

Trauma Triggers & Activation

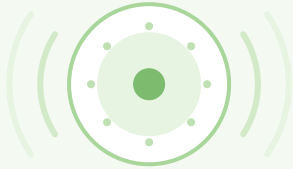
Understanding your inner alarm system

A trigger is anything that reminds your nervous system of a past threat, often without you realising. It can set off a strong survival response even when you are safe now. Understanding how this works is the first step towards feeling more in control of it.

A sensitive alarm

Think of a smoke alarm. Its job is to protect you, so after a real fire it may be set very sensitively, and start sounding for burnt toast as well as for flames. After trauma, the nervous system can work the same way.

The alarm is real, even when the danger isn't. It isn't a sign of weakness; it's a system that learned to protect you.



What Can Trigger the Alarm *and how you might notice it*

Sensory

Sounds, smells, tastes, sights or touch

Places & dates

Certain rooms, crowds, anniversaries, seasons

Relational

A tone of voice, a look, feeling dismissed or trapped

Internal

Memories, thoughts, emotions or self-criticism

Physical states

Tiredness, hunger, illness or pain

Reminders

News, films, conflict or big life changes

THOUGHTS

Racing or catastrophic thinking, hard to concentrate, intrusive memories

FEELINGS

Fear, anger, shame, sadness, or feeling numb and far away

SENSATIONS

Pounding heart, fast breathing, tension, feeling shaky, or heavy and slowed

ACTIONS

Avoiding, withdrawing, startling easily, seeking reassurance

Why It Happens *How trauma memories differ from everyday memories*

Stored in fragments

Traumatic memories are often held as vivid sensory snapshots, not as a story with a clear beginning, middle and end.

Not filed as “past”

Because they aren't fully linked to time and place, reminders can bring them back as if they're happening now.

Easily matched

The brain becomes quick to spot anything similar to the original threat, even a small or unrelated detail.

Four Survival Responses *Automatic, protective, and not a choice*



Fight

move towards the threat

- Anger or irritability
- Tension, clenched jaw
- Urge to argue or control



Flight

move away from it

- Restlessness, anxiety
- Urge to escape or leave
- Keeping busy, avoiding



Freeze

stop, or shut down

- Feeling stuck or numb
- Mind going blank
- At times, collapse or zoning out



Fawn

appease to stay safe

- People-pleasing
- Hard to say no
- Putting others' needs first

Most people have one or two familiar patterns, and they can change. “Fawn” is a clinical term used in trauma therapy rather than a research category.

Resetting the Alarm

What can help, now and over time

Fire, or burnt toast?

Trauma memories can feel as if they are happening now rather than belonging to the past. When the alarm sounds, gently checking the present can help your mind catch up with the fact that you are here, now, and safe enough.

- Where am I? What day and time is it?
- What can I see, hear and touch right now?
- Is there danger here, or is this a reminder?
- What is different about now compared with then?

What Can Help *Different things help at different times*

IN THE MOMENT

Settle the alarm

- Breathe out slowly, longer than you breathe in
- Ground through the senses: name 5 things you can see
- Press your feet into the floor; notice the chair
- Name it: "This is a trigger. That was then; this is now."

AFTERWARDS

Recover and reflect

- Rest, drink water, do something soothing
- Be kind to yourself: this was protection, not failure
- Notice what set it off and your early signs
- Reach out to someone you trust

OVER TIME

Retune the system

- Build steady routines around sleep, food and movement
- Practise grounding when calm, so it's easier when not
- Gradually and safely face avoided reminders
- Trauma-focused therapies, such as trauma-focused CBT and EMDR, have strong evidence

My Alarm Plan *Fill this in on a calmer day*

TRIGGERS I'VE NOTICED

WHAT HELPS ME RESET

MY EARLY WARNING SIGNS

PEOPLE I CAN CONTACT

GENTLE REMINDERS

- Activation is a normal, protective response.
- Your reactions make sense given what you've lived through.
- With understanding and support, the alarm can learn to stand down.

IF YOU NEED MORE SUPPORT

If triggers are overwhelming or you feel unsafe, speak with your GP or a psychologist. In an emergency, or if you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services.

Activation is your nervous system trying to protect you. It can learn that you are safe now.