

Basic Coping Plan

The idea of embracing triggers may seem counterintuitive at first... When you move yourself toward and into a trigger, you have the opportunity to then process the material and move through it. In doing this, you can release the trigger from your body, emotions, and mind and be complete with it. Triggers act as signposts to what is in need of healing. They guide you on the road to freedom (Haines, 1999, p. 154).



Triggers are difficult to deal with, but these five steps (adapted from Haines, 1999) can help survivors navigate through the trigger safely and reclaim their power over triggers.

1. **Notice.** Notice when you are triggered, and notice that what is happening is a trigger. What triggered you? What physical sensations do you feel? What emotions are you experiencing? What memories or thoughts come up?
2. **Stop and breathe.** Stop what you're doing. Take a break from the situation.
3. **Choose.** Consider your choices of coping mechanisms. Which options are best for this particular trigger? Do you have what you need to enact a choice (for example, you need a sound system of some kind if you want to listen to music as your coping strategy. Deep breathing, on the other hand, requires no tools). Don't be afraid to try new coping strategies, or to use several at once.
4. **Engage.** Engage in your coping strategies. Stay present, as much as you can.
5. **Return.** Return to what you were doing before the trigger, or return to Step 1 as needed.

Haines, Staci (1999). *The survivor's guide to sex: how to have an empowered sex life after child sexual abuse*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, Inc.

Crisis Survival Strategies

Distract

- *With other thoughts.* Count to 10, count colors in a painting or tree, windows, anything; finish a puzzle; watch TV; read a book.
- *With opposite emotions.* Read emotional books or stories, old letters; go to emotional movies; listen to emotional music. Be sure the event creates different emotions.
- *With intense sensations.* Hold ice in your hand until it melts completely, squeeze a rubber ball very hard, stand under a very hard and hot shower, listen to very loud music.
- *With activities.* Exercise, hobbies, cleaning, walking; work, sports, go to events, call or go see a friend, computer games, have a meal, coffee or tea; go fishing, chop wood...
- *With leaving.* Leave the situation for awhile physically, leave the situation mentally, build an imaginary wall between yourself and the situation
- *With blocking.* Censor ruminating, refuse to think about the painful aspects of the situation, put the pain on a shelf, box it up and put it away for a while and come back later.

Self-Soothe

- *With encouragement.* Cheerlead yourself; repeat over and over “I can stand it,” “It won’t last forever,” “I will make it out of this.” Think about your strengths. Tell yourself positive, soothing things. Remember you are not crazy—flashbacks are normal and you are healing.
- *With gentleness and kindness.* Take a bubble bath; light candles; put clean sheets on the bed; have a meal out; have a favorite soothing drink such as tea or hot chocolate (not alcohol); call a loved one or support person.
- *With beauty.* Buy a beautiful flower; make your space pretty; go to a museum with beautiful art.
- *With enticing smells.* Perfume, lotion, air spray, lemon oil, potpourri; boil cinnamon; bake cookies.
- *With meaning or prayer.* Open your heart to a supreme being, greater wisdom, or one’s own wise self; ask for strength to bear the pain in this moment. Read or reflect on the teachings of others that have survived trauma.

- *With comforting thoughts.* Tell yourself you are having a flashback and that this is okay and very normal in people who have been traumatized.
- *With strength.* Remind yourself that the worst is over. It happened in the past and it is not happening now. However terrible you feel now, you survived the awfulness then, which means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.

Grounding

- Stamp your feet on the floor to remind yourself where you are now
- Look around the room, noticing the colors, the people, and the shapes of things
- Look at a clock or calendar to keep you connected to the present time
- Listen to the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, the washing machine, etc.
- Have an elastic band on your wrist that you can "ping" against your wrist. Feel it on your skin and know that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing were in the past

Change Body Responses

- Try progressive muscles relaxation
- Breathe deeply
- Exercise, get a massage



Imagery

- Imagine everything going well; imagine a different ending; imagine coping well
- Imagine a world that is calming and beautiful and let your mind go, go with it

Mindfulness

- Focus your entire attention on just what you are doing right now
- Keep yourself in the very moment; put your mind in the present
- Focus entire attention on physical sensations that accompany non-mental tasks (e.g. walking, washing, fixing something, hobbies)

- Sometimes you might lose a sense of where you end and the rest of the world begins. You can rub your skin or wrap yourself in a blanket so you can feel your body's edges, the boundary of you.
- When you feel ready, write down all you can remember about the flashback and how you got through it. This will help you to remember information for your healing and to remind you that you did get through it and can again.

Focus on the Future

- Focus on long-term goals with manageable steps
- Think about how you survived other painful experiences or triggers
- Make choices to keep moving. Every step matters
- Celebrate your strengths and accomplishments

Get Support

- Let people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help you if you want them to. Tell them what you need. That might mean holding you, talking to you, helping you to reconnect with the present to remember you are safe and cared for now.

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