

Triggers and Dissociation

Triggers are sensory stimuli connected with a person’s trauma, and dissociation is an overload response. Even years after the traumatic event or circumstances have ceased, certain sights, sounds, smells, touches, and even tastes can set off or trigger a cascade of unwanted memories and feelings for some people. When they do, the survivor might react with an adrenalin-charged fight-flight-or-freeze response or by dissociating. Dissociation separates a person emotionally from the trauma and, sometimes, from the current setting.

Triggers Initiate an Emotion Reflex

Although triggers can be generalized, as in the case of a loud noise, they may involve specific qualities, such as a particular song or the scent of aftershave. These are some common triggers:

- A sense of being ignored
- Aggressive behavior
- Angry facial expressions
- Anniversaries
- Bright lights
- Colors
- Completing forms
- Crowds
- Darkness
- Disorder/chaos
- Impatient authorities
- Lack of choices or options
- Long waits for services
- Lost privileges
- Loud or abrupt noises
- Not being believed
- Odors
- Requests to repeat one’s story
- Signs and images
- Small spaces
- Songs
- Tone of voice

Although it is not always obvious that traumatic stress has been triggered, the resulting behavior can be off-putting. Thus, a trauma-sensitive approach makes no assumptions as to why a person might be rude, overly timid, argumentative, evasive, or manipulative. Signs of distress can take a range of forms.

Emotional	Physical	Behavioral	Cognitive
Anger/rage	Headaches	Argumentative	Forgetfulness
Anxiety	Holding breath	Cringing/flinching	Fragmented recollection
Fear	Increased respiration	Crying	Inability to relate history
Helplessness	Light-headedness	Restless	Unable to decide
Powerlessness	Nausea	Spaced out/vacant stare	Unable to focus/concentrate
Sudden sadness	Rapid heart rate	Startle response	Unable to speak/respond
Worry	Rise in blood pressure	Stiffness/tension	
	Stomachaches	Suspicion	
	Sweating	Uncooperative	
	Trembling	Unresponsive	

Dissociation Hides the Feelings

Dissociation ranges from a conscious decision to postpone dealing with feelings to a complete loss of touch with the present. When something utterly overwhelming happens, some people detach from their emotions in order to function, perhaps even to survive. As a coping mechanism in the short term, this sort of dissociation can help a person carry on, do what needs to be done, get through the event, and even respond effectively to a threat. However, as a habitual response to stress, dissociation creates a wall between an event and its natural psychological consequences. Eventually, and often with the help of food or mood-altering substances, people can become mentally detached from their feelings and their bodies. Most of the time they seem normal, but there can be an unempathetic hardness about them.

In extreme moments of traumatic stress, a person might suddenly “space out.” Whereas they seemed fully present, talking, and participating, they suddenly become vacant, staring into the distance. At such times, they are likely to need help reorienting. It can help to prompt them to breathe slowly, look around the room, or notice the feel of the chair they are sitting on or the floor under their feet. They may not recall what was happening or being said when they triggered, and they might need reminding.