



# How Do You Know You Have Been Triggered

by Jennifer Young, LMHC

*“The exquisite clarity of fear...” ~Gerald May*

Dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be a life-long task. At this moment, there is no cure for PTSD. There are many treatments, but no cure. So, it helps to understand clearly what you are facing in order to develop a strategy that works best for you. One of the most challenging aspects of PTSD in general is the differences in our brains. We know a lot about the brain as an organ and certainly have a deep understanding of the systems involved, but our weakness is in knowing how each person’s mind impacts the brain’s ability to heal. Think about your mind as the individual thoughts and beliefs that you have based on your experiences and brain chemistry. Because each person’s mind is different, the course of PTSD will be different.

To tackle what your mind is doing and how your PTSD is impacting you it will be very helpful to understand what a trigger is and how to know if you have been triggered. A trigger is something that sets off a negative psychological or physical reaction in you. A trigger can be a place, a person, an experience, a thought or a feeling. The trigger is the thing that reminds your mind and brain of the past trauma. As a result, your mind thinks danger is happening and the sequence of the survival system is activated in the brain (the organ).

The general area of your brain responsible for activating the survival system is the amygdala. The amygdala leads the charge when danger comes your way. The amygdala sends signals to the rest of the body systems to prepare for battle...the amygdala is like the General. The problem with the amygdala is that it does not have a sense of “date”. It cannot tell if the danger is really happening. It just knows that this thing has brought danger before. Once “trauma” happens – you hit a tree while driving your car – your amygdala could associate trees with danger. These traumatic associations are VERY specific to each person. This is a big part of what makes treating and dealing with PTSD so challenging. You can see how important it is to identify your specific triggers. Without knowing what triggers you...it is nearly impossible to get better.

So, how do you know if something is triggering to you? You can determine if something is a trigger by paying attention to how your body and mind react to it. If it is a trigger to you, following exposure, you would experience:

- An increase in negative emotions
- Thoughts consist of associations between present situation and the past
- Experience physical sensations related to anxiety

It is crucial that you begin to shift your awareness to these specific reactions throughout the day. The key is noticing the shift from “feeling OK” to “feeling awful” – or scared, frustrated, sad or hopeless. It is in the moment of the shift that you will be able to both identify the trigger and activate your coping skill to minimize the impact of the trauma. That is your path to recovery.

A couple of tasks that you can use to begin the awareness process include keeping a list of triggers. One list – with no details of why it’s a trigger – just the trigger. You might notice some themes or start to realize that something is a trigger that seems innocuous. By being more aware – you will begin to take control over your mind, allowing you to shift the meaning of triggers to something more accurate as well as allowing you to get present – resist going back.

Another option to begin the awareness process is to rate your emotions throughout the day. Create a rating scale for yourself that documents your feelings. Throughout the day check in with yourself. If your number is high – stop and work to identify what might be triggering you. Don't dig too deep – it is likely on the surface and if not, move on.

Your mind is the best weapon you have against what has been done to you. It is yours and yours alone. When the trauma is over, your mind wants your brain to settle down and work efficiently. Even though it feels like it is working against you – it is not meant to. The survival system kept you alive – essentially did it's job. But when you are safe, your survival system would much rather take a back seat to every day living. It just doesn't believe that it can. With clarity about what is really happening for you – you can teach your brain that you are safe.

Peace to you,

Jennifer