



## Triggers and Responses

Pain cycles generally begin with a trigger – something sets the cycle in motion. In the case of acute pain, the trigger is a new injury or the aggravation of an existing injury. With chronic pain, triggers can be much more subtle. They can be people, objects, odors, or sounds; they might be events, or memories of events. Or they can be a combination or sequence of things.

What they have in common is that they are upsetting on some level. That upset causes stress, anxiety, or tension, which can then cascade into a pain cycle. It is important to learn not only what your triggers are, but how you respond to them. This can give you valuable information about your pain cycles and how to exit them.

When you realize that something is upsetting you in some way, make a note of it. Then also note what your response is. It could be a physical reaction, a feeling, an emotion, or a combination. For instance: “When I see an email from co-worker X, I get angry.” Or, “When I smell R’s aftershave, I feel nauseous.”

Everyone has different triggers, but here are some common ones:

- Certain things that people say – words, phrases, or intonation
- Someone acting angry – violent gestures or shouting
- Unexpected touch – being touched in a particular way
- Holidays – activities surrounding a specific holiday
- Anniversaries – not just marriage, but any specific date
- Certain objects
- Specific smells
- Specific sounds
- Specific colors or textures
- Disruption of routine – unexpected interruptions
- Being startled
- Romantic or sexual situations



These are just a few examples. Be observant, and make your own list. Recognizing things that trigger you can be a huge breakthrough. Once you become aware of your triggers and reactions to them, you will be able to change those reactions into more healthy and helpful responses.

A client said to me, “I love having a plan. I know exactly what I need to do. But I don’t always follow through on it. And I’ve realized that when there is something that I don’t know how to do, my reaction is to stop all together, and then start worrying. I’m realizing now that this reaction is having an effect not only on my life but also on my health. And the worst part is that I’ve been doing it for years without even realizing it.”

Recognizing one of the things that triggered her was a breakthrough. It was causing her to stop. She stops when she is faced with something that she doesn’t know how to do. And her reaction is to freeze and not act at all.

These days, she is learning that when the need to freeze comes up, she just needs to ask for help from someone. Once she voices her problem, the solution usually appears and she can keep moving forward.