

Managing “Triggers” while Recovering from an Eating Disorder

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Triggers can be overwhelming to a person who is taking steps to recover from an eating disorder, including the courageous step of thinking about making changes. Learning how to predict and manage triggers is a necessary strategy for recovery. This article describes learning how to handle triggers and includes some common triggers for individuals with eating disorders.

What is a trigger?

A trigger is something that “sets you off” so that you revert almost automatically to the way of thinking or to the behaviour that you are trying to change. What triggers one person may not trigger another. However, there are some things that tend to be triggers for people recovering from eating disorders. For instance, if you are making some progress allowing yourself to have complete meals without compensating, and you find yourself at dinner with a thin person who is eating very little and saying they are full, you may be triggered into eating less than you planned. You might find yourself thinking, “there’s way too much on my plate”, “I don’t need all of this”, or “that person must think I’m gross for having all this food”, and then feel bad (embarrassed, gross, or envious) and decide “I will eat less than they are eating”, and then you do not finish your meal or you purge afterwards. When you are triggered you *probably won’t notice* the thoughts that lead to your decision. You may only be aware of how intensely “bad” you feel and then later be dismayed or confused about how you ended up acting against your own plan. Emotions often drive us, but not always in the direction of our goals. Being triggered might make you feel like you have lost your agency because you acted against your intention without being aware of how that happened.

Trigger → (Negative or critical thoughts) → Strong challenging emotions → Behaviour or action

The negative or critical thoughts that set off the strong emotions may be so automatic that you don’t even notice them. The key to managing triggers is to interrupt this pathway.

Some ways of doing this that many people have found helpful are:

- learning to notice and then challenge the negative/critical thoughts, so that the pathway is interrupted, e.g. challenge “I don’t need all this” with “I am recovering from an eating disorder and need all the food on my plate” or challenge “that person must think I’m gross . . .” with “I don’t know what that person is thinking – they might be thinking that they wish they could allow themselves to eat what I am eating”;
- practicing mindfulness meditation so that you can allow your thoughts and emotions to be present without necessarily acting on them – seeing yourself as *containing* your

thoughts and emotions rather than *being* them, and observing each one without being pulled-in by any of them; and

- learning to identify your emotions specifically and clearly, so that instead of feeling “bad” and then thinking that you are “bad”, you identify the “bad” feelings, e.g. anger, envy, embarrassment – and talk with someone who will help you accept and understand your emotions.

Where do triggers come from?

Triggers can come from anywhere. For example, walking out your front door and seeing a person who has an “ideal” body shape, you may think: “If I don’t look like that, I am nothing,” and then decide not to eat a meal. Similarly, an ad you see on the bus for dieting might be followed by thinking “Dieting *is* the right thing to do” or “I’m stupid not to diet”. Some common contexts in which people report being triggered include exposure to media, mirrors, being with peers, in social situations, and at work or school – any situation where negative comparisons, competitive feelings, performance anxiety, or perfectionist expectations can lead to critical thoughts and intense negative emotions.

Being with people who tend to diet and talk about dieting is also a common trigger. For example, hearing someone make comments about your body as you are recovering some weight, or making negative comments about their own or someone else’s body shape may make you doubt whether you should continue trying to recover. We live in a society that is obsessed with weight control and where dieting and diet talk are the norm. These cultural obsessions most likely contributed to your developing an eating disorder in the first place and critiquing them can help you strengthen your resolve. You can find critiques and alternative ways of thinking on the [NEDIC website](#).

For some people, exposure to a food cue can trigger a binge, e.g. eating French fries. This may happen if you have a “rule” against eating such foods and you think that since you have broken the rule you “might as well binge” or you “must now restrict”. Remember that you do not have to do any of these things. The rule is the problem, not the French fries. Or, you may be triggered by going to a restaurant or fast food place where you have always binged and purged since having an eating disorder. Buffets are also commonly reported as triggers for those who binge and/or purge. In this case you are changing a practice and it is a good idea to go with someone who can support you, at least the first few times you try behaving differently there.

Given how common and ever-present triggers are, wouldn’t it be better just to avoid them? You could insulate yourself from most triggers by never leaving your house, keeping your TV turned off, and only visiting very safe internet sites. Trying to protect yourself in this way could mean that you don’t let yourself join in activities, wear clothing you would like to wear, go clothing shopping, go to certain restaurants, be seen eating in public, or go to school. You might tell your family or friends that you don’t do these things because you just don’t like doing them. You may see it as natural that you want to avoid exposing yourself to triggers and comfort yourself by thinking: “no one goes to a restaurant and just eats and has a good time.” But people

do go to restaurants and eat and have a good time. If you are trying to recover, or thinking about doing so, you are probably tired of reducing your life to a smaller and smaller box, while you watch other people enjoying opportunities to grow, develop, relate, and create.

Dealing with triggers

The alternative to hiding from or avoiding triggers is to learn how to handle them. Learning to manage triggers will help you develop strength and resilience and, with practice, will allow you to step out into the world with confidence. This involves desensitising yourself to triggers by exposing yourself to them in a deliberate and paced way, with support available to help you along the way. You deserve to have this support. You don't have to be super-human. Being human is enough and we all need supportive people with us when times are difficult.

Before working directly on your triggers it is important to learn some coping strategies. Practice with these will allow you to better tolerate a trigger and, in time, the things that trigger you will evoke much milder and more manageable responses. Some examples:

1. **Deep breathing** – a few deep, unhurried in-breaths and slow exhalations can slow you down and help to change your physiological responses from “emergency” ones to calmer ones. When triggered, put yourself on pause while you deep breathe. Take no action and make no decisions while you are deep breathing and until you are calmer.
2. **Re-grounding** - using your five senses to bring you “back to earth”. For example, focus your eyes on items in your view and examine them intently as though you will have to describe them for an exam, notice how your feet feel on the ground or in your shoes, notice what smells are around you, and attend to the sounds you hear.
3. **Distraction** – put yourself on pause and find some distraction until you can think more clearly, for example, talking with a trusted support person; or removing yourself from the situation, then calming down and going back to it.
4. **As discussed above:**
 - **challenge your negative thoughts.** Practice detecting and then challenging the thoughts that automatically follow a trigger, e.g. “If I don't look like her, I am ugly” can be challenged by saying “Many people do not look like her and yet are attractive – I do not have to look like her” or “I don't judge other people by their looks, so why am I judging myself that way?” Cognitive behavioural therapy can help with this.
 - **mindfulness meditation can be very helpful.** Take a course on mindfulness meditation. You will learn how to allow your thoughts and emotions just to be, without reacting to them. Then when you are triggered, you will be able to observe what happens in your mind without getting pushed around by it. You will have more choice about how you act.
 - **get to know and accept your emotions with the help of people you trust.** Emotion-focused therapy can help with this.

The next step is to make a list of the things that tend to trigger you. You may find it useful to ask a close friend or parent to help you make this list. If you cannot think of any, start observing yourself and keep some notes on what triggers you. For example, note when you are triggered and identify the trigger. Categorize the triggers on your list as the least, more, and most difficult to take on.

Face one trigger at a time, starting with the ones that are least difficult. For example, practice not comparing or negatively comparing yourself; allow the “ideal” body to be there on a billboard without taking it on as something you have to imitate; practice eating a food you avoid because you think it is “fattening” and do not exercise or purge afterwards. Challenge your beliefs about the foods you avoid. For example, will you really gain weight just because you ate a donut? If you are in weight-restoration mode, does gaining weight really ruin your life?

Ask for help! Let people know the challenges you are taking on and when you are struggling to meet them. Let people know how to identify if you are triggered; tell them what signs to look for and what strategies will help you. These strategies may include distracting you, encouraging you to take deep breaths, or guided imagery to ground yourself – whatever you are experimenting with to learn what best helps you in the moment.

Expose yourself repeatedly and practice managing the triggers. Over time you will be better able to deal with them and you will be less likely to resort to unhealthy coping strategies.

Strategies for parents, family members, and caregivers

Anticipate possible triggers and plan for them. For example, if there is a family holiday celebration to attend, discuss with the person where difficulties are likely to arise and plan how these can be managed. Strategies may include finding out what’s on the menu ahead of time and choosing what to eat so the decision doesn’t have to be made on the spot; pre-portioning the meal for the person; sitting beside them for support; and when not at the table, supporting them to manage any social anxieties. Talk together beforehand and identify what triggers might arise. Being prepared will help you both feel more confident. If triggers cannot be identified beforehand, try establishing a “code word” or signal ahead of time, so that your loved one can use it in the moment to alert you to their need for support.

Take triggers seriously even if you cannot relate to them. Although they may seem insignificant to you, there is a reason they cause so much distress to the affected individual. Be empathic and supportive. Being triggered is painful and emotionally tiring. Learning to deal with triggers is not an easy process for anyone involved and your family member may sometimes be oppositional or aggressive. By being lovingly firm and consistent, you are taking care of them and helping them to feel safer in facing their triggers.

Suggested resources

For affected individuals:

Break Free From ED: A free workbook for people with eating disorders that guides them through key components of cognitive behavioural therapy for eating disorders (CBT-ED). <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Disordered-Eating>

Farrell, N., Becker, C. B., & Waller, G. (2024). *Eat Without Fear: Harnessing Science to Confront and Overcome Your Eating Disorder*. New York: Oxford University Press.

For parents, family members, and caregivers:

Boachie, A. & Jasper, K. (2011). *A Parent's Guide to Defeating Eating Disorders, A: Spotting the Stealth Bomber and Other Symbolic Approaches*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Brown, H. (2010). *Brave Girl Eating: A Family's Struggle with Anorexia*. Harper Collins

Treasure, L. Smith, G., & Crane, A. (2016). *Skills-Based Learning for Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: The New Maudsley Method (2nd Edition)*. Routledge.

Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders (FEAST): A website for family members and other carers of people with eating disorders. <http://www.feast-ed.org>

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