

Post-Trauma Triggers

Post-trauma triggers, also called traumatic reminders, are experiences associated with some aspect of the trauma. They are often sensory experiences like a smell, sound, sight, or sensation in the body. The trigger is so similar to something that happened during the trauma that the person has a strong, involuntary response that includes physical/emotional anxiety reactions and sudden, intrusive memories.

Explaining Post-Trauma Triggers

Learning more about how the body and mind respond to trauma is empowering for those who come up against frightening things they don't understand. Caregivers who know common, typical reactions to trauma can reassure and bring a sense of calm and reorientation to the person. One way to explain triggers is, "During powerful events like these, the brain records sights, sounds, smells, and so on, that occurred at the incident. Often, like an early warning system, if we have a similar sensory experience later on, our brain tries to help us to be prepared for another crisis. We don't always know what those triggers will be, but it can help to anticipate what might trigger us in the future."

Examples of Post-Trauma Triggers

- **Visual:** Seeing a movie with violent scenes when one has experienced a violent crime.
- **Sound:** Hearing the sound of firecrackers and misperceiving it as gunfire.
- **Smell:** The smell of smoke reminds one of a traumatic fire
- **Taste:** Eating the same meal as when first learned traumatic news
- **Physical:** Being in a close crowd brings back memories of being in a mob
- **Significant dates or seasons:** Anniversary of a death; Holidays that are no longer shared
- **Stressful Events:** Increasing political tensions trigger memories of a previous coup
- **Strong Emotions:** A mother feels anxiety when her child is late coming home from school; triggering a memory of her child's previous serious illness, when she had the same kind of anxiety.
- **Thoughts:** A bad performance evaluation triggers the thought, "I am a failure," the same thought that occurred after being unable to save someone from drowning.
- **Behaviors:** Getting in the car reminds one of being in an auto accident.
- **Sudden and Unexpected:** When one is tired or generally stressed, an intrusive thought or memory may suddenly come for no apparent reason.

Response to Triggers

While it is certainly helpful to know that post-trauma triggers may come, and to anticipate which ones might be most likely, one also needs to have some strategies for how to deal with these triggers when they occur. Although they cannot be prevented, they can be managed with the following steps:

- Tell yourself that what is happening is different from the traumatic event (e.g., that was a firecracker, it is not gunfire).
- Tell yourself that you are safe now and your body is reacting to what happened before.
- Take several deep breaths.ⁱ
- Ground yourself in the present (notice and tell yourself what you see in your surroundings).ⁱⁱ
- Talk with someone you trust about what happened.

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

ⁱ Deep Breathing (8.10)

ⁱⁱ Grounding Techniques (8.9)