

*This is the 1st 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*

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.^{1**}

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

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.

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.)

To learn more about your own triggers, see the 2nd 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 3rd article in this series:
What to do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting