



Mental Health Counselling Geelong
Focussing on Your Health and Wellbeing

Navigating Emotional Triggers

A practical worksheet for therapy sessions and everyday life

Mental Health Counselling Geelong

This worksheet is for clients and the general public. You can use it on your own, or bring it into a counselling session.

A quick note on safety: Some sections may bring up strong emotions or body sensations. If you notice you're becoming more activated, pause and use the grounding options on Page 3. If you are in immediate danger or need urgent support, contact your GP, Lifeline on 13 11 14, or emergency services.



What are emotional triggers (and why do they matter)?

Purpose of this page: This page helps you understand what emotional triggers are and why they happen. Knowing that triggers are your nervous system's way of keeping you safe, even if it sometimes overreacts, can reduce self-blame and confusion. By learning how your body and mind respond to triggers, you begin to see your reactions as meaningful signals instead of random or wrong. This understanding is the foundation for all the practical work in the next pages.

What is a trigger?

An emotional trigger is anything that sets off a strong reaction in your body and emotions. Triggers can be obvious (a specific topic, person, or place) or subtle (a tone of voice, a smell, a date on the calendar).

Often, triggers connect to past experiences (including stress, loss, conflict, or trauma). That doesn't mean you are overreacting or too sensitive. It usually means your nervous system has learned to protect you.

How your nervous system responds to triggers

Your nervous system is always scanning for safety. When it senses a threat or something that *reminds* it of past danger it can switch into a survival response. This is sometimes called fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

- Fight: feeling angry, tense, defensive, or ready to argue
- Flight: wanting to escape, avoid, distract, or leave
- Freeze: feeling stuck, numb, blank, or unable to speak/move
- Fawn: people-pleasing, over-apologising, trying to keep the peace to feel safe

These responses can happen quickly, before your thinking brain has caught up. That's why triggers can feel intense, confusing, or out of proportion.

What helps: When you practise grounding skills, you help your body become less activated, so you can respond with more choice.

How triggers can show up

Triggers can affect:

- Emotions: anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, fear, numbness
- Body sensations: tight chest, nausea, racing heart, shaky hands, muscle tension
- Thoughts: "I'm not safe", "I've done something wrong", "They'll leave", "I can't cope".
- Urges/behaviours: withdrawing, people-pleasing, snapping, shutting down, over explaining, using distractions

Before you start: choose one recent trigger

This worksheet works best when you focus on one specific moment.

Choose a recent trigger (not the most overwhelming one):

- When did it happen? _____
- Where were you? _____
- Who was involved (if anyone)? _____

The present moment vs past alarm check

Why this matters: Sometimes your reaction fits the current situation. Other times, part of the reaction is a past alarm being activated.

What to do: Answer quickly, your first response is usually the most useful.

- What happened (facts only)? _____
- What did you notice in your body first? _____
- What emotion showed up first? _____
- What did you want to do next (urge)? _____

Your goals for this worksheet

Tick any that fit:

- ☐ I want to notice triggers earlier
- ☐ I want to feel less activated in my body
- ☐ I want to respond rather than react
- ☐ I want to understand where my triggers come from
- ☐ I want to communicate my needs more clearly



Identify your triggers and patterns

Purpose of this page: This page helps you build awareness of your personal trigger patterns. Recognising common situations, body sensations, and thoughts connected to triggers helps you spot them earlier. Mapping your triggers step-by-step reveals the chain of reactions and unmet needs beneath the surface. This insight gives you more control and helps you prepare for future triggers with greater clarity and compassion.

Step 1: Spot your common trigger categories

Why this matters: Naming your trigger categories helps you notice patterns. Patterns make triggers feel less random and easier to work with.

What to do: Tick any that apply. Add your own.

- ☐ Feeling criticised or judged
- ☐ Conflict, raised voices, tension
- ☐ Feeling ignored, dismissed, or not believed
- ☐ Feeling trapped, controlled, or pressured
- ☐ Being alone, excluded, or left out
- ☐ Social situations (groups, parties, meetings)
- ☐ Certain places (school, workplace, medical settings)
- ☐ Certain dates/anniversaries
- ☐ Touch, closeness, intimacy
- ☐ Body-related triggers (mirrors, clothes, eating, exercise)
- ☐ News/social media content
- ☐ Sensory triggers (smells, sounds, lighting)
- ☐ Other: _____

Example: Someone might tick ☐feeling criticised☐ and ☐conflict☐ if they notice they become more activated when a partner uses a sharp tone.

Step 2: Your Trigger Map (complete at least one)

Why this matters: Triggers usually show up in a *chain*: situation - body - emotion - thoughts - behaviour.

Mapping the chain helps you find the best place to *interrupt it*.

What to do: Choose one trigger moment and fill in each column. If you get stuck, start with the body sensations they're often the clearest clue.

Trigger situation (facts)	Body sensations (what I noticed)	Emotion(s) (0-10)	Thoughts/ images (what my mind said/showed)	What I did next	What I needed (but didn't say/do)

Example (short):

- Situation: My friend cancelled plans by text.
- Body: Tight chest, hot face
- Emotion: 7/10 sadness + anger
- Thoughts: They don't care about me
- What I did: Stopped replying
- Need: Reassurance / clarity

Step 3: Look for themes

Why this matters: Themes often point to an unmet need (e.g., safety, respect, belonging, control, being understood).

What to do: Tick any that show up often.

- ☐ Rejection / abandonment
- ☐ Not being good enough

- ☐ Not being safe
- ☐ Not being in control
- ☐ Being “too much” / “taking up space”
- ☐ Being responsible for others
- ☐ Being unseen or unheard

Guiding questions:

- If this trigger had a message, what would it be trying to protect me from?

- What does my body seem to be preparing for?



Grounding and calming: what to do in the moment

Purpose of this page: When you're triggered, your body may move into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Grounding helps your nervous system become less activated, so you can think more clearly and choose your next step.

Step 1: Rate your intensity

What to do: Rate how activated you feel right now.

How activated do I feel (0-10)? ____ /10

- 0-3: mostly steady
- 4-6: activated but able to reflect
- 7-10: highly activated - focus on grounding first

Step 2: Choose 1-3 grounding options

What to do: Pick one option, do it for 30-60 seconds, then re-rate your intensity.

A. Slow breathing (30-60 seconds)

- Inhale through your nose for 4
- Hold for 2
- Exhale slowly for 6
- Repeat 5-10 times.

Example: If your chest feels tight, lengthening the exhale can help your body shift out of threat mode.

B. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - senses reset

- 5 things you can see: _____
- 4 things you can feel: _____
- 3 things you can hear: _____
- 2 things you can smell: _____
- 1 thing you can taste: _____

Example: I can see the window, my mug, the plant, the goal is to anchor in the present.

C. Orienting (helpful for trauma triggers) Slowly look around the room and name:

- Where am I? _____
- What year is it? _____
- What tells me I'm safe enough right now? _____

D. Body grounding

- Press your feet into the floor for 10 seconds
- Notice the support under you (chair/bed)
- Gently tense and release your hands 3 times

Re-rate your intensity (0-10): ____ /10

Step 3: A short “response plan” for next time

Why this matters: Plans reduce the chance of reacting on autopilot.

Complete this sentence:

- When I notice I'm getting triggered, I will first _____, then _____.

Example: I will first step outside and do 4 2 6 breathing, then I will send a short message asking for clarity.



Make sense of the trigger (without judgement)

Purpose of this page: Once you are less activated, you can explore what's underneath the trigger without blaming yourself.

Step 1: Name the emotion(s)

Why this matters: Naming emotions can reduce intensity and increase clarity.

Tick any that fit:

- anger
- fear
- sadness
- shame
- disgust
- anxiety
- numbness
- other: _____

Example: You might feel both anger and sadness mixed emotions are common.

Step 2: Separate facts from interpretations

Why this matters: Facts are what happened. Interpretations are the meaning your mind added. When we treat interpretations as facts, we often become more activated.

Facts (what I can prove happened):

My interpretations (the meaning my mind made):

Helpful prompts for interpretations:

- What story did my mind tell me about this?
- What did I assume about what they meant?
- What did I predict would happen next?

Example:

- Facts: They didn't reply to my message today.
- Interpretations: They're ignoring me / I've done something wrong / They don't care.

Step 3: A compassionate reframe

Why this matters: This isn't positive thinking. It's finding a steadier, kinder, more realistic view that reduces activation.

Old story (what the trigger says):

New story (a balanced alternative):

What I would say to someone I care about in this situation:

Example:

- Old story: I'm being rejected.□
- New story: I don't have all the information yet. I can ask for clarity and take care of myself in the meantime.□

Step 4: If this connects to the past

Why this matters: Some triggers are linked to earlier experiences. Noticing this gently can reduce shame and increase understanding.

You don't need to force memories. Just notice what comes up.

1. This reminds me of _____
2. What I needed back then was _____
3. What I need now is _____



Moving forward: skills, support, and next steps

Purpose of this page: Healing and managing triggers is an ongoing process. This page guides you to build resilience between triggers through small, consistent actions. It encourages you to communicate your needs clearly and bring your insights into therapy or trusted conversations. Setting a next-step plan gives you practical focus and support to continue your growth beyond this worksheet.

Build resilience between triggers

Why this matters: Small, consistent actions increase your capacity to cope and reduce how quickly you become activated.

Tick one or two to try this week:

- ☐ Keep a brief trigger journal (2 minutes a day)
- ☐ Practise one grounding skill daily (even when steady)
- ☐ Move your body in a gentle way (walk, stretch)
- ☐ Prioritise sleep basics (regular wake time, wind-down)
- ☐ Limit content that spikes distress (news/social media)
- ☐ Plan one supportive connection (text/call/coffee)

Example: Practising grounding when you're already steady helps your body access it faster when you're triggered.

Communication: bring this into therapy (or a trusted conversation)

Why this matters: Triggers often involve relationships. Clear, simple communication can reduce misunderstanding and help you get your needs met.

If you want to use this in a session, you can bring:

- One Trigger Map example
- Your intensity rating and what helped
- What you think the trigger might be protecting

A sentence starter:

- When we talk about _____, I notice I feel _____ in my body, and I'm worried that _____.

Your next-step plan

One trigger I want to understand better: _____

One skill I will practise: _____

One support I will use if I feel overwhelmed: _____

Want support with this?

If you'd like personalised support to understand your triggers and build coping strategies, you're welcome to book an appointment with Mental Health Counselling Geelong.

To book an appointment, visit www.mentalhealthcg.com and follow the prompts.