

# Episode 11 What Are Triggers

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Pam B., Lyschel, Bonny

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00:05

Hi, I'm Pam Blizzard from Recovered Peace.

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And I'm Lyschee Burkett with hope, redefine.

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And I'm Bonnie Burns of Strong Wives. We're so glad you're joining us.

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Welcome to another episode of hope for wives. Today we'll be discussing trauma triggers. A trigger is an event that rings an alarm bell that sends our body into fight flight or freeze response, you may experience the consequence of a trigger as a flashback, a panic attack it or intensity of emotions, feelings of anxiety or grief. These are so common to the betrayal trauma experience. And so I'd like to ask you, ladies, how have your triggers shown up for you personally?

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Well, I can share that I had a true trigger that ended up in a physiological response. And the trigger happened when we were in a city where I knew my husband had acted out. And I knew the exact name of the road where, you know, something had happened. So we were on our way to the hotel. And as I was looking at the GPS, I could see that we were going to travel on that road, my heart rate increased an enormous amount. I mean, it was thumping out of my chest, my heart was thumping out of my chest, and I could feel my blood pressure rise. And I knew I was far enough along in this

recovery journey, that I knew that the name of that road had been a trigger, and that my body was having a physiological response, because that memory of that name of that road was still really high in my brain, because of the betrayal trauma, what what I did was I looked at my husband and I said, I am triggered. And he could just tell my my face was flushed, and I was not calm. And he took my hand. Now I realized that if we had been earlier in recovery, and this had happened, him taking my hand would not have been calming. But we were we are far enough along. He took my hand and he said, What do you need to do? And immediately I remembered my breathing exercises. So I started through those and I could see the ocean out of the window. So I looked at the ocean and the seagulls and I thought about where am I? So I was taking in my environment. And I was doing my deep breathing and I was able to calm down. It did not set a good tone for that weekend,

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though. Yeah, triggers are so disruptive. Right? Pam, you said this earlier, but sometimes they're obvious. And sometimes they're not so obvious. A lot of my triggers were not nearly as obvious a lot of that had to do with just the season of life I was in when our last relapse happened, I was in the throes of having little kids at home. So being aware of things was really difficult, because you're just kind of in survival mode with kids anyway. And then on top of that, you know, navigating all the things that come with a betrayal. But some really common or more common triggers for me were things like the garage door opening was a trigger for me in a way that when I would hear it, it would send me into like just this place of apprehension and I would feel so tense in my body knowing because I was anticipating my husband coming home from work, and we were just not in a good place. And so that was a trigger for me that other triggers that put me into like states of feeling out of control or panic, or flashbacks. Like Pam, you had mentioned early on in the definition, things like getting home late from work, instead of him getting home at six, like he said he would be he would get home at 615. And that would throw me into a really significant spiral. But that being late looking at the clock, seeing that 615 And knowing would just take me right back to flashbacks or familiar things and just would put me into such a state of rage and panic and fear. And that would just it would just ignite all those feelings that came up? Well, actually, there was an answer that he would give me when I would do a check in with him that would trigger me he would I would say how is group or how are you doing? And he go, I'm good. I'm good. And that's exactly how you would do it. And it would trigger me every time. I didn't realize it was a trigger. Instead, I would just get aggressive about it and angry. But over the course of time as I learned the skills of self awareness, paying attention to what's going on inside of me. I started to recognize Oh, that phrase, I'm good was a trigger. He has another one where when he's done talking with me, he says okay, and he says it just like okay, and cuts it real short and it's a it'll be a trigger for me. You know, that actually is a trigger even from childhood, because I would, that's a way one of my parents would kind of be very dismissive. It's interesting how they will, like I said, some of them are really obvious, and then others are very obscure, and you don't really recognize them quite for what they are when they first come around. But that's how some of mine showed up.

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I know for me, early in discovery, triggers were so shocking and surprising. To me, I didn't know what was going on. Because what was happening in my body, like Barney described, I was short of breath, my blood pressure was going up, I was having intense, intense feelings of fear and panic. But that didn't match what my logical brain knew is reality. I knew I was safe. I knew that I wasn't in any, you know, there was real, no real threat of danger. But my body was responding and acting in a way that I

couldn't control. And so on top of the fear and the panic, I was feeling, I was also feeling frustration that I couldn't get my own self, my own thoughts, my own emotion, my own body under control. I also was completely confused about why they would show up over seemingly innocuous situations. A TV show we used to watch all the time, without a problem, a certain name would come on, and I would trigger or, sadly enough my husband's behavior, the way he prayed, where his eyes were going, I think I was so hyper vigilant that that could cause me to go into a deep fall. And I experienced my my trauma triggers. The experience for me, was surprisingly overwhelming. Until I learned what they were, how common they were, what the causes were, and what were some of the tools I could use to ride them to apply breathing. Apply other tools to them. What are some of the things we want our listeners to know about the causes of triggers?

07:31

Well, like I mentioned earlier, when I was talking about my, my name of the road trigger, they're caused by the fight flight or freeze response, when we initially go into that threat preparedness like the, when we learn of that betrayal, the moment that happens, the memories that we make, in that immediate season, are kept at a higher level in our brain, so they're more easily accessed. And that is so that we can compare those memories with our current situation to keep ourselves safe. So if this situation is nice and normal, and we're having we're having wine on the porch, and that has nothing to do with your betrayal moment, you're going to feel calm, if like, let's say if he comes in and says a response, that was that was a response during that time, like Michelle's Okay, so we'll Shell's brain, compared that, okay, to the betrayal, trauma experience, and it triggers the fight, flight, or freeze, because it's the same experience. So I guess what I would like you to know is that it's, it's something God made in your body, God put it there to keep you safe. From from, you know, danger from the bear that's chasing you. But neurologically, our brain didn't know the difference between the depth of trust and that bear trying to kill us. So it responded in the same manner it would if you were really physically threatened. And that's why your brain keeps assessing the environment for danger. It's trying to keep you safe. So that trigger is you know, your body being triggered by that sound, smell. Name is just God's way of trying to keep you safe.

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I'm going to use a definition from the your sexually addicted spouse book by Barbara Stephens, and Marsha means. So it says triggers are the situations events, actions, behaviors, or people that causes sense of safety to suddenly evaporate when they enter your space. Triggers can vaporize feelings of safety and make healing from trauma extremely difficult or impossible. Learning what triggers you is an important step and reestablishing your sense of safety when you were offering that all of that explanation Vani, which was really great about the makeup of our brain mediately just makes me think of the scripture that we're fearfully and wonderfully made and how intentional God is. And in things that happen involuntarily, we don't get to decide when we're going to be triggered. And I think that's important for our listeners to know that I've seen clients, group members have an excessive amount of shame around their triggers, a lot of times, it's because they're trying not to be triggered, they get triggered, their spouse doesn't like their trigger. And so they're shaming that happens like you should be you shouldn't be a lot of that you should be past this by now. And those are things that happen that are not voluntary, she didn't choose to be triggered triggers happen, and we don't get much say about it. And because it is an auto response, like Bonnie just described, and so I think it's, that's a valuable piece of information for our listeners to have is to know that they happen. And the reason they're happening is because a sense of safety, like like their definition that I just read, the

sense of safety has just vaporized, they can't find it. And so that's what then leads us into the other emotions that follow quickly. After the the smell, or the thing that you see are the touch or the sound, whatever is the trigger,

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that was a great explanation. Thanks for sharing that I really would like our listeners to know that sometimes you can pinpoint exactly what a trigger is a TV show or with Bodhi, it was the name of a street. And with Michelle, it was her husband's response. For me, it was a shirt, a smell, a location, or maybe even just a memory out of nowhere, there was no reason for that memory to come in to my mind, but I'd be doing the dishes and a memory of a discovery would come in, there were times I couldn't pinpoint it that it came out of nowhere. That's an example of neurologically, the brain is trying to discharge that trauma. And it's just that my brain just set up to hit hits time for a trauma trigger, it's time for you to experience a little bit of shaking and fear. And I think that was natural and normal for me. The other thing, though, that I would like our listeners to think about is the anniversaries. Important dates can be a trigger. And sometimes even if it's not mindful, I've had clients express that they realized that their body just knew there were other things that were sort of subconscious, maybe the weather changed, or you know, certain decorations at the grocery store for Valentine's Day, not even realizing that this was a trigger for them. So they can come from very unexpected places to and that's normal. What are some practical tools that we can offer our listeners to help them navigate their triggers?

13:18

It's something that is learned. And Michelle mentioned it earlier. And that's self awareness. After the initial weeks, I think that we are able to just take that pause when we feel either your heart rate going up, or you start to feel an intensity of emotion. So if we could just pause for a moment, you know, use that self awareness to just pause for a second, and then start to implement some of the tools that I know are going to be mentioned now. That's, that's just, that's like the first

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I think, Bonnie, what you're saying mindfulness is the foundation of recovery and healing for a woman. The very first tool I want every woman to pick up is mindfulness. And being self aware, because if you can harness that tool, I have the ability to slow myself down and essentially do a body scan, take some inventory, what's going on with me what's happening. That's called self awareness. That's all that is, is nothing more fancier than that. Just being self aware. Once an individual is learning how to actually do that, well, then the rest of the tools that we're going to mention, come in really easy. So the next tool would be boundaries, which we've done our beautiful podcasts on boundaries, what we can begin to do is when I am aware what is causing the trigger, then I have the ability to potentially create a boundary. So for example, a trigger another trigger that I didn't mention before but was really important for me to understand was when my husband would come home, I mentioned the garage door. The reason the garage door was triggering is because when my husband would enter the house, he would oftentimes come up behind me and attempt to hug me from behind, which he felt was endearing. When we were in good seasons, that really doesn't bother me, it's totally safe for him to do that. However, we were in the aftermath of a new discovery relapse, I was on pins and needles, that's what was the trigger was the garage doors, told my brain, you're about to be

touched from behind, get ready, put me into a state of hyper arousal. So what I was able to do when I slowed myself down, and I became self aware of all those points, in this moment, I was then allowed to have a boundary, or I implemented a boundary that said, when you come home, I need you to say my name and wait for me to face you before you touch me. Because right now, every time you touch me from behind, it triggers me, and it makes me afraid. And thankfully, my husband was very respectful of that and was like, got it, he didn't necessarily understand it. And he didn't have to understand it, I was just asking for what I needed. And so sorry, I use that interchangeably. That could be a boundary was a personal boundary for myself. But it was also me us using my words, and asking for what I need. Other things are like what Pam was saying about having a movie that you just know, is not a good movie, you're gonna put a boundary around that there are certain actors that we have a boundary around, we don't watch movies with those actors, because they can be triggering for us. And I think also, the other thing is, is being mindful of your safety. When you have mindfulness, you get to sit in the question of what makes me feel safe, because the trigger is telling you you're not safe. So you've got to find out what is what does make me safe, what's the counter to that.

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So in the space between being mindful, and then figuring out how to create a boundary and implement the response, we can give you some tools to just calm your body down. If that trigger response gets carried away, like a freight train, you might go into a panic attack or something like that. So I just like to offer that your five senses are a way for you to stay present, look at something blue to think of a song, or listen or turn on something you can hear chew cement gum, so you can taste smell, some calming essential oil,

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eat pie.

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Five things you can see four things you can touch three things you can hear two things you can smell. And one thing you can taste,

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or you can do the box breathing, which is you inhale for four counts, you hold it for four counts, you exhale, for four counts, and you hold that for four counts. And you do that you repeat that, you know, three or four times that will help your body to regulate a little bit, you know, because it could be an emotional intensity that happens or it can actually be, you know, physical response. But those things help both.

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I think also staying in a place of observation and not judgment, observing, say saying to yourself, I'm having a trigger. just acknowledging that that experience, it's happening in the moment and tell yourself, it's okay to feel what you feel that what you're feeling is normal, don't should yourself as we

yourself, it's okay to feel what you feel that what you're feeling is normal, don't punish yourself as we say, oh, I should be able to handle this, I should be feeling better. It's okay to feel what you feel you've been through a traumatic experience. You know, like we've said, God has designed our body and our brain to help keep us safe. So our bodies in our brain is actually doing what it's meant to do. And we just can use tools to help manage that experience and ride the wave of that experience. Also, if you're having a trauma trigger, you're in the part of your brain, the amygdala is taking, trying to take over and trying to be a red alert to the rest of your body that a threat might be happening. And so even saying out loud, right now, in this moment, I am safe can help your brain sort of calm down can help the amygdala calm down, and help get to a place where you feel safe and where you feel calm. Another thing that you can do is keep a log of when this happens when you have some of your more extreme experiences. See if there's there's a rhythm or a pattern. Does it happen at a certain time of day when maybe you're tired? Or you're hungry? Does that happen when there's certain events going on? And there's two methods But you could apply, you can either avoid those things where you can plan to face them with your tools. And just allow yourself to feel the emotions. Just tell yourself that these emotions are normal and natural, I am not the emotion, the emotion will pass the emotion is temporary. And I can ride this wave.

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I'm really glad you spoke to that, Pam, because the thing that I have noticed is important for myself is self care. And I know we have beat I know some women are like, please stop beating that drum. However, when your self care is in place, and you're doing things to intentionally care for your soul, you will see a direct decrease in triggers, because you're starting to process a lot of the things that do send our brain into that fight flight or freeze mode, involuntarily. Now, some of it is a legit safety situation. But I noticed that I feel much more dysregulated when I have not eaten well, when I am not sleeping well, all of those things that I am in a state of hyper vigilance, like, I remember a particular moment where I had not been sleeping well for days. And then I was driving my car, every person hitting their brakes, I thought I was like gonna slam into everybody like my I was in such a state of tension and anxiety inside that, you could just say that I was in a constant state of being triggered over a river. And so that I think that's really important for our listeners to understand is like, that's why we talk so much about self care is because it impacts everything. And I know that I think I've said that on every podcast, this pack impacts everything. And it does because it's like, do they all just kind of SEEP together, I don't have another way of giving a visual for that. It's important for our listeners to know. And for us to remember that self care is part of the preventive measure. That's going to help you with navigating your triggers.

22:00

And if you aren't aware, we have a whole episode on self care. And we will have it in the show notes. Yeah. And I think part of the self care when it comes to triggers is once you get into the state of self awareness or mindfulness to be able to say, okay, that triggered me what emotion is coming up, when you can practice that pause and go okay, what am I feeling is it anxiety Is it fear, and when you can name it, it loses its power. It's also part of the healing process. I'm just gonna share one more thing that certain songs triggered me. And I could hardly listened to the radio. But I was in the car once driving a long, long car ride, trying to ease the boredom. And a song came up highly triggered me. And I had to find all the blue semis. That was my Okay, I gotta find blue semis, smart.

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23:01

Hey, can we talk for just a minute for our listeners about this is something I see happen in my clients. And I think it's important for us to give more language around this too. For all of us. Sometimes I have partners who mistake feeling an emotion for a trigger. So example, she begins to have the emotion of grief, and she thinks she's triggered. That doesn't mean that she can't use the same tools to navigate both experiences of grief and a trigger. But sometimes I think we use that word. And so when I'm using the word trigger, I'm looking for things to make me feel safe. But if I'm talking, I'm saying I'm grieving, it's not about being unsafe, it's about moving through an emotion. And so I just I want to make sure that we share that for our listeners that they have, again, we go back to mindfulness, slowing ourselves down, what is actually going on here. Now I have had moments where I've experienced the emotion of grief. And it has triggered me, the emotion itself triggered me which we've talked about that as being one of the things in so that can happen. And then sometimes a trigger creates an emotional response. I know it's like the cart before the horse situation here. But I just wanted to be able to give that language to listeners is like understanding that sometimes, especially for women, like Like I've said before, I was just as a busy mom doing life, I don't, I didn't have a lot of margin to be mindful and pay attention. And so as I started my healing journey, and I started having big emotions, which PS scared me to death, I thought I was being overly triggered. But actually, I was just feeling and so I think it's important for us to always have that little bit of discernment as well about what is going on here. Am I in danger? Or am I feeling something?

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I think the hope that I want to leave our listeners is that number one, it is normal. It's kind Amen to the betrayal trauma experience to have that range of emotions, whether it is an extreme trauma trigger, where there's panic and high anxiety, to those emotions that are more like waves that lasts longer. And you may not feel intense fear, but it still can feel overwhelming. I also want to leave the hope that it doesn't last forever, that they do diminish over time, especially if you do apply some recovery tools. And we can leave some some links to some specific tools that our show notes to that can help people and that everybody experiences them differently. And there's nothing wrong with you. If you're having triggers. It's not because you're not strong enough or you're not wise enough, or you know, are there anything is any other thing is wrong with you that this is really common. It's your brain doing what God designed your brain to do to keep you safe. And we can rein that in with the tools.

26:15

All right, here's my hope for our listeners. It's Psalm 27, which we had talked before we even hopped on here, but I think that what the word is offering us is wisdom and direction, in the aftermath, even something like a trigger. And it says The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid? And I would even say or what? When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall, though an army, beseech me My heart will not fear, the war broke out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I asked from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple, for in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling, he will hide me in the shelter of His Sacred tent, and set me high upon a rock, then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me. At his sacred tent, I will sacrifice with shouts of joy, I will sing and make music to the Lord, hear my voice when I call, Lord, be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says if you seek His face, your face Lord, I will seek Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you have

helped you have been my helper. Do not reject or do not reject me or forsake me, God my savior, my father, mother, forsake me, the Lord will receive me. Teach me your way, Lord, lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witness rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations, I remain confident of this, I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, wait for the Lord, be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. So the hope that I want to give our listeners is one, using Scripture as part of our grounding, and re centering and mindfulness and all those things is such a powerful, powerful weapon and tool. But even in this scripture, it talks about when the wicked advance against me and devour me. And though an army beseech me, my heart will not fear. And I think about the invitation that that offers us. Our triggers, like I said before involuntary that there is some comfort that can come from knowing that the Lord knows our fear. And He's inviting us into a place of safety.

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In Pam, my my hope I want to leave you all with is reminiscent of what Pam was saying one of the tools for triggers. I'm safe now. I'm safe now. My personal tool was, I'm in God's hands. I'm in God's hands. And that's from Isaiah 43, which the entire chapter of that is one of my favorites. But the Message version of 43:10 says, don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need for fear for I'm your God. I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady and I'll keep a firm grip on you. And the NIV says I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. So I really love that thought and I'm holding on to his hands. I'm just that little girl really inside. I'm only four. Just holding his hand helped me and he and he will he Yeah, he will. He did he takes it Did he did I'm still here. I thought I was gonna die at one point the pain was so visceral.

30:07

Amen. Praise God. Well, thank you for joining us. We hope to be brightspot on your recovery journey. If you'd like to leave us a question or comment, please go to the contact button on our website. Also help a friend by leaving a five star review on iTunes so others can find us. Bye

30:28

Bye See you later.