

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

5.3 TRIGGER EXPERIMENTS

Confronting the things that trigger us is extremely important in learning to change emotional reactions. It is natural that when we feel overwhelmed we will try to avoid the things that make us feel that way. However, sometimes we can't really avoid our triggers (e.g. the opposite gender, public places). This contributes to a feeling of being out-of-control and unable to cope, because we never develop any skills or ability to deal with the trigger and we only encounter it in unpredictable ways. It is also self-reinforcing, because the relief of not being triggered encourages us to continue avoiding it.

Avoidance is also a major problem because it prevents emotional learning. Emotional learning is learning that happens when we are experiencing emotions. Imagine that your emotion is a box, for example an anger box. In that anger box are all the things you feel and all the autopilot reactions that go with feeling angry. Your triggers are like keys that open that box. When they open it - out pour all the bodily feelings, thoughts, memories, urges and autopilot reactions. If you are not feeling your emotion, then that box is closed. If you only learn new skills or resources when you are calm and not feeling your emotion, then that new learning, and those new skills, won't be getting into the box for when you need them. Trying them out when you are feeling the emotion, when the box is open, is a way to help you get them in. The trouble is getting just enough emotion - opening the box just enough - so that you're not overwhelmed by what's already in there!

Trigger Experiments are one way to overcome the problems of avoidance and encourage emotional learning. The basic idea is to trigger yourself so that you can change your reactions. This lets the new learning get in properly, and helps you develop reactions that work better. The difference here is that this trigger is selected by you, done at a time of your choosing, in the way you want to do it.

This gives you a much better chance of being able to use your new resources successfully, and start to develop new reactions.

Instructions – Trigger Experiments

The **Trigger Experiment Worksheet** can help you to plan a trigger experiment. This involves a few key stages:

Step 1: Identify an emotional reaction that you want to experiment with.

- Pick something that causes you difficulty.
- You may want to use the same examples as the one from your Trigger Management worksheet.

Step 2: Clarify your Trigger Goal

- How would you like to be reacting to this trigger in the future?
- You may want to use the same trigger goal that you developed from your Trigger Management Worksheet, if the reaction you're working on is also the same.
- Think of this as a long-term goal or vision.

Step 3: Develop a Trigger Experiment

- Think about a situation that you could choose to place yourself in that would elicit the same emotions, but on a smaller scale.
- This might be a smaller version of the real trigger, or it might be another trigger that makes you feel a similar way.
- Try to think about the different resources you have that would help you achieve your trigger goal in this situation.
- Think about the general theme of the trigger
- Think about something that won't be too intense or difficult
- Think about something that is under your control as much as possible

Step 4: Highlight your fears

- Be clear about why this is challenging for you, why you would normally avoid this?
- Remember that the best trigger experiments are those that help us to prove these fears wrong – this really helps emotional learning.

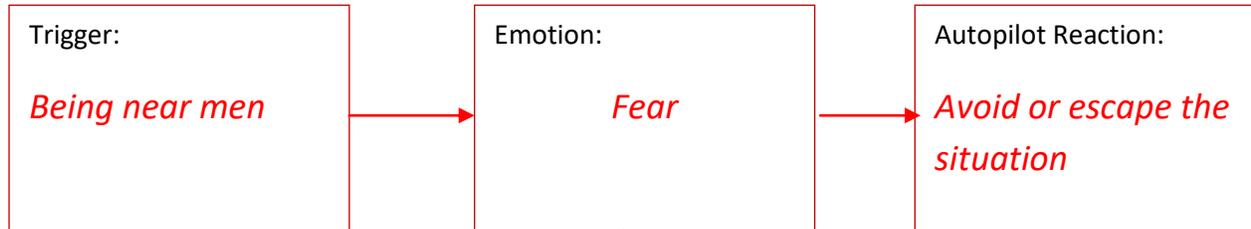
Step 5: Consider the results of your experiment (after you complete it)

- What was the actual outcome? What does this suggest about how you might manage situations like this in the future?
- If the experiment doesn't go well think about why and how you can try again. Do you need a different trigger, a different resource, something else?

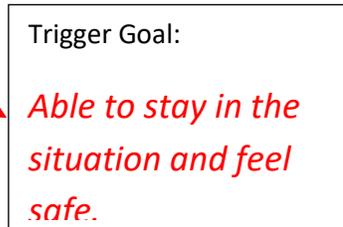
- If the experiment does go well, think about your next steps (handout **6.1: Pattern change Plans** can help with this).

Trigger Experiment Worksheet

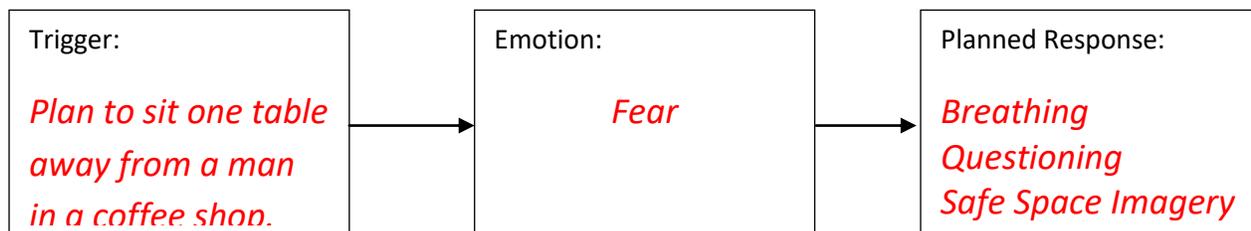
Step 1: What is the emotional reaction I want to experiment with?



Step 2: *In the future* how would I like to react to the same trigger and emotion?



Step 3: How can I confront a smaller version of this trigger and emotion and what can I do differently when I am triggered (planned response)?



Step 4: What's the worst that could happen by doing this experiment (be specific)?

What are my worst fears? Why do I usually avoid this?

I worry that if I am around a man for too long that he will hurt me in some way. I'm also afraid that I'll get too anxious and have a panic attack.

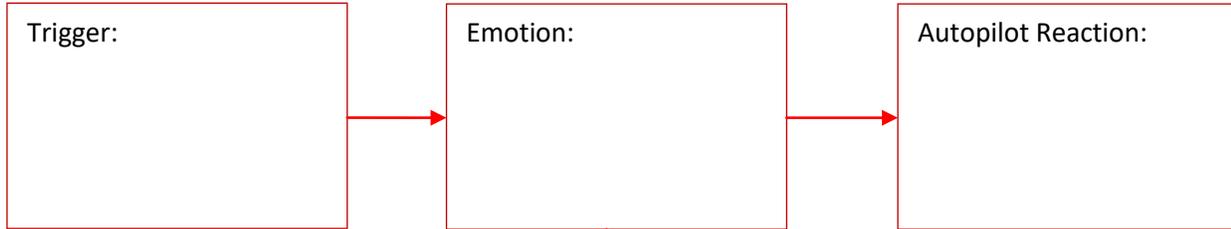
Step 5: What actually happened (complete after experiment)?

Did the results surprise me? What did I learn?

It was very difficult. I felt intense panic the first time I tried and ended up leaving the situation. However I tried again in a quieter cafe and it was much easier. Nobody tried to hurt me and I managed to keep myself in the zone using my resources. I feel more confident that I can cope if I'm triggered this way in future. I'm going to try the first cafe again now.

Trigger Experiment Worksheet

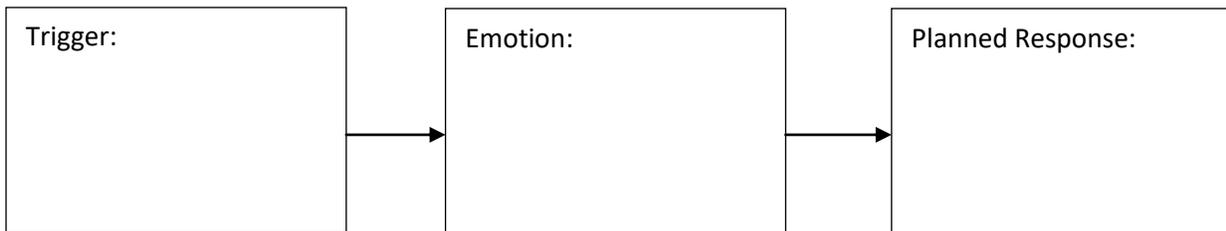
Step 1: What is the emotional reaction I want to experiment with?



Step 2: In the *future* how would I like to react to the same trigger and emotion?

Trigger Goal:

Step 3: How can I confront a smaller version of this trigger and emotion and what can I do differently when I am triggered (planned response)?



Step 4: What's the worst that could happen by doing this experiment (be specific)?

What are my worst fears? Why do I usually avoid this?

Step 5: What actually happened (complete after experiment)?

Did the results surprise me? What did I learn?