

RESPONDING TO TRIGGERS

A trigger is something that an individual says or does or an organizational policy or practice that makes us, as members of social groups feel diminished, offended, threatened, stereotyped, discounted, or attacked. Triggers do not necessarily threaten our physical safety. We often feel psychologically threatened. We can also be triggered on behalf of another social group. Though we do not feel personally threatened, our sense of social justice feels violated.

Triggers cause an emotional response. These emotions include hurt, confusion, anger, fear, surprise, or embarrassment. We respond to triggers in a variety of ways, some helpful and others not. Our guide in developing a full repertoire of responses to triggers is to take care of ourselves and then decide how to respond most effectively. Some of these responses are effective and some are not. What responses we choose depend on our own inner resources and the dynamics of the situation. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive and is in no order of preference.

Leave: We physically remove ourselves from the triggering situation.

Avoidance: We avoid future encounters with and withdraw emotionally from people or situations that trigger us.

Silence: We do not respond to the triggering situation though we feel upset by it. We endure without saying or doing anything.

Release: We notice the trigger, but do not take it in. We choose to let it go. We do not feel the need to respond.

Attack: We respond with an intention to hurt whoever has triggered us.

Internalization: We take in the content of the trigger. We believe it to be true.

Rationalization: We convince ourselves that we misinterpreted the trigger, that the intention was not to hurt us, or that we are overreacting so that we can avoid saying anything about the trigger

Confusion: We feel upset but are not clear about why we feel that way. We know we feel angry, hurt, or offended. We just don't know what to say or do about it.

Shock: We are caught off guard, unprepared to be triggered by this person or situation and have a difficult time responding.

Name: We identify what is upsetting us to the triggering person or organization.

Discuss: We name the trigger and invite discussion about it with the triggering person or organization.

Confront: We name the trigger and demand that the offending behavior or policy be changed.

Surprise: We respond to the trigger in an unexpected way. For example, we react with constructive humor that names the trigger and makes people laugh.

Strategize: We work with others to develop a programmatic or political intervention to address the trigger in a larger context.

Misinterpretation: We are feeling on guard and expect to be triggered, so that we misinterpret what someone says and are triggered by our misinterpretation, rather than by what was actually said.

Discretion: Because of dynamic in the situation (power differences, risk of physical violence or retribution, for example), we decide that it is not in our best interests to respond to the trigger at that time, but choose to address the trigger in some other way at another time.