

Trauma Triggers

A trauma trigger is a psychological stimulus that prompts recall of a previous traumatic experience. The stimulus itself does not have to be frightening or traumatic and may be only indirectly or superficially reminiscent of a previous traumatic event, such as an odor or texture. Triggers can be subtle, personal, and difficult to predict.

When a stimulus triggers a certain trauma, the involuntary response can go far beyond a feeling of discomfort; the response can be overwhelming and uncontrollable, such as an anxiety attack, a flashback, or a strong urge to flee to a safe place.

The five most common trauma responses are listed on the next page.



Trauma Responses

Fight: Aggressive	Flight: Run Away	Freeze: Play Dead	Fawn: Appease	Flop: Limp Ragdoll
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Aggression • Irritability • Moving "Towards" a Perceived Threat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding • Anxiety and Fear • Panic • Moving "Away" from a Perceived Threat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stuckness • Immobilization • Emotional Disconnection • Dissociation • Non-Responsive to a Perceived Threat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People-Pleasing • Conflict Avoidance • Prioritizing Others' Needs Over Own • Difficulty Setting Boundaries • Placation of a Perceived Threat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collapsing • Dissociation • Passive Appeasement • Appearing to go Limp, Faint, or Collapse due to a Perceived Threat

All types of trauma responses listed in the above chart also may possess the following general characteristics:

- Cognitive dissonance due to your body behaving in the opposite way that your brain wants to
- Feeling out of control
- Sympathetic nervous system activation:
 - Digestion pauses to conserve energy as a response to the perceived threat
 - Blood flows away from the extremities to get ready for the perceived threat
 - Elevated heart rate and blood pressure

Note that having any of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that you are experiencing a trauma response.

Trauma Example

How might trauma triggers and trauma responses play out in real life? Let's look at an example:

Years ago, Susie was driving her child to school. Out of nowhere, another car smashed into hers, knocking her unconscious. She awoke in an ambulance, strapped to a gurney with a respirator over her mouth, unable to speak or move. All she could hear was the deep, resonant voice of the EMT speaking into a radio. "Where's my baby?" was all she wanted to know. As she realized her words were unable to come out, Susie panicked. (Don't worry; Susie's child was unharmed.)

Last night, at a social event, Susie is approached by Billy, who also has a deep, resonant voice. Upon hearing Billy speak and without realizing it, Susie begins reliving aspects of that terrifying time (known as a flashback) when she didn't know if her child was dead or alive and was helpless to even ask.

The similarity between the sounds associated with Susie's past traumatic experience and the sounds involved in her current situation result in the trauma trigger which produces a trauma response.

While the current situation is not dangerous, Susie's body reacts as if the situation is indeed perilous due to Susie's past experience. She feels in her body the same sensations she felt when she was panicking in the ambulance, and at the same level of intensity as she did in that moment.

This is how physiological trauma responses work: in an effort to protect ourselves from a perceived harmful, dangerous, or abhorrent situation, our body involuntarily reacts as if the situation is happening again.

In our example, these are five ways that Susie might respond to the perceived threat. (Included are examples of common responses or behaviors in relation to particular trauma responses and is by no means an exhaustive list.)

Fight

- Susie's body instinctively responds to danger by becoming aggressive.
- Susie responds to the trigger with anger. She becomes rude and outwardly insulting to Billy.
- Susie might be completely unaware that she is feeling anger in response to the perceived threat associated with that voice, and thus might have no insight into why she is reacting the way she is.
- Nobody is at fault.

Flight

- Susie's body instinctively responds to danger by getting herself as far away from the threat as she can, as quickly as she can.
- Susie responds to the trigger with avoidance. She avoids being in the same room as Billy for the rest of the night.
- Susie might be completely unaware of her avoidance response to the perceived threat and thus might have no insight into why she feels that she needs to urgently exit the situation.
- Nobody is at fault.

Freeze

- Susie's body instinctively responds to danger by becoming nonreactive / nonresponsive.
- Susie responds to the trigger with immobility. Her entire body goes numb; she doesn't say a word and just stands there.
- Susie might be completely unaware that she is experiencing dissociation in response to a perceived threat.
- Nobody is at fault.

Fawn

- Susie's body instinctively responds to danger by providing appeasement.
- Susie responds to the trigger by appearing very receptive to Billy; she initiates conversation with him, despite internally feeling anxious and uncomfortable.
- She experiences cognitive dissonance, self-blame, regret, confusion, and disgust later.
- Susie might be completely unaware that she is placating Billy in response to the perceived threat.
- Nobody is at fault.

Flop

- Susie's body instinctively responds to danger by going completely limp.
- Susie responds to the trigger by acting like she is unaware of Billy.
- Her body feels heavy and she might need to sit or lie down.
- Susie might be completely unaware that she is experiencing limpness in response to a perceived threat and is confused as to why her body suddenly feels so weird.
- Nobody is at fault.

*This example concerns someone hearing a voice, but a trauma trigger can be a sight, smell, object, sensation, or even an errant thought.

For more information, visit:

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events#part_2510

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>

To learn about healing from a traumatic experience, please visit:

www.AffirmingTherapyCenter.com/Trauma-Therapy-San-Diego/



www.AffirmingTherapyCenter.com
619-246-5342
Team@AffirmingTherapyCenter.com

© 2024 Affirming Therapy Center