

Couples and Triggers



How to soothe when you get triggered

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When you get to a high level of distress with your partner, or they do or say something that is a trigger for you - you will get flooded.

Flooding is a body based response to very high distress. It feels like a 7/10 or higher on your 'distress-ometer'. You will feel overwhelmed, may keep repeating the same thing and be unable to think coherently. This is because your body alarm system is starting to take over. You can go into

- "Fight" where you may want to attack the other person; verbally or physically or jump into action by problem solving and "attacking" the problem. However, this is done at fever pitch rather than in a calm and mindful way. You might flip into your Bully/Attack mode, Self Aggrandising mode or an Overcontroller mode .
- "Flight" where you may want to run away and hide, physically or emotionally. You may literally leave the room, get in the car and drive, "hide" in food, alcohol or other substances or hide your distress by pretending that nothing is wrong. You might flip into your Detached Protector mode, Detached Self-soothing mode or Angry Protector mode.
- "Freeze/Submit" where you shut down your own needs and give in. You might agree to anything to keep the peace and make the conflict go away or you might give in to the hopelessness and powerlessness you feel. You might flip into a Compliant Surrenderer mode, or a Hopeless Surrenderer mode.

These strong responses mean that you are flooded

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When Flooding occurs your body is triggered and feels like there is imminent danger. This may cause an increased heart rate, reduced oxygen concentration in the blood, and decreased blood supply to non-essential functions like the gut and kidney. These bodily responses are all designed to help you manage severe threat. They are associated with feelings of nausea, shaky hands, quickened breathing, dizziness or a racing heart.

When physiological arousal happens you will have

- decreased ability to take in information
- increased defensiveness
- reduced ability to be creative in problem-solving
- reduced ability to listen and empathise.

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What can my Healthy Adult do to help with being flooded?

1. **Notice** the signs that I am getting close to flooding or in its early stages, what does my body feel like? What emotions do I feel? What images do I have (trapped/weighed down etc)?
2. **Pause** WORK OUT A SIGNAL/PHRASE YOU WILL USE WHICH YOU BOTH AGREE MEANS TIME OUT. Take a break what is at least 20 minutes to allow your body to regulate. Remind yourself that you are safe. Use a self soothing tool (Choose a few from list below ahead of time). Try to really invest your attention on something else during the break, so you don't rehearse the argument in your mind during this time.
3. **Repair.** Come back together and acknowledge you got triggered (if you are able you can acknowledge that you went into a coping mode and even perhaps ask how that felt for your partner). If you have a tendency to flight take special care that you do this part of the process - so the break isn't the end point. Sometimes partners feel like the only time they can talk about difficult subjects is when it's very heated, because their avoidant partner won't come back to it. You can break this cycle by making a repair attempt.

When you return to the situation practice slowing down your automatic reaction by staying in your Healthy Adult for as long as you can. Instead of attacking you can lower the tone of your voice and slow down or start with an "I feel/I need" statement. Instead of fleeing you can try to stay long enough to say "I just need to take a walk then I'll be back" or "can you hold me?" Instead of freezing you can try to stay present and let your partner know what you are feeling or give yourself permission to say what you think.

Need more support to manage flooding?

- Use the 4 step Mode management plan so your Healthy Adult can take over the difficult interactions and triggers.
- Use the Couples and Coping reflection tool to build more Healthy Adult in this area

What can my Healthy Adult do to help soothe the vulnerable part of me when I am triggered?

Sensory Soothing

- burn a scented candle
- go to a garden to smell the flowers
- keep a set of pictures you like on your phone
- read a book of paintings/pictures that you enjoy
- listen to music that is uplifting
- open your window and listen to what is going on around you
- listen to a guided relaxation
- make a pot of tea, a coffee/hot chocolate and slowly enjoy the way it tastes
- have something soft/velvety that you can touch
- take a hot or cold shower and enjoy the feelings of the water falling your skin
- take a warm bubble bath
- sit with your pet and let them soothe you

Emotional Soothing for the Vulnerable side of you

This is best done by closing your eyes and taking your time to immerse yourself in the following image

See yourself sitting with your younger self
How old are they?
What is little you feeling?
What are they thinking?
Let them know that you see them and it makes sense that they feel ...
Is there anything you would like to tell them?
What kind of comfort could you give?

Could you put your hand on their shoulder, sit next to them, scoop them up and put them on your lap?
Notice what it feels like for that vulnerable side of you to have Healthy Adult near?