

## Understanding Traumatic Triggers

Traumatic triggers come in many forms. A trigger is a reminder of past traumatizing events. Many things can be a possible trigger for someone. For example, what seems like an “ordinary” request such as, “Make sure the children are ready for school on time,” can be a trigger for a survivor whose abusive partner terrorized and punished her if the children were late for school. Part of our work is in changing our frame so that we always keep in mind that survivors’ responses to seemingly neutral events and interactions with people may reflect a trauma response. Survivors may have adopted long-term patterns that reflect their efforts to adapt to a traumatizing life. We also work to hold in mind that this behavior and these patterns reflect strategies that survivors have developed to keep themselves safe—that is, they reflect strength and resiliency.

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE IS TRIGGERED

We can understand how it might be for a survivor of a flood, like a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, who was swept away as water rushed into her house. We can understand how she might feel frightened when someone turns on a shower without warning—just the sound of sudden water may reawaken the old experience. In a similar way, a person who has experienced terroristic abuse and control by a partner or family member may be triggered by encountering a person in authority. A survivor whose abuser made and enforced “rules” in the house may feel anxious or frightened even by the words “shelter rules.”

| CAN WE ELIMINATE TRIGGERS?   | EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE TRIGGERS   |
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| <p>Once we become aware of triggers, we might feel an impulse to “get rid of all the triggers.” Of course, we will avoid violent images or angry tones in our speech, keep video and film with aggressive content out of the common shelter areas, and try to make the environment calm. But there will always be trauma triggers that we cannot anticipate and cannot avoid. Part of trauma-informed work is supporting survivors as they develop the skills to manage trauma responses both in our shelter and elsewhere in the world.</p> | <p>Traumatic triggers come in many forms. A person might be triggered by a particular color of clothing (“<i>My batterer always wore a plaid jacket home from work, and that’s when he would come after me</i>”), by the smell of a certain food (“<i>I was cooking taco meat when my batterer attacked me</i>”), or even the time of year (“<i>When it snows I remember the night I got pushed out into the snow in my nightgown</i>”). Encountering such triggers may cause us to feel uneasy or afraid. Sometimes we know why we are feeling a certain way and other times we aren’t sure why. Recognizing when we are being triggered is an important part of building the skills to manage our trauma responses.</p> |