



## Trauma Triggers

**First – Review:** People in this group may have different degrees of trauma history, ranging from no known trauma history to a severe trauma history and possibly even current struggles with trauma. People have different levels of awareness and varying comfort levels with regard to identifying and sharing about trauma. Therefore, people should share only according to their level of comfort and readiness and all present should be attentive, sensitive and respectful of one another at all times throughout this group discussion – It may be good to prepare with [Coping Tool Box: Warmup Exercise](#)

When someone has suffered from past emotional trauma, there can be certain events that can set off symptoms of re-traumatization. A simple example would be to think about a physical wound that isn't fully healed. To reintroduce a new traumatic event to the injured area could easily bring about enhanced physical distress. To put this in even simpler terms, imagine having a wounded leg and then getting accidentally kicked in the shin again and how much that could bring back the pain from the previous injury.

However, a trauma trigger in itself does not have to be something traumatic, hurtful or frightening. Quite often, a trauma trigger can simply be a subtle or even subconscious reminder of a past trauma. It can be anything that stimulates a traumatic response such as a smell, or sight, situation or person that “awakens” a past traumatic memory or reactivates a present trauma response even if a specific traumatic memory is not fully realized.

When someone has unresolved trauma, there are environmental and emotional triggers that can quickly bring about emotional distress tied to the past trauma but experienced in the present. Most people are well aware that traumatic responses have varying degrees of discomfort and distress ranging from a mild anxious reaction to a full blown panic attack. Let us consider three categories for trauma triggers: **Avoidable, Unavoidable and Unexpected**

- **Avoidable/Preventable** – When a person knows ahead of time what can potentially set off a distressful emotional reaction then it is important to ascertain if these triggers can be circumvented simply by avoiding them when possible. For example, if an individual knows that he or she is sensitive to loud and aggressive people then that person could attempt to prevent re-traumatization by staying away from places where loud and aggressive people may be more likely to be present. A person in this scenario might, for example, avoid bars, contact sports, and other places where there may be crowds of loud people. Avoidable trauma triggers are obviously “best case scenarios” as there are many situations in life that are unexpected or unavoidable, which leads to the next two categories. Of course not all potentially traumatic places and people can be avoided but it can be helpful to know what kinds of places and people you could successfully avoid without compromising your overall life goals.
- **Unavoidable** – There are some trigger situations and people that are unavoidable. For example if a person is aware that a close family member can be a source of stress that can trigger a traumatic reaction then that person may often find themselves stuck in unavoidable family scenarios at times. Also if someone works or goes to school or has any other required affiliation with an area or place that has known trauma triggers then they may not be able to avoid these places especially if they are part of one's regular routine. There are other unavoidable triggers that can be connected with other essential life events such as going to the doctor, being stuck in traffic, stressful work scenarios, or any other situations that can be triggering and difficult to prevent, circumvent or avoid.
- **Unexpected** – Unexpected trauma triggers are those which may feel like they came out of nowhere. It is unfortunate that in spite of the best laid plans, sometimes someone who is suffering from trauma can be triggered by something that was impossible to anticipate ahead of time. As stated earlier a trauma trigger can be very simple and very subtle therefore at times completely unpredictable. Often the timing of unexpected triggers can be quite challenging due to the surprising nature of these incidents



**Group Discussion** – As a group try to come up with examples from each category, whether from your own personal experience or if you do not have experience, come up with some ideas from your imagination based on what you've read:

- **Avoidable -**
- **Unavoidable -**
- **Unexpected –**

### **Strategizing to Cope with Potential Trauma Triggers**

#### **What to do with AVOIDABLE Trauma Triggers:**

- **Plan ahead** – You don't want to spend your life running from potentially traumatic situations and people. However, some situations are better off avoided. Use common sense. If you know ahead of time that there are certain unhealthy or unnecessary people, places, things or events to just stay away from then consider alternate plans when you can do so without compromising your values and goals. Practice discerning what is and what is not worth the risk when it comes to putting yourself in potentially triggering situations.

#### ***For follow up reflection:***

- **What are some potentially triggering situations that are avoidable for you?**
- **What else can you do instead of putting yourself at risk for these avoidable triggers?**

#### **What can be done about with UNAVOIDABLE Trauma Triggers?**

- **Bring a Friend** – When you know you may be entering dangerous territory, why not bring a support person if it is possible or allowable? Having someone with you in tough spots can be a difference maker. Unfortunately there are many situations where bringing a friend is not an option or a friend may not be available. Having a friend who is at least ready to be reached via phone can be a good backup plan
- **Have a Well-Rehearsed "Coping Plan"** – If you know that you will be entering a potentially triggering situation, having 2 or 3 ways to cope and self-calm is essential. Know what works for you personally when it comes to coping and calming. It is good to have more than one strategy in case the first one isn't working. Here are just a few: Deep Breathing, Grounding, Prayer, Positive Self-Talk, Music, Visual Imagery, Stretching, Walking, etc.

#### ***For follow up reflection:***

- **What are some potentially triggering situations that may be unavoidable for you?**
- **How can you use your support system to help you in some of these situations by either coming with you or at least being available on the phone?**
- **What are 2 or 3 self-calming/ coping tools that you will be ready to use as part of your personal coping plan?**



## What can be done about with UNEXPECTED Trauma Triggers?

- First try your coping plan – Obviously the first move should be to try to cope if you can. Use the same plan you have for unavoidable situations. That is the best case scenario if you can make it work by using your coping tools when you are triggered. However if things are not getting better try the next strategy:
- Come up with an “Exit Strategy” – If you find yourself in an unexpected negative situation that is progressing to the point where you feel like you may not be able to handle it, know what you can do in order to get out of there. Having a friend or family member whom you can trust on standby to come pick you up if things get too difficult can be a way out. Also it may be helpful to have some prepared responses when you need to get out of a bad situation fast. As stated earlier, the best case scenario is to try to work on your coping skills so that you do not have to become too reliant on exiting tough situations when things are difficult. However, just knowing that you have an exit strategy can be helpful in itself.

### *For follow up reflection:*

- **What are some potentially triggering situations that could come up without warning?**
- **Again, what are 2 or 3 self-calming/coping tools that you can try first before resorting to your exit strategy? How can you practice these tools ahead of time so you can master them?**
- **Finally if things get really rough, who can help you with an exit strategy in emergencies?**

### **TO CLOSE GROUP – *Checking out safely***

- *Check in to check out- Does everyone feel emotionally safe and ready to conclude group?*
- *It would be a good idea to do a closing brief relaxation exercise prior to closing group (Counselor’s choice)*

**Reach out, feel, do not fear:  
with time and patience,  
the reward will be greater  
than the wound was deep**

