

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

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: *She's not committed to the project.*

Observable event: He sometimes disagrees with me in staff meetings.
Interpretation: *He's undermining my authority.*

Observable event: My boss offers me positive feedback less often than I would like to hear.

Interpretation:	<i>My boss doesn't appreciate my contributions.</i>
Observable event:	My partner goes to work without cleaning the breakfast dishes.
Interpretation:	<i>My partner is a slob.</i>

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.

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 ever 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:

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

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!!!

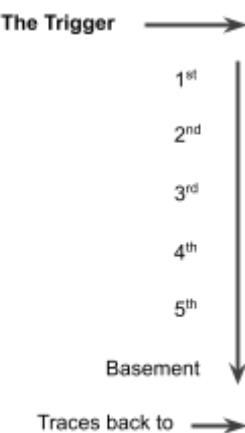
Sick feeling in stomach. Anxious.

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