



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript Episode 8: June 10, 2020 Identifying Triggers

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Teresa, Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor

Marissa: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic. This week our topic is identifying your triggers. Especially now, with so much going on in the world around us, we may find that we're experiencing more trauma responses or negative emotional reactions, especially when it reminds us of that past trauma. We'll be discussing how identifying these responses will help us further cope with them too.

We are your hosts, my name is Marissa and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate with The Women's Center.

Teresa: I'm Teresa, I'm the Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor at The Women's Center. You might hear us talk about triggers a lot, but what actually are they? In order to have a conversation about how we start to identify them, we have to understand what they actually are.

Triggers are situations, things and/or people that can re-trigger a negative emotional reaction to a past traumatic event that you might have experienced. This might be not responding to that present situation that you're in. You might be responding as if you were in that past situation, or that past trauma when you are triggered. This really makes us feel like we're back in that moment of crisis and we're not sitting in that present moment. It's just taking us right back to that age, that environment that we have experienced trauma or abuse in.

Marissa: We'll be talking about two different kinds of triggers throughout this podcast. We'll be talking about internal triggers, which are things that you feel and/or experience inside of your body, as well as external triggers which are situations, people or places. In other words, things that happen outside of the body.

For those internal triggers, these may be things like anger, anxiety, sadness, feeling lonely and abandoned. It could also feel like feeling out of control or vulnerable, things that are very common for survivors of domestic or sexual violence. Memories can also be an internal trigger. Which, you know, are tied to those external triggers, those situations, those people, those places that we remember. Pain, and some more physical symptoms may also be a trigger for us as well.

External triggers might look like an argument, seeing news articles that remind you of trauma, watching really any kind of media, movie, tv show, music even that might remind you of trauma. Witnessing a car accident could also be an external trigger, ending relationships, anniversaries and holidays, specific locations, particularly if something traumatic may have happened to you or somebody you know in those locations. Certain smells can also be a huge trigger. Our scent and memory are very much strongly linked. You may also experience an external trigger by seeing somebody who reminds you of a person connected to your trauma, even if it's not that person themselves. Or even a season in which your trauma occurred in. All kinds of things can really become triggers for us in working through trauma.

Teresa: Like Marissa had mentioned, this is going to take shape and form in so many different ways depending on each person, depending on, you know, what they've experienced, what that trauma or what that abuse is. It also varies in severity from person to person too. As Marissa had mentioned, you might be experiencing fear as a trigger. Especially right now too, during Covid-19, that fear of the unknown, or feeling like things are outside of your control can be a direct trigger back to past trauma or past abuse that you've experienced. Even though you might be out of that environment, and this is looking like a totally different environment, that same core feeling of fear might in itself be a trigger and remind you of the past.

It could also look like that sadness, panicking, you may also experience those flashbacks, either from that past abuse or trauma. Pain, both emotional and physical, you might be unable to focus on things too. And feel really distracted, like you can't get your work done, or you can't be fully present with your family or your friends right now. This can also be tied to disassociating, which we talked a lot about in prior podcasts too. Kind of that feeling of you are outside of yourself, or you aren't in that present moment. It also embodies in a physical way.

We know that triggers, again, affect everybody differently, and some people might not experience those internal triggers and they might be experiencing more physical symptoms related to their triggers. That's going to look like shaking or jitteriness. If you are, let's say, in an environment that directly reminds of a trigger, you might not have that fear, that panic or those flashbacks that some people might have. You might respond more somatically by shaking, or feeling a little bit more on edge. You might also find yourself having a loss of appetite. Some people experience fainting when they're experiencing triggers, as well as fatigue and shortness of breath. This isn't an exhaustive list of how you can and should respond to a trigger. Everyone is going to have something different just depending on how their body has responded and what that trauma and abuse looked like.

Marissa: Why do we have triggers? Why is this a thing that happens to so many people? Triggers occur in the limbic system of our brain, and the main culprit for how we react and interpret triggers is the amygdala. We have evolved from our pre-evolutionary days, but we retain an ancient structure in our brain which is designed which is designed to protect us and keep us alive when we're in danger.

Teresa: The amygdala is involved in that fear circuit of your brain, that like Marissa had mentioned. That is there to keep us alive when we are experiencing a threat or perceived threat. This system is responsible for that fight, flight or freeze response that you heard of, when anyone experiences some sort of trauma. The amygdala is also responsible for what, and where memories are stored in your brain. So, we all store memories, we store trauma in a different way and those memories might not be that grocery list of A, B, C, D. We might not be able to remember an event, and then what happened afterwards or what happened before. That's just all due to the way that our bodies are storing that information.

Some people might be able to recall point-by-point what had happened, and then other people might not be able to. They might store that information and more of a sensory way. They might experience a smell and that might trigger that memory. That is all just due to how it's stored in your amygdala. Ultimately the amygdala makes that split-second decision before that prefrontal cortex, which is the rational part of our brain, you know, that part in the forehead of your brain, before it has a chance to overrule it. Or before we have a chance to try to rationalize it. Really, it's something that happens very quickly, and it just makes that split-second decision if it perceives that you are in danger. The triggers release adrenaline in our brain, and the amygdala kind of says "hey something's going on here, we're going to function from a place of fight, flight, freeze in order to get through this". Then, adrenaline is released throughout the body. When

adrenaline is released, you might be experiencing increased heart rate. You might also experience a change in your blood pressure, a change in your breathing, you might notice that you're breathing more shallow versus from your belly. You might also feel a very common fight, flight, freeze reaction, which is feeling like you have the blood rushing away from your fingertips or your toes. All of these things are instinctual releases that happen when we are in a situation that is a threat or we are perceiving ourselves to be in a threat. This is all done in order to conserve our emotional and physical energy to keep us safe and to keep us alive.

Marissa: These unconscious, emotional responses, all these things that Teresa was talking about, these really prevent an individual from thinking clearly in a situation in which they find themselves triggered. While we may rationally know that a space is safe for us, that we're not in physical danger at that moment, we may still be experiencing feelings of panic and anxiety, and feel like we do have to defend our physical safety even when we might not have to. And the release of stress hormones with each trigger makes it increasingly hard to problem-solve and concentrate. Cortisol, which is that stress hormone that is released, it's not good in excess amounts for our physical and mental health. You may have heard of chronic stress as an actual physical condition as a result of having way too much cortisol going on at all times. You know, even when we're not in that physical danger, sometimes we genuinely think that we are, and our body responds as if we were in that physically dangerous situation.

Teresa: When we're talking about identifying your triggers this is going to be that individualized process, much like everything in healing. It's going to look different from person to person depending on what you've been through. This ultimately means recognizing your own physical and emotional responses to those different triggers in life, that helps us manage and ground ourselves from the triggers. If we're kind of stepping back and taking a look at "I'm finding myself responding in more of a physical way to triggers, versus a more emotional way", that's going to give you a really good place to start identifying maybe what grounding techniques that you can implement to help bring you back to the present moment.

We must practice being aware of ourselves, our triggers, our responses to things, and our surroundings in order to do this. We really got to tap into maybe some uncomfortable emotions or uncomfortable feelings, and give ourselves that space to do it, in order to move forward with this. A way to do this is to ask yourself a number of different questions in order to begin to identify what your triggers are and what your responses are to those triggers. So, consider asking yourself, what type of situations are you in when you're feeling triggered? What types of situations are you in when you are having a physical response or an emotional response? Secondly what is happening

around you when you're experiencing that trigger? What kinds of emotions are coming up for you when you are experiencing that trigger? Is that that fear, the panic, or is that none of those emotions and maybe it is feeling really detached, that disassociation piece. Asking yourself too what thoughts are you experiencing when you are in a trigger? Is it that thoughts of panic, or are you having direct flashbacks to an event or a sensory flashback as well? And lastly, asking yourself what does your body feel like? That's going to cue you into if you are experiencing a number of different emotions, maybe you're experiencing emotions alongside physical symptoms. Or maybe you're experiencing those physical triggers and no emotions at all. That just gives you a really good foundation to understand what your triggers look like and how you build upon working through those.

Marissa: And again, I think that identification of what we're feeling, what we're experiencing is really crucial to coping with these triggers and making sure we can come out on the other side of them doing okay. I'm going to talk briefly about coping with both internal and external triggers. Again, those things that happen inside of our bodies the things that happen around us.

For internal triggers, it is almost impossible to completely avoid all of the emotional triggers that we may experience. We can only control so much, and we can't avoid our thoughts, emotions or bodily sensations. That said, if we're feeling something come up for us and we're really not in the environment to be able to process better unpack that, later on we'll be talking about how you know we can sort of shelve these feelings for later. You know, not doing with them right in the moment, but making sure we circle right back to them, so they don't get suppressed and keep resurfacing at even more inappropriate times.

For external triggers, we can try really hard to manage our environments. If there's a place that is a trigger for us and we don't necessarily have to go there that often, like a certain grocery store or a certain landmark on your way to work, is there a way to take a different route or go to a different store? We can manage our environments to an extent, but again, unfortunately we can't control every single thing that happens to us, every single thing that we may encounter. It's also important again to keep stock of how you're feeling, and we'll be talking about some more grounding techniques too that can help when we are in those situations that we cannot control.

Teresa: As Marissa had mentioned, avoidance may not always be the answer. We can't ultimately avoid all the triggers that we are experiencing, whether they are internal triggers or external triggers. We may be able to kind of shift that way we're going into work, if there's a landmark like Marissa had mentioned, that is particularly triggering.

We might be able to kind of shift in move things around like that, but avoidance completely is not the answer to cope with triggers.

We have to learn to cope with them in effective and healthy manners, which ultimately takes time and a lot of effort and awareness. The more strategies that you have available to cope with these in a healthy way, the better off you'll be at managing your triggers when they come up for you. This is going to be, again, a very individualized thing. Some of the strategies might be super helpful for you and some of them might not be. But, one way to do this is through mindfulness. That is looking around and noticing the things in your environment, as well as helping you move yourself out of your head and back into that situation or back into taking care of yourself in the moment and that trigger.

Relaxation techniques are also really big when you are actively experiencing a trigger, or you are recovering from experiencing a trigger. Let's say you are experiencing a trigger of driving past a place that reminds you of an event. What are you going to do for yourself afterwards, what relaxation techniques can you implement in order to kind of fill yourself back up again, and get you in a back on the road so to speak?

Self-soothing techniques are also really great as well as grounding techniques and grounding is one of the biggest ones to pay attention to in this because I think every survivor every individual can implement some sort of grounding technique when they're experiencing a trigger in order to move through it. We talked about this and our other podcast, but you know specifically grounding techniques can be as simple as taking a sip of a really cold drink like water. That's going to bring you back to the present moment, you're experiencing that sensory grounding but it's also helping you slow down your breathing and get you back more in touch with the present moment. That might also look like playing with a fidget too for some people. Or it could be smelling your favorite essential oil, or your favorite lotion. There are very simple ways to ground yourself in order to kind of get you back to feeling like you are grounded in that present moment. So, it's a big one when we're experiencing triggers.

Some people may also find writing to be really beneficial, either after they're experiencing a trigger to kind of explore why they were experiencing a trigger. This helps us engage that thinking part of your brain to trigger that mindfulness in order to be aware of your surroundings and what it is that you experienced. Deep breathing is also huge because this helps you obviously bring oxygen to the brain and slows you down. When we experience a trigger, we're no longer breathing from our belly, we are doing that shallow breathing in our chest, and our heart rate is going up. We have to work really hard to bring that heart rate down, to slow ourselves down and take those deep, calming breaths to try to regulate your nervous system again.

And lastly, social support is huge when you are experiencing triggers or when you're learning to cope with triggers. This is a really big one if you are feeling very isolated and feeling like you're the only one that is experiencing a trigger. Reach out to a friend, reach out to an advocate, reach out to a hotline, and talk through it with someone if you feel comfortable. I think reaching out to your close support systems and letting them in on things that have been triggering or things that have been upsetting, and talking to you through it can be really beneficial in order to not avoid it.

Marissa: I want to quick echo that point that you had made, I also feel that everyone, and particularly every single survivor can benefit from using some sort of grounding technique. Not only when they're experiencing a trigger, but as they go through their day, as they work to remain present in healing.

With that, I want to talk about a couple more specific grounding techniques. If you tuned into our [Grounding Through Turbulent Times Podcast](#), this will be a nice little review. A couple methods that a lot of folks find really helpful are finding things in a room that are a certain color, or shape, a number of things. You can go for a specific number like three yellow things, five things that are a circle, or you can just keep going until you feel a little bit better and seeing how many things you can identify in that space. It can also be really helpful to remind yourself of your name, your age, where you are, what date it is, those objective facts that help bring it back to the present and out of that flashback or out of that previous trauma. Again, like Teresa mentioned, taking that drink of cold water, iced tea, juice. So that helps regulate your breathing, activates multiple senses, and you have to breathe when you take a drink of a beverage too.

You can also engage yourself through the five senses. If you heard us talk about the 5,4,3,2,1 technique, we go into this quite a bit more in our grounding podcast. If you haven't listened to it, I would definitely recommend it. You go through the senses and find things that you can identify in the space. So, for instance, five things that you see, four things that you can feel or physically touch, and you keep going down through the senses. And you can keep doing that until you feel like even a little bit better, or you can just keep going until you're no longer even thinking about that trigger at that moment.

Teresa: It can be beneficial to shelve it and then revisit a trigger. This might not be avoidance, as we've talked about before, but this just might be recognizing there's a trigger, putting it on the shelf, and looking at it later. Recognizing what triggers us is step number one to moving through them. Sometimes we're not in the ideal space to deal with an emotional trigger due to the environment, or the time, safety level, etcetera. We might experience a trigger, recognize it, but say: "You know what, I'm in the middle

of class right now” or “I’m in the middle of work” or “I’m in the middle of the conversation, and I’m going to be aware that I am experiencing something, I’m going to put it on that shelf and I’m going to come back to it at a safer time”. This doesn't mean that we forgot about that trigger, forget about those responses that are coming up for us and move on. We’ve got to recognize that there is a trigger on the shelf and we’re going to come back to it. We're not just pushing it way too far back and never looking at it again.

In order to fully identify and process the trigger, we have to reflect on what made us feel that emotional reaction and identify the different emotions that came up for us, and look at developing better ways to handle the trigger in the future. You might have to do that later in the day if your schedule doesn't allow for you to take a step back, experience that trigger fully, and look at answering those questions for yourself. You might not be in that safe environment in order to open up, “Why am I triggered by x, y and z”. You might just need to put it on that shelf, take a moment, come back to it tomorrow or next week when you are in a safer spot. And lastly, asking yourselves: when I experienced that trigger was I in danger? Was my safety being threatened? Or is my body remembering past dangerous events, and is it trying to cue me into responding in a certain way in order to protect me based on what I've been through?

Marissa: And that question I think is really important. Was I in danger, or was my body remembering past dangerous events? When we do have that time and headspace to reflect on our triggers, we can really try to dive deep with it and really pinpoint what's going on for us. If that trigger was dangerous, your body did it's job to warn you that you weren't safe. For example, if you saw an abusive person from your past and it triggered your response to help you leave the building, it sounds like your body did what it was supposed to do and it really did keep you safe in that moment.

If the trigger wasn't dangerous, if it's not cueing you into an actively dangerous event, we can ask ourselves, “Is this a trigger I can easily avoid without diminishing my quality of life?” Can I take that different way to work, or is that going to add 20 minutes on to my commute? What's sustainable? If you can't avoid that non-dangerous trigger, reach out to folks. You can talk to a counselor, an advocate to help develop a plan, you can talk to a therapist, a trusted friend or family member. Really anyone in your corner that is invested in your wellbeing and can help develop this plan with you.

Teresa: We know that healing takes time. As much as we would like to get all our trauma work over and one fell swoop, unfortunately trauma doesn't work in that way. Traumatic memories and triggers can appear at any time even if we have been healing for years. Triggers that we thought we had under control can become even more intense,

but none of this means that the work that you've done up until this point isn't working. Working through trauma takes consistent effort and it's not just a one-time thing where you're addressing it, looking at it, and then you're healed.

We've said it before and we'll definitely say it again, that identifying and healing from triggers and trauma or any type of abuse is not a linear process. You may have something that was not originally a trigger, let's say, last month, but maybe this month there is a new trigger that's come up for you. For example, the type of car that you see, a certain smell or certain sound. That might not have been something that triggered you last week or last month, but maybe that's something that's coming up for you now and that's okay. This does not mean that you haven't healed or dealt with your trauma properly if you are still experiencing triggers after you are safe, or if you are still experiencing triggers after processing through other triggers.

Traumatic memories are released sporadically throughout our brains, throughout our bodies, and it ultimately is coming from a place as Marissa had mentioned, of wanting to protect you. Of wanting to set off those alarm bells to make sure that you stay safe based on what you've been through in the past. And again, remember that trauma doesn't function in that rational part of the brain, that's prefrontal cortex. It functions from that amygdala, so that fight, flight, freeze response that is so primal in that we have very little control over how we respond. Taking that shame away of, "I should respond in x, y, and z way". We are ultimately just trying to survive in that moment, and your brain is signaling and doing what it needs to do to keep you safe.

Marissa: And with that, I feel there are a few really important takeaways here. Triggers from trauma and abuse are unavoidable and involuntary. This isn't your fault. Your body and your brain have worked together to try to protect you by sending out those alert signals to keep you safe, even when you know you know you're in physical safety isn't a threat in that moment. When you have those experiences, when you do have that space to sort of identify them and unpack them a little bit, it really helps us continue to manage and cope with these things. and again, if you're experiencing a trigger that is cueing you into something that might threaten your safety, listen to your body. It's telling you I'm to do what you need to do to be safe in that moment and that's also okay too and understanding the difference between those two things will take a little bit of time and will become more clear as you're doing more of this reflecting over time.

Teresa: We have a couple of different resources for you to check out if this conversation has been something that's sparked some interest for you. The first one is going to be the Younique Foundation which is spelled y-o-u-n-i-q-u-e. We talked about this foundation before previous podcasts and they're just a really great resource to check out in general,

but they have a whole section dedicated to managing triggers on their website, so be sure to check that out if you want some more information.

We also will have a worksheet on identifying your triggers linked on our podcast website, so please check that out if you could use a template in order to identify what your own specific triggers are, what those reactions are in your body, or that emotional response and developing a plan to help you cope with them. It's a really good worksheet to look at some individualized plans to better help cope with these things.

Thank you for joining us to learn more about Identifying Your Triggers. Our next session will be about Reclaiming Your Space. If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org. Thank you and be well.