply naming for yourself that you're triggered doesn't make it stop. The stress hormones will still be racing through your body. Your emotions will still be inflamed. However, the moment you say to yourself, "I'm triggered," instead of only being a wild animal fighting or fleeing, your adult self has just woken up. We now have a witness, someone inside who knows that you're triggered. Even though you're still triggered, you're now potentially sane enough to remember the 4-step state-shifting process, and you can proceed to Step 2.

There's only one problem to actually accomplishing Step 1. We're triggered! And when we're triggered, we can't think clearly. We're not even smart enough to know we're triggered. However, there are certain tell-tale signs that get set off in our body and mind when we're triggered. These signs are different for each of us.

*We may feel hot. Our stomach or jaw may begin to clench. Our voice involuntarily starts to rise. We may instantly feel intensely judgmental of the person or situation. Or perhaps we start to space out and have trouble thinking.*

As we learn to identify our particular tell-tale signs of being triggered, it becomes increasingly easy for us to **Name it** – even when our analytic capacities are impaired.

To learn more about recognizing when you're triggered, see the 4th article in this series:

*How to Recognize that You're Triggered*

## Step 2. Take space appropriately.

The key to state-shifting is to remember: ***Do not act when triggered.***

Once you've been able to **Name It**, the critical next step in state-shifting is to **Take space appropriately** from the triggering situation. There are two reasons:

1. If you stay in the situation, you will keep getting retriggered.
2. If you stay in the situation, you are likely to say or do something you will later regret.

For those of us who tend towards fight, taking appropriate space may go against your instincts, which are screaming to defend yourself.

You must take space, but please notice the word 'appropriately'. There is a danger that the way you take space can inflame a situation. Here's an example of an unskillful way to take space:

*"You're a \_\_\_\_\_! I don't want to deal with you."* And you storm out the door.

It might feel really good to let off some steam to your reptilian brain, but now you've created a mess that you'll have to clean up later.

Here are a few examples of how to take space – *appropriately*.

There are the direct approaches:

- *“I’m feeling a bit reactive/unclear/emotional. I could really use a little time to collect my thoughts. How about if we get together after lunch and try to resolve this?”*  
(Never say, “You’re triggered!”)
- *“It seems like we’re bogged down. How about we take a break and come back later and take a fresh look.”*  
 (“Cooling off” periods are often used in conflict resolution and mediation work when people are triggered and emotions are running high.)

And there are the indirect approaches:

- Bathroom breaks are a universally recognized opportunity to take some personal space.
- Buy yourself some time. The other person has just made a proposal that completely triggers you... *“Interesting suggestion! Let me check with my colleagues/run some numbers/do a bit more research, etc. and get back to you tomorrow.”*

There can be challenges to taking space appropriately, but when you really understand that your successful leadership in a situation completely depends on your taking the space you need, you can usually find a way to do it.

When it’s difficult to take physical space, it may be possible to take some psychic space. (Most of us learned during those long hours in school to keep our eyes open and look like we’re paying attention while our minds were actually far, far away.) If you get triggered in a meeting, try taking the needed space by simply temporarily withdrawing from the discussion.

*Important note to those of you who tend to avoid conflict and difficult interactions:*

**Take space appropriately** does not mean that you’re off the hook for dealing with the triggering situation. Quite the opposite! The whole purpose of training leaders in state-shifting is to help you be better able to respond to the situations that trigger you. Remember, Step 4 is **Deal with the situation**.

Once you have removed yourself from the triggering situation, we can proceed to Step 3 – how to actually shift our state of being and return to sanity.

### Step 3. Shift your state.

Once we are no longer actively provoked by the trigger, the flight/fight response will usually subside gradually, and we begin to return to balance.

But, it can take a while. Recovery time is impacted by:

- The intensity of the trigger and the degree of emotional reaction and/or neurological trauma
- How quickly you remove yourself from the triggering situation
- Your general state of mind/body wellness.  
We're more susceptible to being triggered when we're overtired, have low blood sugar, etc. These same factors also influence how quickly we can re-center ourselves after having been triggered.

Because we're dealing with psychological rather than physical danger, we can actually keep re-triggering ourselves by thinking about the situation. You've likely experienced this. It's many hours after you got really triggered by someone, but you're still upset. Like a hamster on a treadmill, your mind is racing, replaying the same conversation over and over in your head.

When there has been a serious emotional hijacking, full recovery can take hours – up to a day or more. As leaders, we cannot always afford the luxury of letting nature run its course and waiting until we've come back into balance. We're often in situations that require a timely leadership response.

Fortunately, there are a number of techniques we can use to speed up the normal process of recovery. We call these **state-shifting tools**.

There are many ways to shift your state. You likely have developed some ways of your own to help calm down – perhaps a ritual of making and drinking a cup of tea, going for a run, or listening to music. (Unfortunately, many of us have become dependent in unwholesome ways of using various substances to shift our state.) It's good to have a variety of techniques. Some tools work fine when you're just a little triggered. You will need more heavy-duty tools when you've spiraled into deep core wounds. Some techniques require you to be in a private space. Others can be utilized in the middle of a meeting.

The more quickly you recognize that you're triggered, take space and begin to state-shift, the easier and quicker the recovery time.

Some of the most effective techniques work directly with our body to help us calm down and regain balance: deep breathing, physical exercise, various forms of psycho-physical self-regulation. Other methods work directly with our thoughts and emotions such as: various forms of self-reflection, emotional release, meditation and prayer.

To learn more about specific state-shifting tools and how to use them, see the 5<sup>th</sup> article in this series: *The Art of State-Shifting: 13 Tools For Recovering Your Sanity*

#### **Step 4. Deal with the situation.**

As leaders, the purpose of taking on the practice of state-shifting is to be more effective. We learn to better manage ourselves so that we can better manage the potentially triggering situations that arise in our organizations and our work.

When we are triggered, we have lost the intelligence and capacity to function well. We use the state-shifting process to help bring ourselves back to our zone of leadership: a place of centeredness, inner balance and focus, where we have full access to our life experience and ability to creatively solve problems.

We are now able to act – not simply react. We look back at the original situation that triggered us. Is there something that needs to be done . . . or not? Often we're triggered by events that do not require us to do anything other than calm down.

If we do choose to act, we can assess the situation, get clear on our goals, and plan how to best achieve these goals. Only then do we act. We may or may not be successful, but our success ratio will be vastly higher than if we had acted while our brain was under the control of our amygdala.

Let's say we were the object of a sexist, racist or homophobic remark or action. We get triggered. The huge rush of emotion is partly about what just happened. But mostly, it's about a lifetime of pain and rage at being subject to an oppressive system. Fortunately, we've been practicing state-shifting, so rather than dumping our lifetime of emotion at this person, we notice we're triggered, we step away from the interaction and do some state-shifting.

Once we recover our balance, we're ready for **Stage 4. Deal with the situation.** Perhaps the offending person is someone with whom I don't have a significant ongoing relationship. Do I really want to spend the energy to go back and try to "educate" them? I sure felt like I wanted to give them a piece of my mind when I was triggered. But upon reflection, I don't have the relational context or the interest to engage with them.

But let's say this person is a teammate, someone I'm going to be working with closely over time. In this case, I may want to have a conversation. Now that I'm not triggered, I can be clear on what I actually want to accomplish, and how to go about the conversation in a way that will most likely produce that result.

#### **Some FAQs about Triggering**

##### ***Does this mean that I'm never supposed to get emotional?***

Not at all! Someone says something that moves you deeply, and your eyes start to tear. It is not necessarily the case that you're really feeling sad about some childhood experience. You feel angry in the face of injustice or afraid when reading about the threat of climate change. Your anger or fear is not always due to some past trauma. Your authentic emotions are an important part of your humanity.

Emotional triggering has certain characteristics that distinguish it from authentic, human responses to real situations:

1. The intensity of our response seems disproportionate to the stimulus.
2. Our reactions overwhelm our ability to effectively respond to the situation at hand. Our neo-cortex gets disrupted by our limbic system.
3. When we reflect later on our reactions, things may look rather different than we “assessed” at the time.

Managing your triggers does *not* mean that all our communications as leaders should be in sweet dulcet tones, totally calm and reasonable and without passion. There is great power in our emotions. There are times to sound the notes of outrage or to allow our loss and grief to pour forth like a river. We want to be able to give passionate voice to our dreams and visions. But, it is also true that as leaders we want to be conscious about our impact.

*“It is easy to fly into a passion. But, to be angry with the right person, and to the right extent, and at the right time, and in the right way – this is not so easy.”*

– Aristotle

For more on how, as a leader, to skillfully deal with emotions (our own and others), see our article: *Managing Emotions*

### ***“Will I ever stop getting triggered?”***

Some degree of triggering seems to be part of being human. You probably won’t suddenly reach an enlightened state of being where you no longer have any triggered reactions to events that come your way. You may always get to encounter the imprints of your life history.

However, there is a great deal we can learn about how we *relate* to our triggers. The practice of state-shifting is a powerful tool that helps us to not be at the mercy of our own triggers. By repeated practice of state-shifting, we can develop an ability to witness our own reactions. We can learn to no longer believe what our minds are telling us when we’re triggered. And importantly, we can learn how *not* to act when we’re triggered.

Each time we interrupt our being triggered and do the practice, it’s as if we’re strengthening a muscle through repeated use. We’re actually laying new neural pathways that, over time, start to develop a new habit. Before learning state-shifting, perhaps it might take us hours to recover from being triggered. With practice, we can greatly shorten that recovery time. We can start to notice we’re triggered sooner and sooner. And the sooner we notice we’re triggered, the easier it is to state-shift. Perhaps one day, we start to get triggered and almost instantly, without conscious effort, the thought arises, *“I’m triggered,”* and we state-shift in the length of a single breath.

When asked by a student,

*“Master, how do you stay centered all the time?”*

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido (a martial art form), responded,

*“I’m not centered all the time. I simply recover faster than before.”*



## **Summary of The State-Shifting Practice**

### **Step 1. Name it.**

The sooner you notice that you're triggered, the quicker your recovery.

### **Step 2. Take space appropriately.**

Don't act when triggered! Find some relatively graceful way of removing yourself from the triggering situation.

### **Step 3. Shift your state.**

Use any of a range of state-shifting tools to bring you back to a state of inner clarity and balance.

### **Step 4. Respond to the situation.**

Respond rather than react.

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The first step in making any change in our behavior is always awareness. In order to manage our emotional triggers, we first learn to recognize when we're triggered. For this reason, the first step of the state-shifting practice is to **Name it**.

The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting:

- |               |                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b> | <b>Name it.</b>                  |
| <b>Step 2</b> | <b>Take space appropriately.</b> |
| <b>Step 3</b> | <b>Shift your state.</b>         |
| <b>Step 4</b> | <b>Deal with the situation.</b>  |

**Step 1** can be more difficult than it seems because when we're triggered, we can't think clearly. We're not even smart enough to recognize that we're triggered.

But, there are certain things that get set off in our mind and body when we're triggered. By studying our own reactions and learning our particular tell-tale signs, we can more and more easily begin to **Name it** – to initiate Step 1 of the state-shifting practice.

Here are some of the most common tell-tale signs:

### **Sign #1. Physical sensations**

Our minds "lie" all the time. Especially when triggered, you shouldn't trust any of your thoughts. But, our bodies tell the truth. Robert used to have trouble recognizing when he was angry. Judith would say, *"I think you're angry."* Robert would protest, *"No I'm not!"* Then Judith suggested, *"Please look at your hands."* Robert's fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles were white.

Very often there are clear physical sensations that will tell us we're triggered. Our stomachs or jaws begin to clench. We feel hot. Our eyes begin to water. We stop breathing or start hyperventilating. By noticing these particular body sensations we may be able to identify, *"I'm triggered."*

### **Sign #2. Judging thoughts**

For many of us, the first place our minds go when we're triggered is to start blaming the other person or situation. We get defensive. All our years of education and life experience go into finding fault with the person or thing that triggered us. This might be someone who we love or respect in our normal state of mind, but when we're triggered, they're the enemy.

### **Sign #3. Difficulty paying attention, dissociation, exhaustion, escape fantasies**

For those of us that tend more towards flight than fight, our signs of being triggered might be spacing out, suddenly feeling drained or exhausted, dissociation and

difficulty thinking. These reactions are typical in those of us who tend to avoid conflict. We may indulge in escape fantasies. We're triggered at work and instantly we're at our next job where people really appreciate all that we do. Or, all of a sudden, we lose all our energy, as if the life is drained out of us and we can't think straight. These are tell-tale signs. You have been taken over by the impulse to flee or freeze.

**Sign #4. Defensiveness**

You find yourself pleading your case, justifying yourself, marshaling your argument and counter-arguments. This may be out loud to a person that triggered you, or venting to a third party. A sure sign that you're triggered is when it's hours after the triggering event, you're all alone and you're still going at it, complaining how you were wronged or why it's not your fault, as if there were some imaginary judge in the sky listening to your rant, who would somehow agree, *"Good point! You're right!"*

**Sign #5. Obsessively repeating thought patterns**

Have you ever seen a hamster running around and around in one of those little metal wheels? Have you ever experienced your mind doing this – replaying the same events over and over again, sometimes to the point of exhaustion? You're triggered!

**Sign #6. Emotional outbursts**

When we're triggered, sometimes we just lose it. Our emotional hijacking leads right to inappropriate outbursts of feeling. There are many times when it's completely appropriate to share what we feel. But the tell-tale sign of triggering is when feelings come bursting forth without conscious thought in ways that we are likely to later regret.

**Sign #7. Sudden intensive engagement in addictive behaviors**

We suddenly find ourselves surfing the net, eating ice cream and thinking about a cigarette. If we have an addiction, many of us go right there when triggered.

**Study yourself and your reactions.**

What happens when you're triggered?

What are your unique tell-tale signs?

The sooner you recognize that you're triggered, the easier it is to begin the practice of state-shifting into your zone of leadership.

For more on triggers and state-shifting, see the other articles in the series:  
*Managing Your Triggers Toolkit*

*This is the 5<sup>th</sup> article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit.  
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at:  
[atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

### 13 Tools for Recovering Your Sanity

Leaders, like all human beings, must deal with emotional reactivity. The practice of state-shifting helps train us to manage ourselves and our reactions when our capacity to think and act has been disrupted by the fight/flight response.

There are four steps to the state-shifting practice:

- |               |                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b> | <b>Name it.</b>                  |
| <b>Step 2</b> | <b>Take space appropriately.</b> |
| <b>Step 3</b> | <b>Shift your state.</b>         |
| <b>Step 4</b> | <b>Deal with the situation.</b>  |

In Step 3 – Shift State – we consciously use any one of a number of tools to speed up our recovery out of being triggered back into our zone of leadership – a state of being where we are centered, our mind is clear, and we can focus on the tasks at hand.

It is useful to have a variety of such tools in our toolbox. Some techniques work when we're just a little triggered. But when we've gone spiraling down into historical pain and/or deep emotional reactions, we need industrial strength state-shifting techniques.

There are many tools that can help our body and mind rebalance and return control to our neo-cortex. What follows is just a sampling of the range of these effective state-shifting techniques.

For a more complete review of the 4-step state-shifting practice, see the 3<sup>rd</sup> article in this series: *What to Do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting*

#### Tool #1. Breathing

Mind-body practices such as yoga and Tai Chi always begin by teaching us to regulate our breathing. When we're triggered, we typically start either holding our breath or hyper-ventilating. Carbon dioxide builds up, creating that panicky feeling like when we've been underwater too long. The simplest state-shifting tool is to begin taking deep breaths, increasing the amount of oxygen coming into our lungs. Simple but effective – especially if we catch our triggering early before we spiral out of control.

#### Tool #2. Move energy

One of the most powerful and quickest ways to shift out of a triggered state is to engage in any form of vigorous physical exercise. Dancing, jogging, working out, biking – anything that gets the heart pumping. Also sounding, singing, using our voice--all these increase the flow of oxygen, help consume the excess energy created by the fight/flight response, and release endorphins that evoke feelings of well-being.

### **Tool #3. Feel your feelings**

Nature has provided us with a simple and effective method for dealing with emotions. Watch any young child. If they are sad or hurt, instantly the tears begin to flow. They cry. Then, it passes. Sometimes when we've been triggered what we actually need is to allow ourselves to feel, especially the deeper emotions that lie underneath our first, triggered response. Sometimes we need to soften our heart, to give space for our more tender, more vulnerable feelings.

### **Tool #4. Self-soothing**

When we're triggered we're a bit like a frightened animal or young child. Various forms of self-soothing can be useful options for shifting our state. This might look like sitting down with a cup of warm tea, taking a bath, lying on the earth, or listening to soft music – whatever you find nurturing and helpful in calming your nervous system.

### **Tool #5. Meditation/prayer**

Mediation, prayer, chanting, and other forms of spiritual practice are all powerful tools for shifting our state. They are highly effective, having been field-tested for thousands of years. But, it helps to have developed a foundational practice before you try to make use of these in a triggered situation.

### **Tool #6. Mind-Body Practices**

Similarly, those who have developed practices such as yoga, Tai Chi and Chi Kung or other forms of martial arts, often find these to be powerful methods for state-shifting when triggered.

### **Tool #7. Connect to purpose**

Leaders are usually dedicated to serving some greater purpose, a calling, a mission or a community. We can draw on the power of this dedication to help us when we're triggered. For example, when triggered with a colleague, by remembering the power of our commitment to this purpose, we put our disturbance in perspective. We hold fast to that higher purpose like a lifeline, and it lifts us out of our triggered state.

### **Tool #8. Self-humor**

Humor is one of the greatest healing forces for human beings. Rather than getting frustrated at ourselves for being triggered, it can be immensely liberating to begin to cultivate a sense of self-humor about our triggers. Especially as we become intimately familiar with our own triggers, it is possible to begin gently poking fun at ourselves. (But be *very* careful about making fun of other peoples' triggers!)

### **Tool #9. Change your physical environment**

When triggered, our primitive brains often associate threat with our physical surroundings. This remarkably simple maneuver can be surprisingly effective. Go to a different room. Even better... if you can, go outside.

### Tool #10. Deep relaxation

Our muscles tense up when we're triggered. If the surroundings permit, sit back or lie down. Close your eyes. Slowly bring your awareness to different parts of your body. As you find any areas that seem tight, breath . . . and invite those muscles to relax. Whether or not you have studied yoga, you might try the corpse pose (also called *savasana*), in which you lie down on your back with your palms facing up.<sup>1\*</sup> It has been shown to decrease heart rate, lower blood pressure, slow respiration, decrease muscle tension and metabolic rate – in other words, the perfect antidote to the fight/flight characteristics of triggering.

### Tool #11. Self-reflection/inquiry

When we are triggered, our rational mind has been hijacked by the *amygdala*. The perceptions that drive the trigger are often distorted, and the assumptions and beliefs that fan the flames are almost always flawed. With this tool, we begin to use our now-functioning neo-cortex to unpack what actually is and is not going on and inquire as to why our reactions are out of proportion to the situation. We might reflect on such questions as:

- Why did I react so strongly?
- What is being triggered in me from my past?
- Am I absolutely sure that the meaning I have made of this situation is completely true?
- Is it *absolutely* true that... this person is out to get me; the situation is hopeless; this will definitely lead to something terrible, etc.?
- Is there another interpretation of events that might also be true?
- Is there possibly some opportunity for me in this situation?

### Tool #12. Anchoring

When a boat is becalmed, it is possible to move it by tossing and securing the anchor in the desired direction, then pulling on the chain (aka *kedging*). **Anchoring** is a psychophysical tool we use in an analogous way to pull ourselves out of our triggered state into a state of power and clarity.

We create anchors before we get triggered so we can draw on the tool when we need it. We begin by identifying what it feels like in our body when we are in touch with our inner power, our zone of leadership. We then create a physical, visual or auditory cue than can serve as an anchor to pull us back into our zone.

- The physical anchor:  
We find a body posture that embodies the experience of being in our place of power. When triggered, we physically assume the body posture then take a number of deep breaths. As we continue to settle more deeply into the posture, it increasingly evokes our felt sense of power and our zone of leadership.
- The visual anchor:  
We visualize a source of power that has particular meaning for us: an image from nature like the river or the sun, an animal, a revered person who inspires us, a spiritual symbol, etc. When triggered, we meditate on this image.  
With a series of deep breaths, we literally imagine we are drawing the power

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<sup>1\*</sup> For complete instructions on doing the corpse pose, see: [www.yogajournal.com/poses/482](http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/482)

represented by this image into our body, until we start experiencing that power within us.

- The auditory anchor:  
We create a short phrase, a series of words that evokes our sense of inner power.

*"I am deep peace."*

*"Like a river, the power of love flows through me."*

*"I am a warrior of justice."*

When triggered, linked with deep breaths, we repeat our phrases like an affirmation or mantra, to help evoke our inner power, our zone of leadership.

Because it's performed internally, the beauty of the anchoring technique is that it can be done in a public setting.

### Tool #13. Drop It

As we become "old friends" with our triggers, there are times when our feelings just don't seem to have such a strong grip on us. It's like when Velcro on a jacket starts to become less sticky. You're about to go down the rabbit hole of triggering... then you realize, *"I don't have to go there. I can just let it go."*

It's important to know that the **Drop It** tool is available to us. However, we want to be careful of P.T.S. – *Premature Transcendence Syndrome*. This common phenomenon is when we're trying hard to convince ourselves that, *"It doesn't bother me."* Meanwhile we're completely triggered, in denial that we're upset, and prone to passive aggression and a variety of inauthentic behavior.

But do watch for those times when it's actually possible to just... let it go.

### In conclusion

As leaders, we want to be balanced and clear in exercising our power to achieve our goals. When we've been triggered, these 13 state-shifting tools can help bring us back into a resourced and centered state of being – our zone of leadership.

For a complete description of the practice of state-shifting, see our article:

*What to Do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-shifting*

*This is the 6<sup>th</sup> article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit.  
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at:  
[atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

## How to Stay Centered in Triggering Situations

In previous articles, we've explored how to recover from being triggered. It is, however, also possible to proactively protect oneself against getting triggered when entering a potentially challenging situation.

When we anticipate problems or begin to experience something that feels threatening, our natural tendency is to tense our muscles and restrict or even hold our breath. It's as if we're steeling ourselves against attack. We often start the physiological process of triggering even before anything has happened, all in anticipation of a possible negative event. This instinctive response comes with a price: stress, muscle tension, exhaustion of our adrenals, immune system suppression, and a diminishing of our creative intelligence.

A better alternative is actually to not protect or resist in this instinctive way, but rather to get *out* of the way.

Imagine for a moment that you're a wire mesh screen, full of holes like a screen door. Take a moment . . . actually do this. Now imagine that this unpleasant energy coming towards you is like the wind. Instead of resisting, let the unwanted energy blow through all the holes in your wire mesh screen. Experience that you can stay calm and spacious, as the unwanted energy passes right through.

We call this **meshing**.

Meshing is a skillful way to prepare yourself for situations that are likely to be stressful and/or emotionally triggering.

But meshing is *not* about being passive in the face of unpleasant situations. When we are tense, our responses tend to be rather primitive: fight, flight or freeze. When we stay open and relaxed, we can be far more creative and resourceful in how we choose to respond to what life brings us.

Here is an example of how one person used meshing in a challenging interaction:

*"I began to be verbally assaulted by the editor, who was going on and on about how I had ruined 6 months of his work. I remembered to mesh, and in the quiet of that space, I was actually able to listen to his real concerns underlying his tirade. When I was able to respond to what I felt he was really wanting, the conversation took quite a turn for the better, and we were able to come to a good resolution."*



Meshing, adapted from martial arts, is a practice of staying open and centered in challenging and potentially triggering circumstances, allowing us to respond more intelligently and effectively.

*This is the 7<sup>th</sup> article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit.  
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at:  
[atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

## **What Do I Do When Others Are Triggered?**

In previous articles, we have explored how to manage ourselves when emotionally triggered. But what about when others are triggered? As leaders, how do we deal skillfully with people when their rational adult mind has been hijacked by their limbic system?

Some seemingly minor offhand comment by a leader may trigger a lifetime of rage at authority figures dating back to childhood. A momentary failure to be acknowledged might send a team member hurtling into a pit of pain and unworthiness due to already existing wounds around feeling unseen and unloved. To others, the provocation may appear slight, but to the person who is triggered, physiologically and emotionally, their body literally responds as if their life were in physical danger.

It's challenging to interact with people when they are triggered, because they're actually not capable of rational thought. Attempts to explain things or "get through" to people when they are triggered almost always fail.

Those of us working in the world of progressive social change get lots of chances to deal with triggering. Our people are very passionate about their work and tend to have strong opinions, and often strong triggers. Some carry varying degrees of trauma that gets re-stimulated at work. Many activists are inexperienced and untrained in dealing with their own emotions.

The purpose of this article is to support leaders, consultants and coaches in developing greater sensitivity and skill in dealing with the emotional triggers of those with whom they work.

## **Recognizing when others are triggered**

Our first task is to identify when others have been triggered. By being alert to recognize these clues, we can tend more skillfully to people and situations before things spiral out of control.

While people may act in many different ways when triggered, here are some possible indicators:

- Emotional outbursts (a rather obvious indicator)
- Expressions of intense judgment with an agitated or tight tone of voice
- Argumentativeness
- Personal attacks, blame, accusations
- Expressions of feeling victimized, powerless
- Non-verbal cues (e.g. clenched jaw or fists, grimaces and other facial expressions, etc.)

- Withdrawal, passivity, avoidance  
(for those who tend towards flight rather than fight, the symptoms of being triggered are often of omission rather than active)

## What not to do

### 1. Don't try to work things out when you are also triggered.

If you're triggered, your first job is always to use the 4-step State-Shifting Practice to shift your own state of being. Until you're clear and centered, almost anything you do will likely further inflame the situation. Many destructive interactions are the result of two triggered people trying to "work things out."

### 2. Don't try to reason with someone who's triggered

I recently watched my daughter try to reason with her 7-year-old son when he was upset because the Lego set he got for Christmas was missing a "critical" piece. There was nothing that she was going to say, no reasonable solution that was going to sooth his meltdown.

This is what it's like trying to reason with someone who's triggered. It's easy to get confused, because the triggered person is still using adult words and may think they're making sense. But, their ability to take in and process information is severely limited. Trying to convince, reason or argue with people who are triggered is not only useless – it often triggers them further.

### 3. Don't accuse someone of being triggered

Telling someone who's triggered that they're "over-reacting" is usually like pouring gasoline on a fire.

### 4. Don't ignore or dismiss the content of what's being said.

Just because someone is triggered doesn't mean that there isn't some validity to what's concerning them. (Though while they're triggered may not be the best time to actually try to deal fully with the content.)

## How to deal with someone who's triggered

Triggers, people, situations and contexts vary greatly. But here are three basic strategies for dealing with people when they are triggered:

### 1. Take space appropriately

Taking space appropriately is Step 2 in the state-shifting practice and is very much what someone who is triggered needs in order to self-resource. But, we must be sensitive and skillful in how we offer space, e.g. not like this:

*"You're triggered! I think you need to go cool off."*

People don't like being labeled, and rarely like being told what they need. You might try something like:

*"Would you like to take some time before getting back to me on this?"* or

*"It seems like this is a charged topic. We both might benefit from taking a bit of space to get clear how to best move forward."*

## 2. Create connection

When triggered, some people need connection and support more than space. We can best offer this through our deep listening – one of the greatest gifts we can give another human being. The experience of really being heard often helps people feel validated, safe and respected, helping them to calm down.

Remember that hearing someone does not mean you have to agree with everything they're saying. (When people are triggered they often say things that even they wouldn't agree with later.)

## 3. State-shifting

In the right relationship and context, we can cautiously use some of the same state-shifting techniques we would use on ourselves when we're triggered.

### a. Move energy

While five minutes of all-out dancing is great for state-shifting, it's probably not a feasible option in most leadership situations. But, be creative about how to get people physically moving. For example, I was facilitating a meeting of the senior management team of a large corporation. The leaders of this prestigious group had managed to get themselves quite triggered. The meeting was beginning to deteriorate rapidly when I had everyone put their coats on, take the elevator down 50 floors, and walk briskly around the long city block several times. When the team came back up to the boardroom, the energy had shifted, their neo-cortexes were back in control and the meeting was able to proceed.

### b. Express deeper feelings

A way for some people to state-shift is to access and express the deeper, more vulnerable feelings that lie underneath the immediate fight/flight response.

You can help them by:

- providing deep listening
- offering empathic responses, e.g.
  - *"It sounds like this is really difficult for you."*
  - *"I hear that the way I responded to your suggestion caused you to feel not respected."*

### c. Connect to purpose

At the right moment (and especially after people have experienced really being heard), it is sometimes possible to call other to a higher, shared purpose.

For example:

*"I know this is really challenging for you. But we have a big program coming up and the team really needs your full participation and experience to be successful."*

#### **d. Mind-body practices**

If you know the person is committed to a particular mind-body practice (e.g. Tai Chi, *Forward Stance*<sup>1</sup>, *Generative Somatics*<sup>2</sup>, etc.), at the right moment it might be helpful to gently invite the person to do the practice (or do it together, if appropriate).

### **Preventing Triggers**

As leaders (not to mention human beings in any ongoing relationship), we want to be mindful of the triggers of those with whom we interact regularly. When speaking about issues that we anticipate might be triggering, here are some tips to possibly minimize needless reactivity.

- 1. Framing and context**  
Take care to provide sensitive and appropriate context and framing when raising potentially triggering topics.
- 2. Attention to time and place**  
Don't raise sensitive topics when people are preoccupied, rushed, already off-center or upset, or will be taken by surprise.
- 3. Sensitivity and empathy**  
For potentially difficult communications, take the care and time to consider how the receiver might experience this.
- 4. Non-violent Communication**  
We often trigger others by speaking in ways that cause them to feel blamed or criticized. NVC (Non-Violent Communication<sup>3</sup>) offers a useful approach and good tools for learning how to communicate in ways less likely to trigger others.
- 5. Inoculation**  
When you know someone has a particular trigger about a topic to be discussed, take initiative to name and address directly what's sensitive (rather than hoping they won't notice)
- 6. Learn about the triggers of those with whom you are close.**  
The more you understand their sensitivities, the better able you are to avoid unnecessarily setting them off.

### **When you're the trigger**

Triggering tends to run high in close relationships where there are elements of emotional dependency. We see this, of course, in intimate and parent/child relationships. We also tend to see more triggering in those who have less power in a given relationship. So as leaders, some staff are likely to get triggered by you. When I ran a good-sized consulting company, I had to make my peace with several people being angry at me on any given week.

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<sup>1</sup> *Forward Stance* is a mind-body approach utilizing the physical experience to develop, explore and demonstrate human actions. Developed by Norma Wong and based on Zen practices, progressive groups are being trained in Forward Stance to help shift the way they move in the world.

<sup>2</sup> *Generative Somatics* is a body-centered path, methodology and change theory by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. It is being taught to progressive leaders and organizations through the work of Staci Haines and <http://www.generativesomatics.org>

<sup>3</sup> [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)

When people are obviously triggered, it's all too easy to dismiss the problem as only being them and their triggers. But, sometimes the problem is actually you and your behavior. As leaders, it's always important to reflect on our own contribution:

- How might I have contributed to this person being triggered?
- Have I heard similar feedback before?
- Is there possibly anything for me to learn here?

## Group triggering

Emotions tend to be contagious and spread like wildfire through groups due to **limbic resonance**.<sup>4</sup> We may see entire teams mutually triggering each other. Budget discussions may degrade into struggles where rational discussion ceases, as people are triggered into primitive fears around survival and control.

For more on how to manage triggers in groups, see our article: *Managing Emotions*

This concludes our series of seven articles on Managing Your Triggers. We invite you to take on the discipline of managing your own energy to better manage people and organizations.

The 4-step State-Shifting Practice will help you to create more and better results, with less collateral damage.

*“Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear?  
Can you remain unmoving until the right action shows itself?”*

– Lao Tsu

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<sup>4</sup> **Limbic resonance:** The capacity for sharing deep emotional states arising from the limbic system of the brain. These states include the dopamine circuit promoting feelings of empathic harmony, and the norepinephrine circuit originating emotional states of fear, anxiety, and anger... a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states.  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic\\_resonance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_resonance)