

Relationship Triggers

*Spring is sprung
De grass is riz
I wonder where de boidies is?*

*De boidies on de wing
But dat's absoid
I always hoid
De wing is on de boid*

Anonymous poem as spoken by Jimmy Durante

A friend sent me a card recently that said 'Relationships are a mystery, but chocolate, that I understand!' Perhaps the mystery of relating to someone else can be understood a bit better when you remember that each person thinks and acts from their own map of the world. Each map originally grew out of a collection of previous experiences, decisions, beliefs and values. The most important maps originate during childhood, when formative ideas are imprinted without the benefit of wisdom. They become like tinted windows through which the world is viewed from then on. Unfortunately they're also the source of sensitive trigger points for subsequent reactions and behaviours.

It's often these triggers that start a whole chain of misunderstanding and subsequent defensive behaviour. Perhaps you know someone who is too trigger happy? It can be difficult to handle people who seem overly reactive or overly sensitive. Sometimes it's as if every little thing can provoke an undesirable response. But to a lesser extent, anyone in the wrong mood often falls into this kind of behaviour. The friction of living in close relationships usually provides ample opportunity to set off such triggers unintentionally.

One couple found that it didn't take long at all to discover that they could both trigger each other into disruption. After the 'honeymoon' patch of feeling 'it was all too good to be true' wore off, they got into trouble. Both admitted to being 'control freaks'. Unfortunately their respective styles of trying to get control quickly triggered the other into reactive behaviour. Bad habits don't take long to develop. Sadly, the resulting unpleasant energy threatened to destroy what seemed to be a good relationship.

He had experienced quite a difficult childhood with a very controlling mother, and a very timid father. He was never allowed to do what he wanted to do. So it was not surprising that he developed his own style of being controlling later on. He had lots of rules about how his girlfriend should behave and how she should dress demurely. He often felt jealous and feared she might be attracted to someone else and he would get rejected. Inside, he couldn't trust his girlfriend, but he covered this up by trying to please her.

She came from a family that had suffered several bereavements. Perhaps in reaction to the grieving, she became rebellious. Her father tried to control her

- which made it worse, until the whole thing escalated to violence. To escape from the hurt feelings, she later developed bad habits with smoking, alcohol and drugs. Her trust was so shattered that whenever she got close to anyone, some part of her would want to destroy the relationship. She was afraid to let anyone find out who she really was. She feared exposure and vulnerability, so she acted cool and dismissive. Whenever her boyfriend tried to control her, she would shout aggressively to defend herself. This terrified him and she always won the argument.

It was as if their respective maps were perfectly designed to irk each other. Each time he felt her pull away, he became more controlling and jealous. Whenever she felt controlled, she would react with aggressive outbursts. When she shouted, he began trying to please her, but this caused her to be even more cool and dismissive. Luckily, they both still wanted to work through their problems and develop the relationship. So first, some of the strong emotions adhering to the old experiences needed to be let go of, so that each could find the way back to that peaceful centre inside. To get out of the stuck place, it was important to disconnect the projections: to realize that their partner was not their parent from the past. They no longer needed to defend themselves so aggressively.

Remembering all the good things that they loved about their partner helped a lot to rekindle the loving feelings again. Then they also needed to learn how to spot those dangerous triggers and remember they have a choice about how to interpret what is being said and done. Sometimes, it might be possible to choose to overlook a mistake. Other times it might be necessary to share about what specific thing was triggering them and why. With practice, they might even be able to negotiate requesting some alternative behaviours. The real relationship begins when two people start learning how to work through difficult times together.

*Every great mistake has a halfway moment,
a split second when it can be
recalled and perhaps remedied.*

Pearl S. Buck

How to stop your trigger points creating a fight:

1. Think of several typical arguments you find yourself experiencing with others. Whether voices are raised or not, those will be times when you know you feel angry even if you don't express it openly. If you don't recognize anger, you might notice times when you feel frustrated, annoyed, irritated, resentful, disrespected, peeved, or cross.
2. With each event, to the best of your ability, identify what you are feeling underneath the anger. What are you secretly feeling fear about? What are you afraid is being lost, taken away, destroyed, etc?

3. Be careful if you hear yourself justifying your feelings, or piling up further evidence about how right you are to be angry, or how wrong they are to be doing what they are doing.
4. Instead, notice exactly what it is about the other's behaviour that triggered you. Was it a tone of voice? raised eyebrow? a particular expression? an attitude? specific words or phrases? These are important clues.
5. When you notice a pattern, or make a connection between what is happening currently with what you experienced earlier in life, you can begin to recognize your most dangerous triggers and the projections that they are linked with.
6. Then you have a choice. You can continue to project the old events and people all over your current experience and repeat the past yet again. Or you could get curious to know the person in front of you now and risk testing out some new responses. Sometimes you might want to share precisely what triggers you, why that is important to you, and what the other person could do instead. They may have no idea how they are affecting you.

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