



TRIGGER REACTIONS



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Wayne Hart, Ph.D.

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Let's spend some time today reflecting on trigger reactions. What I mean by trigger reactions are responses people have, to the behavior of someone else, in which they experience themselves as having their sensitivities offended, criticized, or provoked by the other person's behavior.

I was having a conversation recently with a good friend, Jordan Goldrich. Some of you may know him. He's a very well-known executive coach who specializes in working with leaders who are thought to be abrasive. We were discussing how Jordan helps leaders deal with trigger reactions that other people have.

That got me to thinking about the common way trigger reactions are framed in the media these days. This is June 2023. The person who acts first is generally blamed, for the trigger reaction, that the other person experiences. The first action is seen as a cause of the other person's reaction. So, in the case of the leaders Jordan works with, they are blamed as being responsible for causing that trigger reaction in the otherwise neutral recipient of their behavior.

Not long after that conversation I recalled a retreat or workshop I attended with Bob and Mary Goldie back in the 1970s. I remember one moment distinctly, when I heard Bob's booming voice say, "Nobody can make you feel anything."

That was pretty common thinking back in the 70s. It illustrates the notion that we are responsible for the reactions we have to the events that occur around us. Basically, I believe that to be pretty much true. I admit there are certain extreme circumstances where instinctual behaviors take over. But that's the exception, not the rule.

If we think in terms of "we are responsible for the reactions we have to what other people do," and we take responsibility for "triggering the reactions that we have," we are much healthier. That is because as long as we blame the other person for the reaction that we have, we are putting ourselves in a victim position, seeing ourselves as powerless, and needing someone else to take care of us.

In Transactional Analysis terms, if somebody says something that I find objectionable, rather than blaming them for triggering my reaction experience, I can energize a healthier ego-state and take responsibility for my experience and my reactions. I can put myself in an autonomous position, experience myself as empowered, and take care of myself.

We have a choice. Instead of complaining about feeling victimized, blaming other people for our experiences, and getting society to accommodate us, we can choose to be independent, autonomous, and responsible for ourselves. TA teaches us how to be fully in charge of ourselves so that when we must deal with another person's behavior, we are in the best position to do so.

Thanks for listening.

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By Wayne Hart, Ph.D., Psychologist

Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (TSTA), International TA Association

Transactional Analysis Practitioner Instructor (TAPI), USA TA Association

Senior Fellow (Ret), Center for Creative Leadership