

Q&A - What Is a Trigger? - Published 12/15/2016

For this issue we are going to do a Q&A (Questions and Answers) about triggers. This is based on several questions that we have recently been asked about triggers.

Q What is a trigger?

A When using WRAP, we define a trigger is an external event that causes us to feel uncomfortable.

Q How do you define uncomfortable?

A The definition of uncomfortable is made by the person experiencing the trigger. We each have a different level of discomfort. What one individual may experience as discomfort another individual may not consider as a problem.

The actual nature of the discomfort may also be different. One person may experience anxiety. Another person may experience fear. Someone else may experience a fight or flight reaction. We may experience these reactions from different triggers, or from the same trigger at different times. This does not really matter all that much. The important thing is to recognize the fact that we have been triggered.

Q Is it “bad” that I have been triggered?

A In WRAP we work very hard to **not** judge things as being other “good” or “bad.” When we are triggered it is more important to recognize the trigger than to judge it as a good or bad. By judging the trigger as “bad” we open ourselves to self-shame and self-guilt. This can make it more difficult to deal with the trigger because we are adding more uncomfortable feelings to those uncomfortable feelings that are already coming from the trigger.

Q Can you give some examples of triggers?

A Once again each of us will have different triggers. The following list is just a group of triggers that people have mentioned as being triggers for them. They may or may not be triggers for you.

- Problems at work
- Difficult relationships with co-workers
- Benefits being questioned or denied
- Doing work that is hard for you
- Anniversary of loss or trauma
- Traumatic news
- Being very overtired
- Work stress
- Family friction
- Financial problems

Q Do the triggers ever go away?

A There does not appear to be a definitive answer for this question. Some individuals say that some of their triggers have gone away once they recognized them and learned healthy behaviors to deal with their effects. Others say that the triggers never really go away, that they become muted and less powerful as we learn appropriate responses.

Q How do I learn to keep my triggers from messing up my day?

A That, of course, is a very important question. In WRAP we learn to use our wellness tools. Sometimes these are called “healthy coping skills.” The name is not important. What is important is that we learn to respond to our triggers with healthy behaviors. This is called our “Trigger Action Plan.”

As I began my recovery I had a difficult time understanding how to respond to my triggers with healthy behaviors. I had spent so much time responding to triggers with unhealthy behaviors that it took some time to unlearn those old behaviors and replace them with new healthy behaviors. Many people have similar experiences as they begin to master their triggers by using their action plan.

Here are a few examples of what people have said that they have used as wellness tools when they are triggered. As with all things WRAP, an action plan is based on what is healthy for each individual. Something that is a wellness tool for one person may not be a wellness tool for another.

- Get one thing done that I know I can do well
- Do a reality check
- Talk to a support person
- Write in my journal
- Get some vigorous exercise
- Play my guitar for an hour
- Do a deep breathing or a relaxation exercise

The skills involved in using our “Trigger Action Plan” are a different subject. We will go into depth about that subject in a future issue of “WRAP News.”

Summary on Triggers

In WRAP we define a trigger as an external event that causes us to feel uncomfortable. The trigger can be different for each of us. The “uncomfortable” feelings will also be different for each of us. As we learn to use our Trigger Action Plan the triggers gradually lose their power and may no longer be as devastating as they once were. Triggers are not viewed as “good” or “bad.” They just are. When we view them as “bad” we may feel shame and guilt on top of the feelings that are already coming from the trigger.

If you have any questions or would like to share your experience with your Triggers or your Action Plan, please consider joining our online support group on Thursday evenings. The details of that group can be found at: namimercer.org/wrap