

Anatomy of a Trigger: Change Your Focus and Improve the Outcome

With Mary Mackenzie

We all create meaning about what happens in our lives that is based on our past experiences and trauma. For most of us, we do this so quickly that we don't even notice that we're doing it! When we create meaning about something internally, we become convinced that the other person (or ourselves sometimes) has done something wrong, and we proceed to judge them (or ourselves) for it. The alarming thing about triggers is that we are certain our idea about why something happened is accurate. Then, we become certain that the other person attaches the same meaning to their action. The minute we are certain we are correct about why something happens, we start reacting, usually in self-defeating ways, often in ways that will create suffering for ourselves and everyone involved in the situation. When we are reacting, we can't even access our authentic self because our focus is on the other person.

Our emotional triggers, then, are attached to the pain we have felt and continue to feel about old unmet needs that we are bringing into a present situation. It only takes a flash of a second for us to feel and then respond to a trigger.

Let's look at a few examples of how this plays out in our lives. Say that your partner comes home a half-hour later than you agreed and you know that it's because she cares more about her work than you.

Your mother sounds agitated on the phone and you know it's because she's upset with you.

Your business partner doesn't want you to look at the books until he has completed the bookkeeping for the month and you know it's because he's pilfering money.

Every situation has many possible reasons that explain it, but we are convinced that the meaning we attached to it is correct. In most cases, it doesn't even occur to us to question our assumption.

Once we have the thought that the other person has done something wrong and we are convinced that our assumption about the situation is correct, we forget three things.

1. Who the other person is to us. In a sense, we forget the wholeness of our relationship with the person and instead we focus exclusively on the event that is stimulating the trigger. We could be married or professionally partnered with someone for twenty years, but when we're triggered we only focus on our unmet need in the situation and the meaning we have attached to it.

2. The totality of our needs that are met in the relationship or in the situation. We become singularly focused on our current unmet needs and our idea of why it happened. This focus is intense and to the point like an arrow hitting a target.

3. What we want. We are so focused on our perception of what we don't have that we forget to focus on what we want. This can show up in the most absurd ways. Once I had my car at the shop for new tires. I (Mary) was scheduled to leave town at 4:00 p.m. to drive 300 miles to facilitate a workshop. The people in the auto shop promised me they could get the new tires installed so that I could leave on time.

When I arrived, they told me it would take them until 5:00 p.m., which would make me late for my scheduled training. I mentioned that they had promised me it would be done by 4:00 p.m. and I had to leave town by 4:30 p.m. or I'd be late for the training. They said okay that they would get the work done by 4:00 p.m. Did I stop arguing with them? No, because I was triggered into momentarily believing that they had been dishonest and so I set out to prove their dishonesty. Once I got triggered, I forgot what I really wanted: to get my car fixed by 4:00 p.m. to meet my need for safety and integrity (to be on time for my training) and instead I was needlessly arguing with them to prove a point. This happens much more often than most of us realize. It is counterproductive and stimulates aggravation and annoyance for everyone involved – including ourselves!

The most tragic thing about reacting to a trigger is that it prevents us from accessing our own authenticity because we become focused on reacting to the other person, rather than clarifying for ourselves what is important to us. The result, of course, is friction with the other person and little hope that we will actually succeed in meeting our needs.

It only takes a split second for our emotions to be triggered and to forget who the other person is to us, all our needs that are met by the relationship, and what we want in the situation. Most of us will spend these first few moments of a tense conversation in one of two ways: blaming the other person or blaming ourselves. We will feel angry if we're blaming the other person or shame if we're blaming ourselves. Neither option is effective in resolving the situation, yet our long-term triggers, patterns, and need to protect ourselves take over. Let's examine this more closely.

Analyzing Your Own Triggers

Think back on a recent argument that you had with someone. Chances are good that you were focusing on blaming the other person, judging her bad or wrong, or thinking she should have done something different. Your focus was on her.

Whenever we put our focus on someone else, we lose our connection to self. Sound peculiar? Here is an illustration of this dynamic.

Say that you call your graphic designer to discuss your concern about your recent bill. You tell him that you were expecting a much smaller bill and you'd like to understand why the fees increased on this project. He gives you an answer that doesn't make sense to you so you delve a little deeper. You assure him that you enjoy working with him and that you'd like to continue working with him. He takes this as a threat that if he doesn't lower his prices you won't work with him anymore so he says, "If you weren't such a poor money manager, this wouldn't be an issue. There's always enough money for YOU to be paid, but you want ME to take a cut in pay. You just don't know how to run a business. You... You... You..."

Where do you think your focus would be? His focus is on blaming you and many of us would reciprocate by blaming him. Maybe you would think, "He's paranoid and impossible to have a reasonable conversation with. How on earth does he stay in business?" Then what happens? You both slam the phone down feeling awful and justified and leave the situation unresolved. How much time did you focus on your needs? Do you even remember what they were? This focus on other people through anger, blame and judgment actually keeps us disconnected from ourselves and prevents us from taking actions that will meet our needs.

If you are feeling angry, hurt, resentment, annoyance, or judgment, the chances are good that you are blaming someone else for doing something you think they shouldn't have done, or for not doing something you think they should have. When unexpressed, these feelings turn to resentment.

If we believe our judgment and respond by yelling at, blaming or judging the other person, we guarantee our lack of success in meeting our needs. Remember what our need was in this situation? "...to understand why the fees increased on this project." We not only didn't meet that goal but we also alienated our graphic designer and disrupted the harmony in our relationship. Can you relate to this?

Developing skill in transforming the thoughts that trigger our emotions, then, begins with changing our belief that other people are responsible for our feelings.

Although it may sound trite and maybe you've heard it several times before, the truth is that no one else is responsible for your feelings. If you are angry, hurt, frustrated, and judgmental or resentful it is because you have an unmet need, not because someone else did something wrong. What someone else did is merely the stimulus.