



## Triggered! Now What?

A scent wafts by, or someone speaks certain words in a certain tone, or that time of year comes around again. Suddenly we are defiantly thirteen, or playfully four, or speechlessly afraid in situations where we would prefer to be competent adults.

With awareness, we might be able to take back adult control, or we might just get through the moment as best we can, hoping no one notices. The sense of being hijacked might be familiar, or this might be the first time a buried part has surfaced in recent memory. While our system is flooded, our usual creativity, flexibility, and problem-solving abilities are physiologically unavailable. We can reach for our basic survival tools, breathe, look around, and remind ourselves that the triggering will end.

**Everyone gets triggered.** Later, we might scheme to release that errant part so it cannot embarrass us again, thinking of that as healing and resolving to work harder at it. We often see regressing or switching to a younger part as a failure, as if we “should” have our best adult faculties available at all times. This is a subtle form of victim-blaming, where any weakness, faltering, or vulnerability is seen as a reason to be hurt.

It may be more obvious when someone with PTSD gets triggered, but it happens to everyone. We behave more warmly toward a stranger who happens to look like our beloved third-grade teacher. We refuse to eat anything with

peanut butter after a food poisoning incident. The past weaves through our present, shaping our reactions far more than we consciously realize.

**Allow closeness.** The simple but not easy process of healing is to allow those younger parts to come closer, rather than pushing them away. Each one got left behind, frozen in time, because of overwhelming events. Our responses to the young parts echo our responses back then, including dissociation, fear, shame, rage, and a need to fix it right now.

**Turn toward resistance.** Even when we know that acceptance is the key to feeling better, our resistant responses need to be acknowledged and given time first. We can say hello to the part who wants nothing to do with frightened or playful inner children, who is concerned with surviving in the present, who may, given spacious attention, reveal a panicked need to flee that comes from the past.

From that place of spacious listening, we can let the panicky part know that it makes sense it would feel that way, given what was happening back then, and it gets to feel that way as long as it wants.

We can also gently take note of what has changed since then, taking in the present environment. Perhaps it is safer now than it was then to be vulnerable, or perhaps there are good reasons for continuing wariness. Most importantly, that old situation ended, and we have new skills and new possibilities now.

**Hear what they know.** To allow younger parts to come closer, we have to be willing to hear and feel what they know. They might carry traumatic memories in the form of images, emotions, or body sensations. They might carry love for an abuser. They might carry awareness of body parts that have long been dissociated and numb, like the

pelvis.

**Simply acknowledge.** Eventually, something shifts inside and we give our consent to know. The new information might slide silently into place, or come in flashes, or approach and withdraw as the younger part gains trust. It might crash against us in waves until something deeper shifts in our understanding of the present or the past. We might feel calm, or numb, or overwhelmed with emotion. We might ruefully acknowledge that it made sense to resist.

Even though we might want to fix the past problem, offer comfort, or change the younger part's experience, all we need to do is acknowledge the information we received. "I see that image, feel that emotion, acknowledge the love, sense my pelvis." We can also acknowledge our reactions to the new information. For example, it is common to feel shame for positive feelings toward abusers, even though capacity for love is cause for celebration, not shame.

**Blending skills.** Once a connection is made with a younger part, information flows both ways. They can look around at the present and see that it is different from the past. They see the skills and strengths and wisdom we have acquired in the intervening years and tentatively try new ways of being in the world. The next time they take over, adult and child can blend together, with access to more inner resources.

The younger part may express needs or longings or fears that affect present-day actions. At first, we can declare a Decision-Free Zone and simply listen. Over time, we incorporate their wishes into our actions, neither ignoring them nor letting them take over.

**Time for repair.** When we believe we have everything under control, being triggered can be a frustrating and embarrassing interruption. It reminds us that we are fallible,

vulnerable, and affected by the past. While we might expect ourselves to be in top form at all times, getting triggered reminds us that we need time to rest, regroup, and repair past injuries.