

# Being Triggered

## Introduction To Being Triggered

When we're triggered, these are tipping points in our life. When we're triggered, we can lash out or not. We've messed up plenty of times in our lives and lashed out at the other person; who is often a person that we feel very close to. This article is being written to help us (me included) to stop this greatly hurtful and damaging way of relating to others.

What do I mean by being triggered? When we're triggered, we have an overly strong and harsh response-reaction to what was said to us. When we've been triggered, the harsh response may be kept in in the form of being very angry at the other person while having a strongly aggressive story or a strongly defensive story looping again and again in our head. Or the harsh response can be outwardly expressed to the other person in the form of attacking the other person or strongly defending ourselves.

In regards to how we behave, probably the worst moments of our lives are right after we've been triggered. Take a moment to go back to when you were at your most harsh behavior, your most angry behavior. These times of your most angry behavior toward someone were probably right after you were triggered. One of the most problematic parts of relationship is that the people that we love the most can provide the biggest triggers. We all have been triggered. And I know that I'm going to get triggered in the future.

## What Happens In Our Brain When We're Triggered?

When we're triggered a part of our brain takes over. This part of the brain is not the neocortex that thinks logically. The part of the brain that takes over when we're triggered is the amygdala. The amygdala is the 'fear center' of our brain. *The amygdala responds in the same way whether the perceived attack is physical or verbal.* When we've been triggered, we feel attacked by the other person. When we're under attack, the amygdala, the fight, flight, or freeze part of our brain, takes over. The amygdala releases chemicals needed to fight, flight or freeze. These chemicals are cortisol, norepinephrine and adrenalin.

## What Are The Three Signs Of Amygdala Hijack?

The term [amygdala hijack](#) was coined in 1996 by a psychologist, Daniel Goleman. He uses amygdala hijack to indicate that the person is reacting or responding from the fear center of the brain (the amygdala) and not the neocortex (the thinking part of the brain).

The three signs of amygdala hijack are sudden onset, a strong emotional reaction, and when you reflect back on the situation you realize that your response was inappropriate.

When we're triggered, when we feel attacked, and the amygdala takes over (amygdala hijack happens). This is a very, very good response of our brain if a huge bear is starting to charge at us. Thank heaven for amygdala hijack that sends so many 'panic and hyping chemicals' into our body so we can get the hell out of there or get ready to fight in an instant.

Amygdala hijack is a very inappropriate way to respond when a loved one (or when anyone) says something to us that does not threaten our life. The worst arguments in a relationship are when both people are in amygdala hijack.

## The Two Most Common Reactions To Being Triggered

The two most common reactions when we've been triggered are to defend ourselves, or to attack the other person and tell them how very wrong they are. When we defend or attack, our amygdala is in command. The amygdala's job is to react very, very strongly to the perceived threat. Again, *the same strong amygdala-fear response* comes whether we've being verbally or physically attacked.

### Common Reaction #1: Attacking The Other Person

One word – blaming. When we feel hurt or upset or a victim by what someone said, we may blame the person; make the person wrong, so very wrong, for saying what they said to us. We're going to attack the person and tell the person all the ways that they're a total jerk for every uttering those words. We may also add in all the ways in the past when they've said unfair things to us to further prove to them that what they said to us is a load of crap, and so very, very far away from the truth.

## Common Reaction #2: Defending Ourselves

When we defend ourselves, we'll give a very impassioned lecture to the other person telling them many, many reasons why what they said is total bullshit. This is all coming from ego fueled by the amygdala part of our brain. The ego has two jobs – to defend ourselves (to make sure that we keep living) and to give us drive in life. When we defend ourselves in this way, then the ego is in 'its full glory,' doing such a great job of triumphantly defending ourselves.

## A Little More About Amygdala Hijack: Both Attacking and Defending

I'll use an example of a wife and husband to illustrate amygdala hijack in action from the husband's perspective. During amygdala hijack, we're being chemically hyped from the amygdala part of our brain to attack or to defend. These chemicals are very strong and for a very good reason. These hyping and reactive chemicals are meant to be overwhelming to our normal thinking. We're in great danger and we need to instantly do something very strong in response to this great danger.

Unfortunately this great danger could be *again* your wife saying: 'Why do I have to tell you to take out the garbage? Can't you see that the garbage is getting full and just take it out for once.' And her saying 'for once' sends you into amygdala hijack.

Both you and your wife work. You've agreed that she'll cook and that you'll clean up the kitchen after and take out the garbage. The truth is that you do clean up the kitchen well, but that you get lazy about taking out the garbage. This has been an ongoing issue with you and your wife for years.

But you're in amygdala hijack and you tell your wife that in the fifteen years that you've been married you have taken out the garbage without her having to tell you. You then tell her that this has happened many, many times. And what she said is another example of the bullshit statements that you've put up with for fifteen years. And now you're going to go through the list of all of the bullshit statements that you've heard her say. Your ego is actually feeling very justified in your ranting. Your ego is defending you, attacking her and showing you that you are strong in the face of being so damned by your wife; by the person you claim to dearly love.

We'll usually be much better off if we give ourselves a 'time out,' and tell the other person that we're experiencing a strong reaction to what they said and we need to walk off, or breathe through, the reaction that has already taken hold of us. Natural breathing will stop the further release of the hyping chemicals, though the chemicals already released will keep us 'jacked up' until they wear off. We can say to the other person that we want to continue with this, but only after we've settled down enough to not be so swept away by the fear center of our brain. This step takes maturity from both people. If the other person is in amygdala hijack the other person may strongly want to 'keep going at it' until it's finally resolved<sup>1</sup>.

### Option #3: The Uncommon Response To Being Triggered

The uncommon response to being triggered is to know that we're in amygdala hijack and to not respond from our amygdala; from the fear center of our brain. If there ever was a time for the saying 'it's easier said than done' is when we're in amygdala hijack and we choose to respond from who we really are and not be sucked into an aggressive or defensive fear response fueled by our amygdala.

This third option is to acknowledge that we've been triggered and to know that the triggering is happening because we feel attacked or threatened. This is the perfect moment to go into our wound rather than be defensive or to attack the other person.

How do we know that we're wounded and that the force of our response is not justified? We're very angry, hyped up and ready to lash out at another person *for what they said to us*. The other person is not threatening our life. The other person said *words to us* and we're ready to chop off their head or we're ready to go into a defensive rant. *That's a big clue* that there is some damaged part or woundedness in us that is being exposed, triggered, and activated at that moment.

The hyping chemicals have already been released and we're wanting so very much to attack the other person or to defend ourselves. These hyping chemicals are naturally compelling us to take sudden and strong action to attack the other person or to protect ourselves. If we have enough awareness and if we really have a conscious desire to work on our wound, then we have a chance to go with the first step of option number three which is to stay with the very uncomfortable emotions without taking the aggressive outward action of attacking the other person or defending ourselves.

The second step of option number three, after not lashing out, is to look inward. This is very difficult to do when the hyping-fear chemicals are strong. And yet, this is what is asked to heal, to go within to discover our wound. This discovery may or may not happen. The more times that we go inward after we've been triggered, the more possibility we have to go deeper and deeper into our woundedness; giving us a greater possibility to heal the wound that has been triggered.

The biggest aid in this very difficult moment is our strong desire to live as who we truly are, and to not be taken over by this very primitive reactive response that is vastly exaggerating the current situation (our wife telling us *again* about taking out the garbage).

The second biggest aid, after having a strong desire to not react from the amygdala hijack, is to begin breathing into our belly, and to not have a breathing pattern that is tight, shallow and mainly focused in our chest. I refer to this type of breathing as [natural breathing](#). By breathing into our belly, we're activating the parasympathetic (calming) part of our nervous system.

If we have enough conscious awareness so that the amygdala part of our brain has not hijacked our thinking and action, and if we breathe into our belly to keep activating our parasympathetic nervous system, then we have a chance to communicate from who we really are and not from the primitive lashing out part of our brain.

### Being Triggered During Meetings

*I guarantee that if you keep coming to the meetings that you will be triggered by something that I say.* You may also be triggered during hands on work. Our body holds many emotional memories. Any of the three different types of hands on work may trigger you.

If you come to group enough times, I also guarantee you that you will be triggered multiple times. Each of us has built up defenses or ways to protect ourselves throughout our life. It's part of being human to protect ourselves. When we feel exposed or accused or threatened, our defenses will come up. There will be a time when I say something to you or during hands on work that will send your brain into amygdala hijack. This is the perfect moment to go into your woundedness.

If your response after being triggered is taken over by the fear center of your brain, then, in that moment, we're missing the opportunity to work. You'll either be blaming me or defending yourself; both of which is being aggressive from your ego. Amygdala hijack stops real work from taking place.

### Healthy Boundaries And Protecting Ourselves

It's very good to have healthy boundaries and to protect ourselves. Charles asked me years ago: 'Phil, what is your greatest protection?' I know that I must have looked at him dumb-eyed or doe-eyed because I didn't have an answer. Some time went by and he said: 'to be in your higher heart.'

Charles uses the words 'higher heart' to refer to the part of our heart that doesn't have duality; that has only love. What Charles calls the higher heart, I call the compassionate heart. The compassionate heart has only love. The compassionate heart doesn't have love and hate. The emotional heart has both love and hate.

If the husband is in his higher heart and his wife tells him, even with an attitude, that he has neglected again to take out the garbage, the husband will be able to respond by recognizing that the garbage is full and it's time to take it out. If the husband is in his higher heart, there can be some irritation that comes up, though this irritation will be more like the irritation of a mosquito bite and not the fear of being threatened by a huge bear about to pounce on him. If the husband is in his compassionate heart he may be able to understand that his wife is stressed and not saying things in the best way, and that he has been, at times, neglectful to take out the garbage.

The response from our best protection system, from our higher heart, is a much healthier and happier way to live than being swept away in amygdala hijack when our wife tells us that we've neglected to take out the garbage. The ego is very useful and needed for human life. Though if the ego is in charge of protecting us, then we're going to repeatedly and unfairly hurt others again and again during our life. Being protected by our higher heart is not 'rolling over' or submitting to others. Being protected by our higher heart is having an aware, and not an exaggerated, response to whatever comes up. In spiritual circles, the words enlightened and waking up are used. We can 'be awake' when we're triggered rather than being swept away by the amygdala-fear center of the our brain.

## What Is Possible To Do If You've Been Triggered By Me During A Meeting

If you've been triggered during a meeting it's first very helpful for both of us to acknowledge that you're having a very sudden, strong and aggressive reaction (either inwardly or outwardly) to what I said or to the hands on work. We both know that the amygdala part (the fear part) of your brain is hyping you up. This is a very blatant sign that you're not in your higher heart, and that the fear center of your brain is currently in charge of protecting you from *the words* that I said or from the hands on work. Your life is not being threatened.

It's very helpful if we both slow down and not speak too quickly. We can both breathe into our bellies to make sure that we'll release as little as possible of the hyping-fear response chemicals into our bodies.

Then I may suggest that we investigate where in your body that you're most tight. The tension in our body increases when we're being reactive. If our body can soften, then our mind can also soften and slow down. When we breathe into our belly and our body softens, then the amygdala hijack is becoming weaker.

Amygdala hijack is strengthened by quickly continuing to talk and by our body continuing to stay tight. I can assist you through hands on work or suggesting that you stand and stretch to help your body to relax.

If we breathe naturally and if your body relaxes, then we have the opportunity to find 'the loaded gun;' to go within and find what is inside that produced such a strong and harsh reaction to words or to the hands on work. Triggering indicates that a little thing has caused a big, strong and aggressive reaction. Triggering means that the gun is already loaded and that if we just put a little more pressure against the trigger of the gun, then pow .... out comes the aggression.

When we get sent into amygdala hijack, it's a prime opportunity to heal; to take the bullets out of the loaded gun. So even if we get triggered, there are no bullets to shoot and we won't hurt the other person *for saying words to us*. Then the words said to us are a like mosquito bite and not like a huge bear that is charging toward us. We've all healed certain triggers in our lives. Specific things that were said to us in the past and that used to send us roaring into amygdala hijack no longer have that trigger response.

I remember as a child when another person would call us a name like fathead or dummy, the child could response with: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.' We could have a much more loving life if we could say: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' Words can never hurt who we really are.

Group work gives a unique framework to consciously work after we've been triggered; giving us the opportunity to go more deeply into the woundedness that produces such a strong reaction.

### I've Been Triggered By My Teacher, Charles, A Number Of Times

I've been triggered by my teacher, Charles, a number of times. And yes, I've had times where, after being triggered by Charles, I've inwardly said: 'That's it. I'm not coming back. I don't need this bullshit.' So far for me I've continued to come back. I continue to go to retreats and to workshops regularly.

It used to take some time after my sharing was over for me to settle down internally after I was triggered. I would breathe and write, and be further guided to heal the wound. In meeting the wound, healing is possible.

There was one particular time that I felt humiliated by what Charles said to me in group. How dare he say that to me! And in front of so many people that know me. What will they think of me now?

This was a pivotal time for me. I didn't attack. I didn't defend. My body was shaking. Charles and I went inside. The searing uncomfortableness was there; almost terror. Charles had exposed a major dysfunctional way that I had learned early in my life to cope with being raised in an alcoholic family. The behavior was dysfunctional, though as a small child it helped me cope in a hostile home.

Many decades after leaving my parent's home this dysfunctional behavior was still there. At times this dysfunctional behavior was my 'go to' coping mechanism. The energy of that coping mechanism was greatly reduced on that day that I felt so humiliated. By being made aware of the dysfunctional coping mechanism and feeling it deeply, I can now recognize, usually quickly, when it's there and choose to live from who I really am.

I have a strong fascination to why I get so upset when words are said to me. And when I use the trigger well, the healing of my woundedness is possible. I don't remember the last time that I was triggered strongly by Charles, and I look forward to the next time. When I'm triggered by Charles it's a precious opportunity to work with him on what is inside of me that prevents me in that moment from living as who I really am. The Lord knows that I've caused a lot of hurt from being hijacked by the amygdala part of my brain. And the Lord knows I truly don't want to continue that hurt.

### Conclusion

We've all experienced the overwhelming and aggressive response, the amygdala hijack, the fear response, to when someone says *words* to us. Being triggered is an opportunity to 'wake up,' to heal, and to live from who we really are rather than reacting from our amygdala-fear center.

How will you use the time in group when you're triggered? I'm here to support you when you have a strong reaction-response during our conversation or during hands on work. You may feel justified in your strong response. But why a such strong response to just words or to hands on work? Why is there such an urgency to attack or defend yourself so strongly after I've said some words to you or because of hands on work? I would love the opportunity to travel together in the your investigation of why you were triggered.

I welcome amygdala hijack in my life. It's a time to test where I'm at. Am I living as who I really am or am I living from a reactive amygdala? It's obvious to me that when I get strongly triggered that I'm in amygdala hijack, that I'm not in my higher heart and that I'm not living as who I really am. When I'm triggered, I'm at a crossroads – which path to travel? The path of who I really am or the amygdala hijack path? At times I'm not going to take the path of who I really am. I'm prepared that, at times, I will again travel the amygdala hijack path. I pray that I'll be compassionate to myself when I fail to live as who I really am and I pray that I'm compassionate to others at all times.

### Footnotes:

1 Diane Musho Hamilton did a masterful job in a seventy minute online video

series of four talks to guide a person through conflict resolution. This online video is posted at [tricycle.com](http://tricycle.com); including how to work with amygdala hijack. [Click here](#) to go to [tricycle.com](http://tricycle.com) and to listen to the first of the four talks. The first talk doesn't include amygdala hijack. If you're not a Tricycle member, then you can only listen to the first talk. If you come to the Thursday meetings, you can ask me more about how to listen to all four talks. She also wrote a very good book on conflict resolution called [Everything Is Workable](#).