

## Triggers: The Hidden Forces that Fuel Our Reactivity

When a person's behavior, words, moods or reactions in the present touch a childhood wound in us and remind us of a painful experience in our past we will have an exaggerated response. Our strong level of reactivity may be to FLEE (detach, dismiss and minimize), FREEZE (become anxious and fix) or fight (become angry and defensive). Whether quiet or loud, our inward reactivity is intense because the feelings we had as a child flood into the present situation. We are often unaware that we are experiencing something historical in the current interaction.

For example, my (Kay) mother was very anxious and my reaction as a child was to pull away and avoid eye contact so I would not feel her anxiety. When Milan was anxious in our marriage my programmed response was to flee and move away, just as I did with my mother. My detaching increased his anxiety which made me want to get further away. Although my reactivity was quiet, the desire to detach was strong and preset before I ever met Milan. For many years in my marriage, I did not understand Milan's anxiety triggered me and caused historical feelings and reactivity to flood into the present. Detaching was largely unconscious and automatic.

When we are triggered we are less able to communicate, problem solve, think logically or stay engaged in any constructive way. We often feel childlike because we are re-experiencing a childhood wound that activates the same historical feelings and responses. Often the wound has never been acknowledged, addressed or resolved. The goal of the comfort circle is to help reveal triggers and then to begin to heal the childhood wounds as someone listens, validates and comforts us about those painful memories.

Understanding triggers can also help us have compassion for ourselves and others when we realize childhood wounds are often at the root of irritating, reactive behavior.

### **Worksheet: Individual exercise to help you identifying your triggers.**

1. Pick someone with whom you have a close relationship who irritates you or makes you upset. What behavior, moods, words or reactions in this person cause you trouble?
2. When and how do you overreact to this person? Do you tend to flee; minimize and detach? Freeze; get anxious and fix? Fight; get defensive and angry? Cut off? Other? Describe your behavior when they upset you.
3. Use the list of soul words and write down three feelings you experience when you have strong reactions in this relationship. Try to use more than one category on the list of soul words.

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4. Write down (don't share) everything you want to say to this person when you are experiencing the feelings you just listed above.
5. Now think about your family growing up. (Parents, siblings, relatives or traumatic experiences within or outside the family.
6. When and with whom did you have a similar cluster of feelings? To whom in your past would you like to say the words you wrote down above? (If you can't see a match perhaps you never experienced these feelings as a child and feel you don't have the skills or experience to effectively deal with this person. In these cases feeling bewildered or overwhelmed can also be a trigger and cause reactivity in you. )
7. Describe the childhood wound fueling your current reactivity? Has anyone ever listened to you explain these difficult childhood experiences or offered sympathy or comfort for what you experienced? Owning and grieving these experiences helps the memory become less activating in your present relationships.

### **Goal:**

When we recognize our triggers and notice they are activated we need to: 1. Remember, the person we are interacting with isn't causing all the feelings we are experiencing. 2. We can own them by saying, "I am getting triggered. Give me a few minutes to collect myself." Do some deep breathing and remind yourself you have resources now you did not have as a child. Re-engage after you are less reactive. 3. Determine what skills you need to develop to stay more engaged when you are triggered.