

Understanding the Triggers of Betrayal Trauma

By Coach Cat, on 'Covenant Eyes'. May 30, 2018.



“Suddenly my heart is racing, I can feel the blood pumping in my head, my palms are sweaty and I feel like I want to run. I can literally feel my body start to tense with building energy that has nowhere to go. My head floods with questions, doubts, insecurities, and fears. I begin to feel overwhelmed, like I’m getting tunnel vision, I’m trapped and need to get out...”

Triggers are a universal experience of trauma survivors everywhere. No matter what caused the trauma—a car accident, a serious assault, a sudden loss of a loved one, or a betrayal—reminders of that event, and the feelings and thoughts that came with it, can be overwhelming, unexpected, and extremely scary and hard to manage.

Short of literally locking yourself in a padded room, the likelihood of never coming across a trauma trigger is zero. The world, while it seems so different to us now, still turns the same way it was before the traumatic event and, as such, is full of possible reminders of our trauma.

We are all familiar with the concept of PTSD triggers in the context of war veterans. Every year we see firework warnings issued as people acknowledge the triggering effect of the loud noise that serves as a painful reminder of the gunshots and bombs experienced in war. Similarly, the backfire of a car can cause a trigger response in a combat veteran. We also acknowledge that a person who has been knocked down by a car might find walking close to a road to be triggering.

Betrayal Trauma Survivors Also Experience Triggers

For the betrayal trauma survivor, these triggers, sadly, often come in the forms of people, places, and things that they know well, that have held meaning for them in the past and that are now relegated as a painful reminder of their hurt.

The disclosure of sexual secrets in a relationship can tarnish otherwise cherished moments, memories, and mementoes. That wedding photo that has been proudly displayed on the dresser, the ring he bought for me while he was away on business, the hotel we usually go to in our favourite spot—all smeared with a new reality, one in which all those things happened in the context of a lie, a false reality, where he or she was keeping secrets and acting out.

Often, the places we have been to are actual places he acted out, the things he bought are offerings made to appease a guilty conscience, and the people we know have us wondering if he uses them for objectification. Nothing in the past is sacred and nothing in the future is safe.

Even worse is the reality that for many women in the early days, their partner is a primary trigger. When you consider the dynamic of trauma, it is worth noting that most people who are traumatized by the actions of another do not have to share a bed or a house with that person!

Tools for Dealing with Betrayal Trauma Triggers

At Betrayal Trauma Recovery, I work with clients to understand and manage their triggers. I find that women really need to:

- Understand the science behind triggers, how and why they happen, and how to recognize them.
- Increase their awareness of their own personal triggers and the impact they have on them, allowing them to take the first steps to learning how to confidently recognize and face a trigger.
- Understand how tracking triggers can help them prepare for unavoidable triggers and anticipate triggering situations (and even prepare for them proactively).
- Learn and implement some of the simplest and most useable techniques for regaining their personal power over triggers.

Understanding trauma triggers, and learning to manage them, is a big part of healing from betrayal trauma. It's a foundational skill on which to build a more emotionally regulated future. Taking back a sense of personal power amongst the flood of emotion we experience when triggered can be a lynchpin in the healing journey. Triggers can strike anywhere, at any time. They're a normal and natural response to a traumatic reminder, and it seriously pays to have some tools for dealing with them at your disposal, ready to be used right then and there.

Many of the best trigger management tools are free and easy to use by virtue of the fact that they are related to you, your breathing, and your physical body. In fact, breathing is a vastly underrated skill when it comes to emotional regulation!

One of the fastest and most effective ways to begin calming a trigger is to focus on your breathing. Doing this can help you regulate your heartbeat and the neurochemical reaction happening in your brain. Taking slow and steady breaths, sometimes combined with visualizations or helpful grounding statements, can literally calm your body's response to a triggering stimulus.

Sadly, triggers often seriously impair your ability to think clearly and remember information you would usually summon without issue. Due to that, creating a trigger management plan can be an essential component in your healing and, if you don't have one, breathing exercises can be your first addition!