

You Own It: what to do if you get triggered

Since the topic of sexual assault can be triggering, we have created a document with various ways to stay grounded, and contacts for when you do get triggered and would like to seek help. However, *please keep in mind that the information here does not replace seeing a trained professional.*

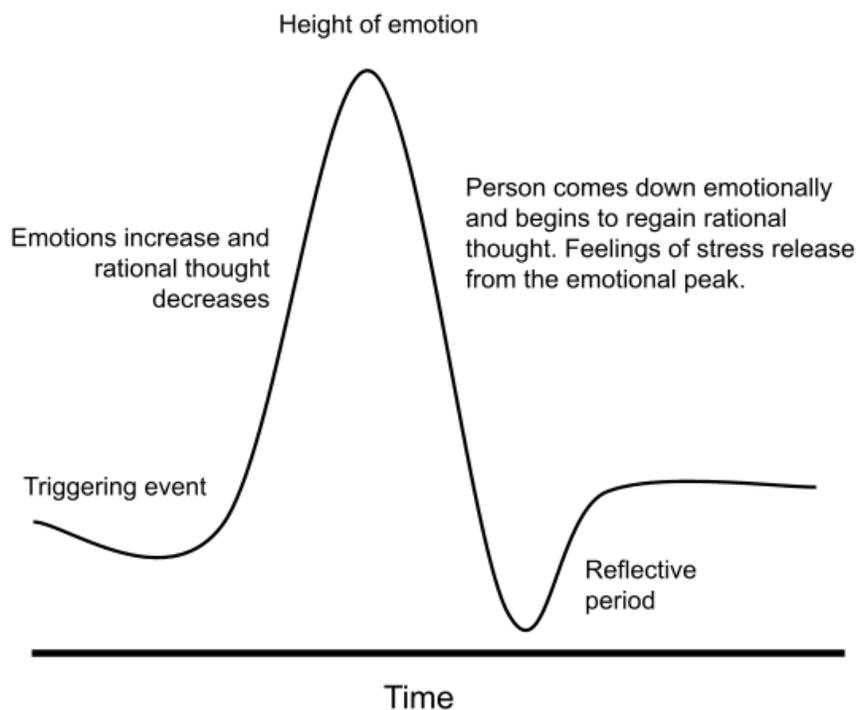
For emergency help, please contact one of the following:

- ❖ **Emergency Crisis Centre:** <https://spoedeisendepsychiatrieamsterdam.nl/> (020) 523 54 33. In case of emergency situations, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, etc.
- ❖ **Suicide prevention line (113):** <https://www.113.nl/english> - in case of extreme emotional distress to the point of seriously considering suicide
- ❖ **Sexual abuse** primary nationwide aid helpline: 020 613 0245

Additionally, you can click [here](#) to visit our Mental Health Resource document to find psychologists most suited to your needs.

About being triggered

One of the first steps to controlling your triggers is to understand how they work. The graph below illustrates the emotional process that occurs when a person is triggered.



The process begins by a triggering event that then begins the emotional response. As your emotions become stronger, you become less rational and this is when any feelings of panic might begin. Eventually, these feelings cumulate to an emotional climax in which you may experience heightened fear, crying, or acting out. As the peak passes, you begin to calm down and feel a sense of relief, and your thoughts become more rational. There is often also a calmer period in which you can reflect on the event. Eventually, you return to a “pre-triggered“ state.

By understanding the process you can better prepare yourself and react in a knowledgeable way to lessen the impact of the trigger. In doing so, you can flatten the emotional peak and as a consequence exert less emotion during this time. There are a number of ways you can do this. Below are techniques that we have found to be helpful in managing your triggers. However, these might work for some people and not others, as learning to deal with your triggers is a very individual experience. We encourage you to try these following techniques, but also to do research yourself to see what works best for your situation. These also work best as a complementary to therapy.

- Walk-through

One technique that may work is approaching the subject from an empathic yet rational lens. The first step is being aware of what triggers you and the reaction it has on you. Once you are triggered, recognise it, observe it and allow yourself to understand why this is happening. Do not be critical of yourself for being triggered, be patient with yourself and remember that this is a normal reaction to difficult things you have experienced. Take deep breaths and try and regain some emotional control. Do not put pressure on yourself to calm yourself down right away, as this will only increase your stress levels. Continue to breathe until you feel your emotions coming back down. When you feel this shift, tell yourself positive statements like “good job, the worst is over and I handled it well“, or “I am in control“ until you feel more calm. When in the reflective period, continue to pay attention to your breath and reflect on the situation. Repeat positive statements. With practice, you can regain more control of the emotional response to the triggers that may arise in the future.

- The 5 senses technique

This technique helps you ground yourself in your surroundings to remind your mind and body that you are safe. This technique usually works best when you are in a panicked and scared state and need to ground yourself. It goes as follows; focus on

- ❖ 5 things you can see
- ❖ 4 things you can touch
- ❖ 3 things you can hear
- ❖ 2 things you can smell
- ❖ 1 thing you can taste

- Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique helps relieve tension in your body by tensing different muscle groups in your body. This works best if you are able to sit or lay down. To do so, begin at one extremity of your body and tense your muscles as you breathe in, and hold for 4-5 seconds. Then, slowly relax your muscles as you breathe out (4-5 seconds). You can repeat a muscle group multiple times to help yourself relax. Move towards the other extremity of your body slowly until your entire body is no longer tense.

- Coping statements

Coping statements are positive words or sentences that are used to replace negative and usually untrue thoughts that might come over you when you are triggered. Thinking or speaking negatively of yourself does not help you improve yourself, nor will it help when you are already in a negative headspace. With practice, you can teach your brain to eventually think coping thoughts when you get triggered, which helps regulate your emotional responses. Avoid negative generalisations like “everything is terrible!”. Lead with positive statements and your mind and body will follow. Some statements that might work for you could be,

“Stop, breathe. I can do it. I have done it before and I can do it again.“

“I acknowledge how I am feeling. I understand my reaction and I can control it.“

“I am safe and this will pass.“

“I can feel bad but still choose to take a new and healthy direction.“

“This is difficult and uncomfortable but I can handle it with slow, deep breaths.“

Do not underestimate the power of the mind! If you think it and try to believe it, you eventually will. The effectiveness comes with practice so do not be critical of yourself if you still feel panicked the first time using this technique.

- Panic journaling

This technique is especially helpful for those who cannot or do not want to talk to others about their problems, as journaling allows the expression of emotion rather than suppressing and avoiding feelings. Writing gives you a space where you can express your emotions in any way you choose without feeling vulnerable and exposed. It can help you process what you feel without worrying about “making sense“; your thoughts and writing do not have to be fully coherent, legible or presentable. Expressing these emotions is the first step to then understand and analyse how you feel, and eventually gain control over them. In the journal, you can write whatever comes to mind, and you can use prompts such as “what am I panicking about? What other emotions do I feel in this moment? Are there underlying fears that I should address?“. What can be especially helpful as well is revisiting the journal to meaningfully reflect on how you feel and dig deeper into what and how is creating pain in your life.

- Light exercise

Unless you are hyperventilating, or struggling to breathe for any reason, light exercise can be helpful in releasing the tension you hold in your body when you are triggered. Go for a walk

or a run, or any situation where if you feel too overwhelmed, you can stop easily. This is a helpful way to release stress, distract yourself, and feel more in control of your body.

- Using smells

Olfactory stimuli can affect your emotions. Choose a calming smell, such as lavender or lemon. Have it be a smell you can easily access. When you are at your most calm, have yourself smell your chosen scent. By doing so a number of times you will create the association between calmness and the smell in your brain. Then, when you feel yourself becoming stressed or panicked, you can use the smell in combination with deep breathing to “trick“ your brain into thinking you are calm. For this to work however, the association between calmness and the smell needs to have already been created, so take the time to begin this technique in advance.