Coping with Triggers
Adapted from Seeking Safety by Lisa Najavits (2002)

What is a trigger?
A trigger is anything that sets off PTSD symptoms, or any harmful behavior

Examples: Hearing certain music, watching certain shows
Crowds
Smells
Darkness
Being touched
Sudden movements or sounds
A certain tone of voice
News stories of injustice

When to avoid triggers
There are some occasions when it makes sense to avoid what we know will trigger us.

1. When the activities or situations are easily avoided and do not add to our quality of life. Example, watching a violent movie.

2. When the triggers may be truly dangerous. Example, going to the party where you know there will be drugs, or calling an abusive person. In these cases, it is probably better to chose to avoid these when you can. It is not helpful to “test yourself” with these triggers to see if you are “strong enough.”

When to (gradually) approach triggers
Many things in life that trigger us are not truly dangerous, but they remind us of our trauma and so they feel very dangerous. Some of these things can reasonably be avoided and not take away from our quality of life. Other times, we may find ourselves avoiding more and more and finding our life’s comfort zone shrinking smaller and smaller. In these cases, our avoidance of triggers may limit the quality of our life.

Examples: Avoiding relationships
Avoiding intimacy
Avoiding social activities
Avoiding leaving the house

It takes time to change these triggers, and to retrain our brain that some of these things can be safe today. In general, by working very slowly, in small steps, to approach these triggers, we can learn to feel greater comfort with a wider range of experiences.
How to cope when you are triggered

1. Strive for balance. With PTSD you may feel too much at times (e.g., overwhelming, intense emotions) and too little at other times (e.g., numbness, dissociation.) To best fight triggers, the goal is balance: being conscious, and in touch with reality so that triggers will not control you.

2. Cope with triggers before, during, or after they occur. The best way is to cope before by preparing in advance, but you can cope well at any time in the process. Never give up!


CHANGING WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE TO COPE WITH TRIGGERS

Who Are You With?
Detach from unsafe people (abusers, dealers). Move towards safe, positive people. Call your sponsor, or a safe friend or family member. Call before, during, or after a trigger occurs (preferably before!) You can talk about how you are feeling, or just discuss “light” topics such as movies or sports to distract yourself. Also, stay connected with important people in your life by carrying photographs of them. If you get triggered, pull out the photos and ask yourself, “What do I need to do right now?”

What Are You Doing?
Switch to safe activities. Try reading, TV, calming music, exercise, taking a walk, or doing a craft or hobby. Keep busy in general by having a structured schedule that focuses your attention away from triggers.

Where Are You?
Change your environment. If you feel triggered, find a safe place by leaving the room, the area, or the neighborhood; taking a drive or a walk; throwing out drug accessories or self-harm tools; or changing the TV channel.

IDEAS FOR COMMITMENT:

Please commit to an action that will help move your life forward! It may be anything you feel will help you in addition to trying one or these ideas:

- Option 1: Eliminate one major trigger from your life this week. For example, throw out all the alcohol in your hour or don’t respond to someone who may have a negative influence
- Option 2: Write a list of your top three triggers and how you can cope with them.
• **Option 3:** Imagine a Star Wars or other fantasy scene in which you heroically battle a major trigger. What image helps you?
• **Option 4:** Fill out the Safe Coping Sheet (See below for an example applied to this topic.)

**Example of Safe Coping Sheet:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Old Way</th>
<th>New Way</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saw a movie or TV show that triggered me.</td>
<td>Saw a movie or TV show that triggered me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Coping</th>
<th>Old Way</th>
<th>New Way</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt upset. I didn’t cope well at all – I got high to escape my feelings.</td>
<td>If I were to try using, “Who, What and Where,” to create distance from the trigger, I could: WHO: Call a friend. WHAT: Leave the move or TV show. WHERE: Go outside and take a walk.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Old Way</th>
<th>New Way</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt better for a little while, but then felt more hopeless.</td>
<td>I’d feel safer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Safety in Coping (on scale 0-10)**

Old Way ______  New Way ______

Thanks for trying out one or more of these strategies!