

What are your triggers?

By Dave Batty

What triggers you? What sets off a volcano of anger? What triggers fear in your heart? What makes a temptation so enticing that it seems irresistible?

“I was doing just fine in communicating about a problem with my next door neighbor—until he began to trash-talk my wife! That’s when I lost it—and my angry shouting just took over.” Perhaps you can relate to this man’s experience.

A friend was at an outdoor concert in New York City a few months after 9-11 (2001), when a commercial jet passed over on a low flight path. He said about 90% of

the people looked up.

Before 9-11 such a common noise would have hardly gotten a single glance upward. For many today, that noise also triggers feelings of fear, and creates a flashback to the images of tragedy portrayed on TV.

Other triggers pull us down a path that leads to sin. Every temptation starts with a trigger—something that grabs our attention and our desires.

What is a trigger?

Just about anything can be a trigger.

Some triggers are visual—you see someone or something and it becomes a trigger—pulling you toward a certain response.

Another example of triggers are smells. Sallie Culbreth, the founder of *Committed to Freedom* (see the box on page 2), was sexually abused by a man who used Horehound cough drops. Years later, that smell can instantly trigger memories of past sexual abuse. With those memories also comes a flood of emotions—deeply connected to that abuse.

Sounds can also be triggers—as mentioned earlier—the sound of a jet flying overhead.

Each trigger pulls us toward a response. Some are very obvious—others hidden. But in each case they can open the door to emotional

A trigger may have become a part of your life through a traumatic event.

turmoil and responses that lead to a chain reaction of events.

Some triggers are simply thoughts. You may be sitting in church, when out of nowhere a movie starts playing in your mind—a sin in your past, or a failure, or a painful experience. You wonder—what triggered that memory?

The more important question is—how will I respond to this trigger? Will I let this trigger pull me down a destructive path? Or will I choose a different response as I speak God’s truth to it.

❖ **What are the triggers in your life that put you in bondage to sin or hurts of your past?**

❖ **How can you break the power of the triggers in your life today?**

❖ **How can your struggle with triggers help others?**

2, What are your triggers?

We can be in bondage to the traumas of our past, or the temptations that have overwhelmed us in the past. We can continue to be on an emotional roller coaster, letting our emotions control our moods, our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

But God wants us to experience freedom from these bondages. So what is the path that will take us to the freedom God has for us?

What gives power to a trigger?

First we must identify the triggers in our lives and understand how they are affecting us today. The abuse or betrayal may have taken place 20 years ago—no physical scars remain, but the emotional damage is still very real today.

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Committed to Freedom Ministries provides training and counseling to survivors of sexual abuse. For more information, contact *Committed to Freedom Ministries* at 501-623-6850.

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Each trigger in your life is tied to your thoughts and your emotions. The trigger may have been born out of an event in your life that first exposed you to that experience—the trauma of sexual abuse, the fight with another person, a car accident you were involved in, the betrayal by a

Every trigger has false beliefs connected to it.

These false beliefs are what give the trigger so much power in our lives.

friend, the first time you saw pornography, or the first time you stole an article of clothing from a store, or an embarrassing moment.

Each one of these events opened a door of experience in your life, and now the memory, the sight, the smell becomes a trigger—a magnet in the present to pull you down a destructive path today.

Every trigger also has false beliefs connected to it. These false beliefs are what give the trigger so much power in our lives. The sound of a low-flying jet triggers the thought—maybe this is another plane about to crash—terrorists are here again—I can't be safe any more. All kinds of false beliefs can be attached to that trigger.

If you are going to gain control over these triggers in your life you must identify what those triggers are and the false beliefs that you have attached to them.

Another person may have had a similar experience, but does not have any of the same current triggers you do related to this event.

In one sense everyone is different—yet we all have triggers of one sort or another.

What gives a trigger power in your life? Part of the answer is the false beliefs that are attached to it. Perhaps the better question is who gives a trigger power in your life? You do! Each trigger only has as much power as you give it.

How do you give power to a trigger? Let's take a look at a gun—it has a trigger, and the gun can do great damage if you pull the trigger. But the trigger has no power and does no damage until someone wraps their finger around it and squeezes it tight.

The trigger by itself is nothing but a small piece of metal—harmless. But when it is installed in a gun, and the gun is loaded, this harmless little trigger sets off an explosive series of events that can be very destructive.



In a similar way the triggers in our lives are by themselves harmless smells, sounds, people, or objects. But when we connect them in our minds with memories of past experiences, often coupled with false beliefs, we give them power to take us down those paths, and experience current damage in our lives, and the lives of those around us.

How do I break the power of a trigger?

“I can’t help it when I get angry and explode. That’s just the way I am. I have always been short tempered—just like my parents and grandparents. That’s just my Italian temperament.” Maybe you’ve heard a similar story.

If you want to live in the full freedom that God has for you, then

Gaining control over a trigger means you will have to think and choose before you respond.

you must take responsibility for your present actions, thoughts, and emotions.

First, you must identify the triggers in your life. Start with the obvious ones. Make a list of them and describe your typical response to them.

Second, try to understand what happens before the trigger goes off in your life. Does this trigger usually happen at a certain time of the day or night? Or when you are with a certain person? What is the set-up? What puts you in that vulnerable position where you easily give in to that trigger?

Third, take your finger off the trigger. Make it your goal to not respond the way you have in the past. Some triggers related to

temptations have power because we have not made a decision to stop that activity. In our heart we still like what it does to us, and we are not willing to give it up completely.

If you are going to find freedom from that trigger, you must choose to turn away from that temptation.

Taking your finger off the trigger means also that you will begin to think before you respond. Think about the consequences of squeezing the trigger.

Fourth, attack the lies associated with the trigger. Bring God’s truth into the picture. You must find out what God says about this issue in your life, and then make that part of your thought process.

Instead of embracing the beauty of a pornographic picture, you must make a choice—I will not go down this path again. What is God’s truth

How long will you let triggers have power in your life?

A 67 year old man with a deep love for God—after a lifetime of successful ministry—still found triggers from his childhood having power in his mind.

“I still hear the words of my father when I was a child: ‘you will never amount to anything in life.’”

At 67 he still struggles with insecurity triggered by those words from the past.

that relates to this—God has a plan for true intimacy—sex with your wife or husband. Any other expression of sex is outside God’s boundaries, and will bring destruction into your life.

Another way of seeing God’s truth here is to recognize that pornography is a path of false intimacy. It’s not the real thing. It’s visually beautiful, but it’s still false intimacy. And it will not bring true fulfillment and pleasure into your life.

If anger is the trigger—then you must bring God’s truth about anger into your thought process. If it is fear—then what does God say about fear?

Fifth, choose a new response to the trigger and the memory of the past. This new response needs to be based on God’s truth. As a teen, I remember giving in to a temptation, and going down the path of sin. I immediately felt God’s conviction, and repented of the sin, and asked God to forgive me.

In the months that followed the memory of that sin would come back, often with a flood of shame. Each time I would again confess that sin, and ask God to forgive me.

Several years later the memory and feelings of shame still came back. So one day I took my finger off the trigger, and took a careful look at the trigger. I knew that I had sincerely repented of the sin several times. God’s word gave a simple response to that—If I confess my sin God is faithful and forgives it.

The conclusion was clear—this re-occurring shame was not from

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God. A light went on in my head—these feelings of shame were from the devil—not God. The devil came as an angel of light with a message that felt like it was from God.

When the lie associated with the trigger was exposed, the trigger lost some of its power. But the real key to destroying the power of the trigger came when I attached a new response to the trigger.

I decided on a strategy for responding the next time this memory and feelings of shame came upon me. My strategy was not to talk to the devil—but to talk to myself and to God.

1. What I did years ago was sin.
2. God has forgiven me.
3. The shame I am now feeling is not from God, but is a lie from the devil.
4. I will use this moment to look to God for His peace—the true and legitimate feeling I can experience right now.
5. I will also use this moment to recommit myself to walk in obedience to the laws of God.
6. I will use this as a trigger to pray—I thank you God for Your forgiveness and love. Thank you that I no longer need to live in bondage to this past failure—but that I can walk in the new freedom that you give me for each day.

You can't change the past failures, traumas, betrayals, and other

tragedies of your life. But you can choose new responses to each one. You can attach new insights to each painful memory of the past. Don't exchange one lie for another lie. Be sure you are replacing each lie with God's truth.

See each trigger from God's point of view

When we choose to gain control over our triggers we may be in for a long battle. We must work at this with diligence.

Some triggers may not be dangerous or wrong. Food can be a trigger for bingeing, anorexia, and other disorders. But obviously the solution here is attaching the right thoughts to our eating.

Other triggers are dangerous and you may need to stay away from them completely. "Avoid every kind of evil." 1 Thessalonians 5:22 NIV The alcoholic may need to commit to never enter a bar again. Or the one addicted to drugs may need to stay completely away from the neighborhood of the drug dealer who

When your trigger is Goliath sized

When King Saul and all the other mighty warriors in the army saw Goliath—he was a giant sized trigger for fear. Why? They looked at Goliath—seeing him as a big problem from a human perspective.

1. Goliath is big—much bigger than me.
2. He's a warrior—a big warrior—an experienced warrior.
3. He's powerful—much stronger than I am.

David was a young man, possibly still a teenager when he met Goliath that day for the first time. He saw the same physical issues everyone else saw. In his mind, he also saw God in this situation. Goliath's speech

triggered in him a desire to go fight him—even though he had never been trained to fight in the army of Israel.

When he attacked Goliath, he went speaking God's truth into the situation. "You come against me with the sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, who you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. . . . The whole world will know that there is a God in Israel." 1 Samuel 17:45-47 NIV

David experienced God's power as he attacked the enemy and brought freedom to his country.

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sells cocaine or heroin.

If the trigger is a person who deeply hurt you in the past—what is God’s path for you to complete freedom? Forgiveness may be one step in breaking the power of that trigger. “God I place in your hands this person who betrayed me. God I want to learn to love this person as Jesus would.”

What kind of love can you have for someone who betrayed or

abused you? Jesus loved Judas to the end. It’s not about having warm, fuzzy feelings for that person. No—it’s the non-romantic love described in 1 Corinthians 13, which starts with love is patient, and gives many other expressions of that kind of love.

You can choose to not let hatred rule your heart. Instead you can bring that hurt to God and say, “I need your healing. I want to be free of the power of this hurt.”

So the next time you see this person you can begin to see him or her as Jesus does.

1. Jesus loves this person.
2. Jesus does not ignore or minimize the sin this person did to me.
3. Jesus will do what is right for that person.
4. I need to focus on Jesus and the healing and freedom He has for me.

What triggers a critical attitude?

It seems that some of us have been born with a double anointing of the gift of criticism. Our criticism of others is so deeply rooted in our daily lifestyle we don’t even consciously think about it. It’s as natural as breathing.

So what triggers a critical attitude? How can you begin to recognize what triggers it in your life and begin to overcome this bad habit?

1. Ask those closest to you, “Where do I have a critical attitude?” Or “When have I criticized you?”
2. Keep a journal of examples where you have been critical today. You may be asking, “Why keep a journal of such negative things?” One of the steps to overcoming this habit is to be aware of how common this is in your life. Making this list also helps you begin to see the impact it is having in the lives of others.

3. Ask yourself, “What triggered this critical reaction in my heart?”

—Have I been wounded by this person?

—Is it my insecurity? Does pointing out the flaws in others make me feel better about myself?

—Is it my selfishness? “I want what they have.”

—Is it my standard of perfection for others? “If you are not perfect, you deserve to be criticized.”

—Has God specifically given me the ministry of pointing out the faults of others?

—Do I simply find pleasure in exposing the failures of others?

Jesus challenges us to “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Luke 6:28 NIV.

One of the steps that can help

overcome a critical attitude is to pray, “God, what thoughts do you want me to think about this person?” Philippians 4:8-9 gives a whole list of guidelines to use in bringing our thought life up to God’s standard for us. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy—think about these things.

How can you encourage this person? How can you be kind to this person in spite of what they do to you?

We must admit that when we have a critical attitude we are in bondage. It may be a fierce battle to overcome this old habit. Paul says, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” 2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV.

We must purpose in our hearts to go down the path of freedom—especially in controlling our tongue.

We must be vigilant in the new strategies we have planned for our triggers. The devil will continue to come back and try to get us to believe the lies attached to the triggers. We must continue to review God's truth—what does God say about this trigger? How does God want me to meet each need and desire in my life?

The key issue is that you must continue to fill your mind and your heart with God's truth. And you must continue to put His teachings into practice in your daily living.

It's also important to make yourself accountable to another trusted person who will help you see triggers in your life and listen for the lies that you may be telling yourself.

How my triggers can help others

As you learn to live in victory over the triggers of your past, you can become a model of encouragement to others struggling with triggers in their lives. They can take courage from your success and follow the same path.

Your strategies are not a guarantee to lead to the same success in their lives. But as they see how you are growing, your life can be a help and encouragement to them.

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16 NIV)

What are your triggers? Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences.

1. What are some of the triggers in your life? Are the triggers related to a past trauma, a temptation, or an embarrassing experience?
2. Read chapter 11 of 2 Samuel.
 - A. What was the trigger that started David down his path to sin?
 - B. What were the lies he was living with before Bathsheba arrived at his palace?
 - C. What were the opportunities David had which could have stopped him from going down this path to sin?
3. Every trigger has a false belief tied to it. What are the false beliefs tied to your triggers?
4. Read James 1:13-15. How does this speak to the chain reaction of events of temptation? How do triggers fit in to this process?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 10:5. How can you use this scripture in gaining control over the triggers in your life?
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:22. What are the things you need to stay away from where you are vulnerable to triggers?
7. Write a prayer to God about your struggle with triggers in your life.



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