

*This is the 4<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)*

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:

- Step 1**      **Name it.**
- Step 2**      **Take space appropriately.**
- Step 3**      **Shift your state.**
- Step 4**      **Deal with the situation.**

**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*