

"Am I crazy?" ...No. You were triggered.

Examples:

- *You were walking home, and someone passing by in a car shouted something. Your heart started pounding, you felt dizzy, and you thought you were going to vomit. You took a different way home.*
- *You were watching a movie, and the next thing you knew, you were out in the garage, cleaning up.*
- *You were at the Mall, and heard a child crying. Suddenly you froze, unable to think or move. Everybody asked you what was wrong, but you couldn't speak.*
- *You were making love, and you started crying for no reason.*
- *You got in a shouting match at work. Now you don't want to go to work, or even to call in sick. You stay in bed, not knowing what to do, not able to do anything.*

The first thing is to recognize that you are not crazy: you are **triggered**. (See below for some of the reasons people can be concerned they are going crazy.)

What does it mean to be "triggered"?

A "trigger" is something that reminds you - usually unconsciously - of a trauma. Your mind and body respond, to protect you from the trauma, just as if it were happening for the first time. Usually, the response involves an adrenaline rush, or the "fight-or-flight-or-freeze" response. This isn't just a human response - animals have it, too. *It is a set of protective coping mechanisms*, although sometimes it can be dysfunctional or unhelpful.

Ways people experience triggering:

- You may be afraid that you are going crazy*, or otherwise are in serious trouble. If you have previously had worries about your mental health, then the psychic attack can make you even more concerned that you are mentally unstable.
- Your sensory perceptions may be altered. Your face and/or body may go numb; everything might look different (including your own face in the mirror); you might "hear things that aren't there," but also have trouble hearing things that are there, and so on. The reason for this is that adrenaline gives you temporary superpowers, altering your metabolism, circulation, hormones, and sensory perceptions.
- Panic can also make you feel like you are having a heart attack or stroke (although you're not). It can also give you a migraine, asthma attack, irritable bowel attack or stomach pain, herpes outbreak a few days later if you've had herpes in the past, and so on. The body responds to what the mind is experiencing, and the physical stress response can provoke these reactions. Unfortunately, the physical sensations can add to the sense of emergency.
- You might experience dissociation. This is similar to an "out-of-the-body" experience. Under stress, you may find that you become disengaged from your body, observing events as if from far away, or "blacking out" and then finding you have lost time when you come back to full consciousness (time has passed without your awareness). A milder form is simply feeling very numb emotionally or feeling very "spaced out." When people have dissociated, it is often hard for others to detect it. You might behave completely normally, or appear unusually quiet or distracted, or even cold and detached.
- If you go through a time when you are triggered repeatedly, it can start to affect your sleep, dreams, mood, concentration, appetite, sexual function, etc. It can temporarily make you lose weight and your hair fall out. (If you are a "stress eater," you can end up gaining weight.) It is exhausting, and can make you concerned that something is really wrong with you. Sometimes people start wondering if they might have diabetes, cancer, fictitious diseases they see on the Internets, etc. However, they are actually reacting to a trigger.
- If you are eating badly, or smoking a ton, due to stress, this will also change how your body feels, and you might not at first identify why it is.
- Sometimes folks try to turn off the problems by self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, or by doing self-control behaviors like cutting or burning, or food binging or food restricting. These kinds of measures may relieve panic and emotional pain temporarily, but the side effects can make the problems worse, which then makes the person feel even more vulnerable, even more sick or unstable, or like more of a failure.

How to deal with being triggered

1. Recognize that you're triggered. *This can be difficult to impossible* (except, unfortunately, with long practice), due to the symptoms (see above). It is helpful if you have a significant other and/or friends and relations who understand triggering, are able to recognize it, and will alert you that this is what is happening.

2. If you know what the trigger is, physically get away from it.

Examples:

- *Someone or something on the street triggers you...* Go into a store - into a dressing room or the bathroom, until you are calm, if necessary.
- *Something triggers you while you are driving a car...* Pull over, park, get out of the car, and walk around. Even if you were in a hurry, it is far safer to take a brief break than to drive in a partly-dissociated state.
- *Something in a movie triggers you...* Go for a walk outside.
- *You have a dream that triggers you...* Get out of bed, go to a different room, turn the lights and music on, dance around, take a shower, make breakfast.
- *Something triggers you during sex...* Use your safeword (a word you and your partner agree to use as a signal to immediately stop all activity without discussion or hurt feelings), grab your clothes, and leave the room. Go wash your face and hands, which can give the feeling of a fresh start.

In most cases, you will need to physically change your location, and physically change what your body is doing.

In many cases, you may need to do this more than once, if you get re-triggered when you resume your normal activities.

If being triggered causes you to have self-destructive impulses (you want to fight, drink, or cut, for example), or other impulses that can be harmful (you want to scream or run away, for example), then you will need to do something that also prevents these from happening. Vigorous athletic activity can be useful for these strong impulses (especially running, boxing, throwing, or chopping wood).

3. If you are having the respiratory and cardiovascular symptoms of a panic attack (trouble breathing, palpitations), try breathing into a paper bag. Take a paper lunchbag, hold the opening around your nose and mouth, and breathe in and out into the bag until you start to feel better. This helps reverse the physical effects of disordered breathing, and has a calming effect. A paper bag is easy to keep in the car or your coat pocket.

4. Strategic withdrawal:

After a bad episode, it may be helpful to take a day off of work or school.

Stay home, take the phone off the hook, pull the blinds, be left alone for a day - as you would if you had the flu.

If there are a lot of people at home, withdraw to your room.

Resolve to not deal with the issues that have been demanding your attention, just for one day.

Use the time to consciously care for and heal yourself, recovering your energies.

Include these activities to "break the spell" of the triggering:

- A long hot bath or shower, to cleanse yourself from the stress.
- Apply lotion (even just olive oil) all over, after shower or bath, to strengthen your hands and protect your skin surface.
- Physical activity: a little dancing and jumping jacks, big arm circles and chorus-line kicks, stretches - no pressure to perform, just moving around and loosening up your muscles.
- Music: play some, and sing along. Try to sing as un-self-consciously as a child does.
- A good healthy meal, prepared from scratch, taking plenty of time over it. (Use simple available ingredients, don't get involved with shopping.) You're not doing this just for nourishment, but for constructive, non-intellectual, creative activity.
- A nap. If you can't fall asleep, just read in bed.
- Play with and/or groom your companion animals, if you have them.
- If you watch movies or t.v., stick to comedies and children's movies, especially ones you already know and love. Keep it light. Don't get triggered by television shows, movies, or the news.
- Save talking, journaling, processing, and strategic planning for another day.

5. In the longer term, you will need to work on making an action plan for the next time you are triggered.

Some tools that can help in making an action plan:

- Self-help books and workbooks. One online resource that is very good is called "Psychological Self-Help" by clinical psychologist Clay Tucker-Ladd. See especially chapter 5. <http://bit.ly/GHAHu2>
- A personal support system of significant others, friends, and relations who understand triggering and can help you deal with it when it occurs. Make sure you have a safeword that is shared with intimate others, so each party is always able to call a halt to any triggering activity if it occurs.
- Spiritual support - from religious practice, scripture study, pastoral counseling, etc.
- A support group. These can be found online, or you can call a local counseling center and ask for some connections. Also check local free newspapers and bulletin boards.
- If you have a regular exercise routine, it will help to lower your adrenaline rushes and your overall tendency to react too strongly to stimuli.
- If you have a healthy diet that is low in animal proteins and high in fruits and whole grains, that will improve your metabolism and your health, making you more resilient.
- If you have creative, sensual, and spiritual practices or routines, that are prioritized just like your diet and exercise are, they will also help to anchor you in a healthy way of life, despite triggering events that occur.

*About mental health problems:

People who have trauma issues have often been medicalized as mentally ill, even when they are fully functional outside of the context of the trauma. Traumatized children have also been misdiagnosed as having developmental delays. Some of the psychological responses to being triggered, that can lead to these misdiagnoses, can include:

Dissociation - severe forms can involve hallucinations or amnesia

Inability to speak or move when it is necessary

Emotional withdrawal and disordered emotional behavior

Rages or hysteria

Self-destructive behaviors, and/or behaviors that destroy relationships

It is important to see if these issues go away when the triggering stops. If they do not go away, then the person might benefit from outside intervention, including taking shelter in a hospital or other safe space, and/or using special counseling, prescription medication, and other therapies to de-escalate the issues and restore normal function.

Always remember:

It is no shame to have strong self-defense mechanisms. It means that you have prevailed against things that could otherwise have broken you. It means you are a strong survivor who has important lessons to share with the world.

Don't give up. Likewise, don't presume that you are alone. Many of us have experienced these things, and are using our experiences to build a better, safer world for ourselves and others. You will do the same.

Peace

