**WHAT IS A TRIGGER?**

To be triggered is to experience an emotional reaction to something based on a previous negative experience. Triggers can be people, scents, places, harmful substances, or anything else that serves as reminders for intense or distracting emotions. Oftentimes, triggers are reminders that put people in a mental and emotional place of distress, pain, anger, frustration, and other strong emotions. In the case of addiction and recovery, triggers are often some sort of internal or external stimulus that causes the former addict to desire to use drugs or alcohol again.

Triggers are easily identifiable by the way someone reacts to something. For instance, triggers may occur when someone remembers an event, or when an uncomfortable experience happens. The experience may cause someone to lash out, breakdown, or cope in unhealthy ways. As a result, individuals with unchecked triggers can cope in harmful ways, foster unhealthy relationships, and endure much suffering.

**Triggered: External and Internal Triggers**

Triggers can be broken down into 2 categories: internal and external. Both can strongly impact the individual feeling the result of the trigger. External and internal triggers include:

1. Shame/guilt/anger/regret
2. Depression and anxiety
3. Inconsistency
4. A loss of control
5. Heartbreak, job loss or grief
6. Stress or fear
7. Feeling unsafe, feeling misunderstood
8. Specific places (home, streets, cities, countries)
9. Trauma/PTSD and abuse
10. Feeling judged, feeling attacked, feeling invalidated

There are other triggers such as sights, smells, conflict, aggression, news stories, books, and memories that can cause disruption in our lives.

**Trigger Management: Healthy Coping Skills**

There are healthy ways to cope with difficult triggers, and those suffering can feel reassured they don’t have to give triggers power. One of the most important steps to identifying triggers and managing them in healthy ways is to be self-aware. Being self-aware allows for individuals to understand the driving force behind their behavior, or the trigger before and after they react. Simple recommended methods to effectively manage triggers include:

1. Exercising
2. Resting
3. Therapy or counseling
4. Meditation or mindfulness
5. Spending time with positive people
6. Drinking water or tea for relaxation/hydration
7. Joining a support group
8. Eating nutritional meals
9. Using positive distractions
10. Reframing negative attitudes or perceptions

Practices like mindfulness allow individuals to focus on right now, placing their mindset in the present moment. This encourages detaching from painful or distressing experiences and can reduce stress. Healthy ways of managing triggers allow individuals to thrive without turning to damaging coping mechanisms that can harm them or others.

**Trigger Management: Unhealthy Coping Skills**

Unhealthy coping methods can worsen triggers that can manifest as stress, anxiety, and depression. In many cases, individuals who have not found healthy coping mechanisms can indulge in toxic behaviors or develop toxic habits. Untreated triggers can create distracting and disempowering habits that can heavily affect individuals and loved ones. Some examples of unhealthy trigger management include but are not limited to:

1. Misdirected anger
2. Violence
3. Emotional, psychological, sexual, financial, or mental abuse
4. Making excuses for harmful behavior
5. Self-harm
6. Developing poor behavioral compulsions
7. Abusing harmful substances
8. Binge eating or drinking
9. Lying/Denial
10. Bottling it up
11. Exploding with anger or rage
12. Befriending people who abuse or sell drugs or alcohol

**What Causes Triggers?**

Triggers can either be positive or negative, although negative triggers can have the most damaging effects. There are common triggers that can lead to frustration, broken relationships, depression, isolation, and in some cases, suicide. Triggers can become a problem if they are frequent, and if one is having difficulty coping because of them. For example, a child who grew up in an abusive household may feel anxious when people argue or fight. Depending on his or her involvement in family conflict, he or she may feel afraid, lash out as a defense mechanism, or distance him or herself from conflict.

Emotions like anger, guilt, irritability, and low self-esteem can surface when individuals are triggered, spiraling into various behaviors and compulsions. Unfortunately, the nature of emotional or mental triggers can run very deep and can be traumatizing. Some can push individuals to adopt unhealthy ways of coping, such as self-harm, harm to others, and substance abuse.

**Find an Empowered Solution**

Triggers can cause individuals to develop a “flight or fight response.” Since triggers can cause great distress and anxiety, it is often suggested for those struggling to get help.

Individuals with problematic triggers may not know the cause and can benefit from therapy. Therapy or treatment for distressing triggers can reduce the likelihood of one developing troubling compulsions and chemical use disorders. Therapists in rehab facilities can offer individuals tools and ideas that can be helpful while battling troubling emotions and compulsions. Individuals can learn new and healthy coping mechanisms. Additionally, individuals who suffer from chemical use disorders can find help to decrease the risk of a relapse. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps individuals control their impulses, which can lower compulsions. Peer groups offer support and empathy while someone recovers.

**HOW TO IDENTIFY SUBSTANCE ABUSE TRIGGERS AND COPE WITH CRAVINGS**

Cravings for our favorite things are common and one of the many things that make us human. But if you’re someone in recovery from a substance use disorder, cravings for drugs or alcohol can come on strong, throwing a wrench into your attempt to avoid relapse.

Cravings are caused by “triggers” that provoke memories and feelings linked to substance use. And while some substance abuse triggers are unavoidable, like a scene popping up in a movie of people using drugs or drinking, identifying and putting a plan in place to address them will help you cope with these cravings.

Before you can come up with a way to stop your cravings, you need to understand what’s going on when you experience them.

**What’s in a craving?**

Let’s first dispel a common misconception: A craving does not mean someone in recovery will, or even wants to, resume drug use.

Cravings are normal, common, and often uncontrollable urges that do not point to a person’s moral failing. Just like a dieter who wants a piece of chocolate cake, cravings happen to most, if not all, patients in recovery from substance use disorders. And if not properly managed, they can make avoiding relapse more challenging.

There are two fundamental types of cravings you should be aware of:

1. These types of cravings manifest as a physical response in your body. It can feel like your stomach is turning, your chest is tightening, and your muscles are aching.
2. These cravings are mental, showing up in your thoughts and emotions – e.g., “I need it now,” or “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Substance use disorders and drug use change the way the brain works. If you’re in recovery and experiencing a craving, you’re taken back to the time when substance use brought you pleasure, and your brain pays no attention to all the ways it caused harm.

So to avoid experiencing these cravings, you first need to know what causes them.

**How can you identify potential triggers before you start craving?**

Identifying triggers starts with knowing yourself, and knowing the symptoms.

Triggers are thoughts, feelings, and memories that remind you of your substance use or the lifestyle around your substance use. Brain scans have shown that these triggers are tied to your neurochemistry, activating the key parts of your brain that lead to the desire to use.

These triggers can be different for everyone. Depending on your own personality and substance use history, the following things may trigger a craving:

1. Special occasions and holidays
2. Parties
3. Sporting events
4. Gambling
5. Being around people you associate with substance use
6. Being offered a drink or drug
7. Fatigue
8. Stress
9. Free time or boredom
10. Watching a movie where someone is using your drug of choice
11. Loneliness

Keep in mind, this list is not all-inclusive. Many triggers are difficult to avoid, but that doesn’t make managing your resulting cravings impossible.

**How can you cope with cravings?**

You need to have a plan in place before you encounter a trigger and experience a craving.

Cravings are not permanent, and will disappear if you do not give in to them.

Second, as you create a plan, approach coping with your cravings from two different angles: **internal** and **external.**

When you are triggered by a situation and experience a craving, you should follow an internal protocol to extinguish the feeling. This process could look something like this:

* Recognize the craving
* Remind yourself that the craving doesn’t need to be acted upon
* Remove yourself from the situation

However, you’ll also need a strong external support system and other activities to help you continuously cope with these challenges. Let your supporters help you redirect your feeling into something distracting, like exercising, watching a movie, reading a book, or taking a walk.

*Family, friends, and addiction recovery professionals are essential to help you avoid triggers whenever possible, and provide you with the right coping mechanisms to guide you through these episodes.*