

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 44

Managing Triggers

What are triggers?

A trigger is something that causes you to experience intrusive thoughts, images or feelings from the past. Triggers can cause a range of both physical and emotional responses. Sometimes you are directly aware of what caused the trigger: - re-telling your experience, receiving your adoption information from the government, birthdays and other special days. Other times you may not been aware of what has triggered you: - weather, smells, foods, people not listening to you, something you saw on the television or read in a newspaper, people arguing, etc.

Where do triggers come from?

Triggers are links to our past – they are from our unconscious, related to past feelings of danger and memories of being hurt. They are associated with any of the five senses including taste, smell, audio, touch and visual.

How does our body immediately respond to triggers?

In any fear-provoking situation our body will often respond in what is known as a “fight, flight or freeze” response. Any problem (real or imagined) can cause the thinking part of the brain (cortex) to send an alarm to the main switch for the stress response, which is located in the mid brain (amygdala). This activates the nervous system and causes changes in our bodies, making it difficult.

When we have a fight or flight response (hyper aroused), our heart rate increases, our breathing becomes more rapid and shallow, our muscles tense, our hearing becomes more sensitive, our stomach may feel like it has butterflies, our palms become sweaty – we become anxious and hyper vigilant.

When we have a freeze response (hypo aroused), our body does the opposite. Our heart rate decreases, we become tired and generally we immobilise. For some people, this ‘shut down’ switch occurs immediately and they dissociate. This more serious response is more likely to be associated with early childhood abuse – it is an escape when there is no other escape.

It is important to note that if we remain hyper aroused for too long our bodies may suddenly assume a mild hypo arousal state – think of a really stressful time in your life when afterwards you literally collapsed from exhaustion.

How can we change our triggers?

Unfortunately we can't change our triggers – we can only change our responses to them. In some cases however, we know they might happen and we can prepare for them.

Strategies to help deal with triggers when they happen:

1. **Physical.** Because our body reacts immediately to a trigger it is important to pay attention to our physical changes. Observe your breathing and focus on slowing it down. Eat well, have a regular sleeping routine and avoid stimulants such as coffee and alcohol.
2. **Distract yourself.** Take time out from the situation/take time to respond. Focusing on the physical (above) also provides time out.
3. **Dis-empower the trigger.** Ask yourself who is responding – is it you now or you back then? Remind yourself that this trigger is not real in your present world – you can control its effects.
4. **Thoughts/cognitions.** This can be difficult because triggers are about the irrational not the rational. Try to focus on logic rather than feeling. Try not to catastrophise, let go of absolutes, “black and white” thinking and “all or nothing” thinking; recognise that you don't control other people's behaviour and that that's ok. Don't internalise other people's negative behaviours as though you have caused them or there is something wrong with you.
5. **Self Esteem.** Remember on what's important to you as a person in the life you have now created for yourself. Choose your battles and choose what is important to you and what you have control over. Try not to give your power away to the trigger or to the situation – don't respond with self defeating shame or self defeating pride.

What are some long-term strategies to being triggered?

Over time if we experience a number of triggers or if we remain hyper aroused for too long, we don't feel comfortable being anxious and hyper vigilant for long periods of time - it is normal to want to calm ourselves.

Unfortunately in order to decrease our hyper aroused state we may engage in numbing and avoidant strategies, such as drinking alcohol or using drugs, gambling, sleeping

too much, shopping and overspending etc. These activities may work in the short-term but in the long-term they have the opposite effect. In the end these activities will only increase your anxiety, isolate you from loved ones and people who help you to feel happy, and cause other problems in your life.

Positive ways of coping long-term with triggers.

Not only is life very busy in our 21st century but everything has become much more immediate and instant, and we have become much more available with the intrusion of mobile phones, email and internet. (So it's not surprising that we may seek immediate fixes to our hyper arousal states). The down side is that we become disconnected to ourselves and our bodies; we don't stop!

Becoming reconnected to ourselves, our bodies and our needs, not only helps when we are triggered but can have long-lasting effects on our happiness and our lives. We feel more in control. Learning to do this is like learning any new skill – the more we practice it the better we become.

1. Exercise.

Engaging in exercise not only increases the endorphins (which are the ones used to deal with stress and to promote positive feelings) but it also gives us “me” time without any external interruptions.

2. Mindfulness.

Rather than being on ‘autopilot’, we take time out to be in the present – not the past and not the future (both of which can cause unnecessary anxiety). It might mean taking 10 minutes out in a quiet spot to focus on our breathing; it may mean 10 minutes of observing what is going on around us with all our senses with out interpreting these.

A note about mindfulness – when you first start it is not unusual to get easily distracted; just bring your focus back to the present – and remember that the more you do this, the easier it becomes. There are also many excellent mindfulness CDs and free downloads available on the internet.

3. Yoga.

Yoga is a mindful approach to the body, breath and mind. By focusing on these three, yoga teaches us how to be in the present. Yoga also gives us energy by allowing us ‘time out’ from the bombardment of stimuli (mentioned above). The best thing about yoga is that anyone of any age can do it. There are yoga classes everywhere and if a class isn't for you there are also many basic yoga DVDs available.

4. Locate a special place that calms you.

Many people identify that being near the sea has a soothing effect on them. For you it may be bush walking or gardening. Find that place and put aside time to visit it, particularly when you are feeling stressed.

5. Identify the ‘shoulds’ in your life.

Too frequently we put pressure on ourselves and our lives by confusing situations and thinking that we have no choice (“shoulds”) when we do have choices (“coulds”). Ask yourself is this situation a “should” or a “could”?

6. Surround yourself with activities you enjoy and people who make you feel positive about yourself.

Actively plan these. Don’t wait for them to happen.

Triggers are tricky and sometimes you may need to talk about what is happening – particularly if you don’t understand what is going on or where the feelings have come from. A counsellor from The Benevolent Society can listen and help you locate what it is that triggered you, identify some short-term strategies, and plan some longer term options that may help.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC)

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