

Appendix 3B

Responding to Triggers

A trigger is something that an individual says or does or an organizational policy or practice that makes us, as members of social groups, feel diminished, offended, threatened, stereotyped, discounted or attacked. Triggers do not necessarily threaten our physical safety. We often feel psychologically threatened. We can also be triggered on behalf of another social group. Though we do not feel personally threatened, our sense of social justice is violated.

Triggers cause an emotional response. These emotions range from hurt, confusion, anger, fear, surprise or embarrassment. We respond to triggers in a variety of ways, some helpful and others not. Our guide in developing a full repertoire of responses to triggers is to take care of ourselves and then decide how to most effectively respond. Some of the responses listed here are effective and some are not. What responses we choose depends on our own inner resources and the dynamics of the situation. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive and is in no order of preference. Read the list of responses and think about the discussion questions at the end of the list.

LEAVE: We physically remove ourselves from the triggering situation.

AVOIDANCE: We avoid future encounters with and withdraw emotionally from people or situations that trigger us.

SILENCE: We do not respond to the triggering situation though we feel upset by it. We endure the situation without saying or doing anything.

RELEASE: We notice the trigger, but do not take it in. We choose to let it go. We do not feel the need to respond.

ATTACK: We respond with an intention to hurt or offend whoever has triggered us.

INTERNALIZATION: We internalize the trigger. We believe it to be true.

RATIONALIZATION: We convince ourselves that we misinterpreted the trigger, that the intention was not to hurt us, or that we tell ourselves we are overreacting so that we can avoid saying anything about the trigger.

CONFUSION: We feel upset but are not clear about why we feel that way. We know we feel angry, hurt or offended. We just don't know what to say or do about it.

SHOCK: We are caught off guard, unprepared to be triggered by this person or situation and have a difficult time responding.

NAME: We identify what is upsetting us to the triggering person or organization.

DISCUSS: We name the trigger and invite discussion about it with the triggering person or organization.

CONFRONT: We name the trigger and demand that the offending behavior or policy be changed.

SURPRISE: We respond to the trigger in an unexpected way. For example, we react with constructive humor that names the trigger, but makes people laugh.

STRATEGIZE: We work with others to develop a programmatic or political intervention to address the trigger in a larger context.

MISINTERPRETATION: We are feeling on guard and expect to be triggered so that we misinterpret something someone says and are triggered by our misinterpretation rather than by what they actually said.

DISCRETION: Because of dynamics in the situation (power differences, risk of physical violence or retribution, for example), we decide that it is not in our best interests to respond to the trigger at that time, but choose to address the trigger in some other way at another time.

Discussion Questions

- Which responses are most typical for you when you are triggered? As a targeted group member? As an advantaged group member?
- Are there differences in how you respond to triggers depending on the ism?
- Which responses would you like to add to your repertoire?
- Which responses do you use now and would like to stop using or use more selectively?
- What blocks you from responding to triggers in ways that feel more effective?
- What can you do to expand your response repertoire?