



Triggers

What They Are and Why They Are Important

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To Roy Rogers, Trigger was his main steed, his mode of transportation, and his best friend. Well perhaps best friend next to Dale Evans! If someone happens to shoot skeet, the trigger is that lever that he or she pulls to discharge the shotgun. However, for addicts, a trigger can be the beginning of their worst nightmare. Just like the first few grains of snow that start down a hillside and trigger an avalanche, a relapse can be triggered by what seems like the smallest of events or emotions. Knowing those triggers and making a plan for intervening before the addict hits the steep slope is key to recovery.

With new brain imaging technology, scientists now understand that the brain of someone who is addicted eventually undergoes structural and functional changes. Scientists currently think once these changes happen the addicted brain cannot be changed back to the pre-addicted brain. A group of cells form what is often referred to as an addiction template. These cells become organized to be the route of least resistance to the pleasure centers inside the brain. The addiction template then is the path chosen first in response to both external and internal stimuli (triggers) that set off an addictive response cycle.

This process is much like what a person experiences when on a roller coaster ride at an amusement park that loops over itself or a line of dominos. Once the roller coaster car gets to a certain spot in the track or when someone tips the first domino, a threshold is met that the roller coaster car or line of dominos will complete the run – there is no turning back. The thrill of riding the roller coaster or watching the dominos falling in a geometric pattern both is amazing and pleasurable to watch. The experience is a little like the feeling for an addict in the early stages of addiction. The use of the drug or addictive behavior is full of anticipation, sometimes fear, excitement, and for many during and after there is a feeling of a rush and pleasure. The brain is set up to seek interest and excitement, joy and enjoyment. Couple those feelings with fear and anxiety and the brain has the perfect cocktail. Unfortunately, the brain encourages the addict to repeat the process. However, as the cycle is repeated over and over, the loop becomes more and more powerful, tolerance is created, more drugs or risk are needed for a similar rush and sense of pleasure over which the addict has less and less control. The addict becomes sensitive to anything that triggers his/her need to use.

Triggers can be almost anything, external or internal. Examples of external triggers include anything outside the addict. For the alcoholic it could be an ad for beer that once was merely a common commercial on television; or it might be a sound of the click and whoosh of a beer can being opened; or it might even be a smell like Tequila used in making a margarita. For the sex addict, a trigger might be a TV commercial showing a lot of flesh like a model in a bikini or an athlete in tight shorts; or it could be driving by a video arcade specializing in X-rated adult movies. Triggers can be certain body smells or perfumes and colognes.

For the cocaine addict, a trigger can even be the contents of a bag of sweet and low spilled onto a table, a rolled up dollar bill, or something resembling a crack pipe. For the prescription addict, the sight of the amber colored bottles prescriptive medications come in, a prescription pad lying unattended on the doctor's desk, or a friend's bathroom medicine chest can be triggers.

Internal triggers are much more difficult to manage because they involve having the ability to manage emotional states. Examples include getting angry over something that the addict believes justifies taking a drink, swallowing a pill or having an affair. It might even be a blue or depressed mood that through experience the addict knows a couple of lines of cocaine will alter the feeling into some perceived happiness no matter how short lived. Some addict's find going on a shopping binge creates a sense of satisfaction and delight at least until the bill arrives. For food addicts, eating one half or all of a Black Forest chocolate cake will so alter one's mood that the distraction seems worth the misery at first.

Since feeling badly about oneself is frequently a constant companion of the addict, he/she may use the Internet to alter the feelings by talking to someone in a chat room and finding an anonymous sexual partner no matter how unsafe such an adventure may be. Since a trigger is the very start of the addiction cycle, it has the least power and momentum. This is the place where the addiction loop is most easily stopped. The mechanism to stop the trigger in its tracks is called an intervention. When patients are working on their relapse prevention the most frequent intervention cited is, "call my sponsor". This assumes the person's sponsor is waiting for that call, the cell phone batteries are fully charged and the instrument is turned on. "Go to a meeting" is used almost as frequently. This assumes everyone lives in a place that has a meeting on every corner 24/7/365 versus more than likely the next meeting is three days away.

For an intervention to be successful it must meet certain criteria.

EXQUISITE MODEL FOR INTERVENTIONS.

- (1)The intervention must be immediately available to the addict
- (2)The intervention must be something that is possible to do in the real world
- (3)The intervention must be something that has a reasonable chance the working successfully where or when an intervention is needed
- (4)The intervention must be something that the addict is likely to do
- (5)The intervention must be specific for the trigger, ritual, or event that is likely to result in acting out with the addict's drug of choice.

These interventions must be rehearsed before they are needed or they are as useless as a three dollar bill. Provided this part of the relapse prevention program has been thoroughly rehearsed, it can stop the addiction cycle at its weakest point – at the trigger.

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Treatment at Santé Center for Healing is an integrated approach (a multi-disciplinary team utilizing behavioral, cognitive, and interpersonal therapy) that is solution focused rather than problem focused. Santé offers Individual, group, family counseling and small sized processed groups in Primary and Secondary Residential Care Treatment settings.

Santé Center for Healing also offers Mirror Imaging, Transitional Living, Aftercare and an Intensive Outpatient Program. Santé is located on a serene hillside, 30 miles north of Dallas / Fort Worth in Argyle, Texas. The 14 acre property offers a tranquil environment for individuals suffering from the disease of addiction. Santé is a place where one can turn thier life around. A place to learn how to live life on life's terms. A place to examine one's life, stop unproductive behavior patterns and cultivate inner resources.