

Triggers and Addiction Examined

By Chrissy C.



What are Triggers and why do they matter?

An addiction trigger can be anything that prompts memories, thoughts, or feelings, that have to do with addiction. These triggers can make us want to slip back to our former selves. Triggers can be brought on by smells, tastes, sounds, people, places, stress, anxiety, or specific days or dates. Triggers can lead us towards relapse. These are some of the things we need to continuously work on day in and day out. Identifying our triggers and learning how to navigate through them, can help us avoid relapse.

Cravings are the by-product of triggers. They start out small with just a thought. If the craving is not addressed with a coping method, it can continue to grow and become the forefront of our thoughts. The craving becomes powerful, and eventually that's all we can think about. It's difficult to resist the urge and give in to temptation unless we have support and help to get past the craving. In early recovery, these might sound like difficult tasks to get accomplished but they are achievable.

To completely understand triggers, we need to understand that addiction rewires the reward system in our brain. Our brains are programmed for survival. This means we naturally avoid pain and seek out pleasure. Healthy behaviors affect us in a positive way and we get a mild boost of "feel-good" chemicals. Addiction hijacks this natural reward system, as drugs/alcohol flood our brains with "feel-good" chemicals. Eventually, we become acclimated to these larger doses of chemical rewards and need to go to dramatic lengths to achieve a buzz. When we are using, we start to anticipate the big boost of "feel-good" chemicals coming from our next fix. These thoughts and activities that are associated with addict behavior and use, can also cause changes in our brain. This is where triggers come in. Anything linked to our memories, thoughts, or feelings of addiction, can be a trigger. Triggers can cause our brain to reboot, back to the broken reward system, which can result in cravings for drugs or alcohol, even long after we've given them up.

In early recovery, our brains lack those "feel-good" chemicals. That causes us to feel "off" or "out-of-whack". Our brains stop making as many natural "feel-good" chemicals because it's accustomed to the boost from our addiction. We are especially desperate in early recovery, for more "feel-good" chemicals, because they have mostly been depleted. We feel a rush of unbalanced emotions, feelings, and anxiety when we stop using.

It can often feel like a relapse comes "out-of-the-blue", when in fact, triggers lead us towards it. We must identify our own triggers and learn to navigate through them if we want to avoid relapse. Just like our paths to recovery, we each have different triggers. Not all triggers will apply to you. When we crave our substance of choice, we need to backtrack to

recent events...how am I feeling? Did anything specific happen recently?
Am I keeping up with my recovery responsibilities?

There are 2 categories of triggers:

Internal and External - Internal triggers are thoughts or feelings that make you crave drugs or alcohol. They can be a memory, a physical sensation or an emotion. Internal triggers come from "inside" the person. These are examples of internal triggers:

-guilt	-pain
-anger	-stress
-anxiety	-shame
-overwhelmed	-depression
-vulnerable	-frustration
-loneliness	-insecurity
-fear	-stress
-rejection	-betrayal
-over-confident	-complacency
-mental/physical illness	

Many internal triggers are associated with PTSD.

External triggers are triggers that factor outside of yourself, that make you want to use or drink. These are examples of external triggers:

- people, places, things
- major life changes
- relationship difficulties/sex
- financial issues
- children/family
- objects that remind you of using
- people who elevate your stress
- people you used/drank with
- places you used
- concerts, parties, dinners
- home/work responsibilities
- glamorizing drug use

Triggers have a strong sensory connection like sight, sound, taste or smell. These triggers could include things like music, specific songs, or the smell of a bar or club. Occasionally, triggers can be so overpowering and strong, that they actually bring on physical anxiety symptoms, things like a pounding heart, upset stomach, dizziness, uncontrollable shaking and sweaty palms.

Coping skills can help you confront and overcome the exact things that led to your substance abuse. That's why it's very important for recovering addicts to have many coping skills. Everyone's coping skills are different. Different coping skills work for different people. It's all about finding coping skills that work best for you.

CBT is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It is an evidence-based treatment that focuses on uncovering negative thought patterns. It helps change our way of thinking and helps foster positive reactions, and teaches us how to cope with negative emotions, cravings or relapse triggers. Coping skills in CBT are healthy and positive for your mind, body and soul. We can use these skills to get through bad days, stressful days, and days we want to use or drink.

Check your HALT (hungry, angry, lonely, and tired) symptoms. HALT is an acronym that recovering addicts use to quickly check their triggers and emotions. Hungry, angry, lonely and tired are very popular triggers that you can usually fix in a short amount of time. Stress is another trigger that is very common. Some easy ways to decrease stress could include breathing exercises and/or meditation. Yoga, exercise and journaling also help to de-stress. When something stressful happens in our lives, it's best to breathe deeply and wait to respond. By doing this, it clears our mind and helps us address the situation with a level head.

Below are some other coping skills that help us deal with triggers:

- 12 step meetings or any other recovery meeting, can offer you a guided means of reducing or stopping drug use. You can also meet other recovering addicts who can become part of your sober support network.

- Mindfulness, Meditation and Breathing Exercises can help you work through difficult thoughts and emotions. It can also allow you to focus on the present.

- A very important coping skill in recovery, is having Gratitude. As you work on your recovery and through your struggles, remember others who are struggling. Remember those who support you, remember what makes you feel good, and be grateful for it all!

- Keeping busy is a helpful coping skill. We spend so much time in active addiction and surrounding ourselves with negativity, it's time to replace those actions with positive ones. We can use this time to check things off our to-do list or do things we have put off doing.

Watch tv, play music and dance, catch up with friends, or read a book. Do whatever makes you feel good!

-Stay physically healthy. Drugs take a toll on our bodies. Eat nutritionally, get adequate sleep and exercise. Exercise is a great way to relieve anxiety, stress and feelings of depression. Endorphins are released during physical activity and it helps rid the body of chemicals and toxins.

-Talk to a therapist, counselor or your sponsor. They can help advise you and are there to listen to you. These professionals can help you work through difficult emotions or situations.

-A sober support network helps to ensure that you are never alone. Having reliable, trustworthy peers, that you can call at any time, is invaluable.

The bottom line is that most addicts in recovery, will at some point, experience triggers. Be aware of how you feel, physically and mentally. Don't ignore the warning signs of relapse.