



Befriending Your History: Deconstructing Triggers

If you have a trauma history, you know the experience of having been triggered into your history, into painful, dark, overwhelming spaces. That's an unfortunate given. Most people wish they could shut this stuff off —keep it away. Although most trauma survivors try to keep a lid on the forbidding material most find they eventually can't. With practice you can, over time, learn to befriend the overwhelming material and learn to unload the charge. Our group is about giving you the tools to help you deconstruct your triggers when you're on your own. When you're with your therapist, you can gently move more into the pain.

Being present is a term that describes the experience of being curious, open, and interested in this moment, right here and now. When you're present you can identify what's going on, you feel like you have some control on what's happening inside you. Life feels in proportion without feeling overwhelming.

Getting triggered happens when some unfinished piece of your history gets activated in your current moment. You might feel overwhelmed or go numb, feel spaced out, life might feel too big or like a bomb just blew up.

At those times you can assume you are dealing with triggered experiences from the past. The past is intruding in your present here and now moment. Something from the past is coloring or distorting the present experience in some way.

These triggers can take the form of kinesthetic, auditory, and visual memories—also flashbacks and trance states. Even though these are memories, they're not necessarily experienced that way. In fact, they may feel as though they're happening in the present. Learning that these are undigested memories can help you become freer in the here and now. These are teachings that inspire you, motivate you, and urge you to be all that you can be, allowing fear to reduce so your peace of mind can flourish.

Deconstructing Triggers

1. **Create safety for yourself.** First things first. If you are in a triggering environment and feel out of control, you might need to leave the situation before you do anything. That might mean going to a bathroom, to a separate office if you're at work, or going for a walk.

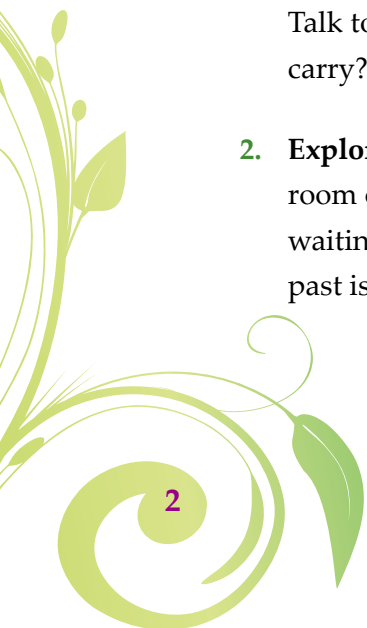
Sometimes we need a little space in order to decompress. Men need more time than women to lower their physiological arousal. If you can, take the time you need. That might mean telling the person you are with that you will be right back, or back in 10-20 minutes.

If it is a highly unsafe situation you don't have to be graceful, thoughtful, or even considerate in leaving. What's most important in that moment is for you to feel safe. As you practice these skills you will be able to stay in the situation and keep working on yourself without anyone noticing.

If you're in a situation where you have to be present (or appear to be present) and are still struggling with the triggering material, take a moment for some self-talk. It is sometimes helpful to tell these activated parts that you really want to hear what happened and why they got so triggered, but that you can't be present to them in the way you want to right now. At those times, it's good to let your parts know that you will spend time with them. Let them know when—and keep that promise!

If you can stay in the situation without increasing the stress to intolerable levels, then explore what else you might need to increase the sense of safety. Do you need to call someone? Talk to a trusted person who is nearby? Take out a piece of paper and write? Talk to yourself? Touch something soft? Or something solid? Grab a special stone you carry?

2. **Explore what happened.** When you are feeling somewhat stable, maybe in another room or quiet space, you might want to explore what happened. (For some, this means waiting until you are at your therapist's office.) Once you begin to notice where the past is intruding, you'll have a greater chance of deconstructing it.





- 3. Deconstructing the triggers:** Take stock of every little thing that happened. Sometimes it's the little things that create the trigger, things we might overlook. We're looking for things in the present which look/feel/smell/sound like something in the past.

Walk yourself back through time starting from the "before" point. Where were you before you got triggered? What were you thinking, feeling, and what was going on in your body? Go slow and notice.

Then take the next slice of time. Have you ever seen a storyboard of an animation or a movie? They go frame by frame. That's what we're going to do here. Explore what happened after that first frame. Walk your way through time until the "big bang." What happened? What thoughts/ feelings/ sensations were going on? Is there anything familiar about those T/F/S? A key to deconstructing the triggers is to notice what was familiar about the experience, what pulls you to the past, both internally and externally.

At some point, a memory or association will arise, often spontaneously. For some, having that "click into place" allows them to relax. That doesn't have to be the case for everyone, all the time. Whatever happens, though, it's a good idea to write down the association. Many people keep a notebook with them. Jot down the facts of the situation. And then notice the feelings you had without going into them. Note them on paper (like you did in the bare attention exercise) and bring them up with your therapist to process.