

DEALING WITH TRIGGERS

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A few months ago I received an email order for one of my books from a woman who had experienced the death of both her son and husband. It seemed everywhere she went and everything she did set off emotional reactions related to the deaths. Her question in the note she sent to me was: *How can I control my grief reactions to these triggers I encounter each day?* She has given me permission to use her name. Here is my letter to her:

Dear Maureen,

I am responding to your question about triggers and how they produce powerful emotional reactions. You probably will not be satisfied with my answer. My short answer is: You will only be able to control your responses by confronting the very triggers that are causing your grief reactions. Below is more of a psychological explanation that will help you understand the reasons why grief reactions are so automatic.

When a traumatic event happens in our life, our brain automatically stores all the information surrounding the event—you correctly call them “triggers.” The reason for this is that our brain remembers anything in our life **associated** with pain. Then, when we later encounter the trigger, our brain automatically responds by sending messages to our body (our heart, our stomach, our muscles, even our eyes) to respond as if the trigger were actually going to bring about more pain. It is a protective mechanism. The process is called *Classical Conditioning*.

If you ever took Psych 100, you learned about Pavlov’s dogs who learned to salivate to the ringing of a bell because the bell was rung just prior to food being placed in the dog’s mouth. In your case, the triggers (similar to the bell for the dogs) are associated with the pain of your loss (food in the dog’s mouth) and your automatic body response is being upset (similar to salivation for the dog).

The important question here is: What can I do about it? You already know the answer:

You need to confront (experience) the triggers again and again and again so that the triggers will gradually lose their potency.

Remember when you were young and your favorite song produced feelings of joy? And, then after you heard that same song over and over, you discovered that the feelings of joy began to diminish? Perhaps they never totally went away, but their effect decreased with repeated exposure. It's the same for everything in our life. The **only** way to decrease the effect of our triggers is to confront them again and again.

Of course, this seems a cruel way to cope with your grief, right? I'm basically saying:

"Maureen, continue to confront all of those things that remind you of the loss of your precious loved ones and experience your grief again and again."

There is, however, one exception to this suggestion: Do it in your own time and in your own way. There may be times and situations where the best thing to do is avoid grief-producing triggers. Finally, no one should force you to flood yourself with triggers, nor should anyone prevent you from doing so.

What I have learned from thousands of people I have met who were coping with the death of a child, a sibling, a spouse, a parent, or a friend is the following fact:

Confronting the very triggers that cause the pain associated with grief will eventually result in a decrease in the automatic bodily responses. Conversely, avoiding the triggers will only maintain the effect. People who, for example, avoided going to the cemetery for years report that, even decades later, upon their first visit, the tears came. It's as if the triggers quietly sat there for years waiting to produce the bodily responses.

So, there it is. Maureen, I know that coping with your grief will continue to be difficult for you for a long time. But, someday you will notice that, even though the triggers are still there, your responses are not as intense. This gradual decrease does not mean that you are forgetting the life of your beloved husband and son. It means that your automatic grief response is easing up a little.

I hope all this makes sense.

My best to you.

Regards,

Bob Baugher