

## Triggers

A trigger can be anything that makes us remember a past memory, positive or negative. Sometimes triggers can set off a flashback, which is a memory of the past that intrudes into the present, making the trauma seem as if it is occurring right now. Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that they think trigger flashbacks. They will react to this trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

Oftentimes triggers relating to sight and sound are most common, with triggers relating to touch, smell, and taste less common, but equally as impactful. A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma. Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes. The following is a sampling of examples of potentially triggering things/senses/situations:

- **Sight:** Often it's someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits, or objects related to the trauma; situations where someone else is being abused; objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place; places or situations where the abuse took place
- **Sound:** things that sound like anger (raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking); things that sound like pain or fear (crying, whispering, screaming); anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds the survivor of the abuse (sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing); anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice); words of abuse (cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used)
- **Smell:** anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume); any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol)
- **Touch:** anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you)
- **Taste:** anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (i.e. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco)

All of these examples are common triggers for survivors of sexualized violence, but by no means are all of the triggers you might experience. Triggers are unique from person to person, but they universally make survivors feel the same: scared, anxious, angry, and unsafe.

## How do I recover from a trigger?

Grounding is the process in which you bring your awareness to the present moment when you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or having a flashback. The following simple strategies are examples of grounding:

- Breathe: Breathe in and out slowly and from your stomach, not your upper chest. Count to 4 as you breathe in and again as you breathe out
- Engage your senses: turn on loud music, hold an ice cube, count colors in the room, smell your favorite perfume, eat something with a strong flavor
- Move vigorously (jump up and down, stomp your feet, go for a run/walk, exercise)
- Feel your arms, legs, and torso – squeeze to bring awareness to them
- Hold onto a safety object – find an object that reminds you of a time you felt safe, calm, peaceful, and happy; observe it's features and the memories associated with it
- Tell yourself, "This is not happening now. This happened in the past. It is just a memory. I am safe now."
- Do the 5 Senses Exercise:
  - What are 5 things you can see right now?
  - What are 4 things you can feel right now?
  - What are 3 things you can hear right now?
  - What are 2 things you can smell or taste right now?
  - What is the day, month, and year right now?

## What can I do?

*How do you know when you are triggered?*

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In the future, when you feel triggered, try journaling about the situation using the following prompts:

- What am I doing?
- What's my environment?
- What am I thinking?
- What am I physically feeling?
- What am I emotionally feeling?
- Is there a pattern?

- Is there a memory attached?