RECOVERY IN FOCUS

Triggers in a Connected World

Finding them, breaking the chain · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

A trigger is anything your brain has linked to using, so tightly that meeting it pulls your mind toward the substance before you've thought a single thought. The linking wasn't a choice. Clinicians call it **conditioning**: do something enough times in the same places, with the same people, at the same feelings, and the brain links them together. The link is strong, it's automatic, and it works like the smell of food making your mouth water. Nobody decides to salivate.

Triggers used to live in places you could avoid: a corner, a bar, a house. Many still do. But recovery today has a complication earlier generations didn't face: a lot of triggers now travel with you, in a pocket, on a screen, in a feed. The contact you never deleted, the photos that surface themselves on anniversaries, the group chat, the payday alert. This session covers both kinds, old and new, and then teaches the part that matters most: how a trigger becomes a relapse in four steps, and how to break that chain early, which is always easier than people think.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

CLASS 1 **1.** How Triggers Get Made **2.** Your Trigger List
CLASS 2 **3.** The Four-Step Chain **4.** Breaking It Early

After this session you will be able to

- Explain how triggers get learned and why willpower alone doesn't erase them
- List your own triggers across all four types: feelings, people and places, senses, and screens
- Say the four steps from trigger to relapse in your own words
- Break the chain early with avoid, interrupt, and tell

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to name your triggers specifically, including the ones on your phone, and to build an avoid-and-interrupt plan you'll actually run. Talking about triggers can stir the pot a little. That's normal, it passes, and we'll end each class grounded.

Part 1: How Triggers Get Made

WAIT, REALLY?

In brain-scan studies, showing people in recovery a few seconds of drug-related images lit up the brain's memory and emotion centers **before conscious thought**. A watch, a corner, a song can start the machinery before you are even aware of it.

Four kinds of triggers: Feelings (stress, boredom, loneliness, anger, even celebration) that always traveled with using. People and places (the friend, the corner, the parking lot, payday). Senses (a song, a smell, a lighter click, the crinkle of certain packaging). And screens, the newest kind: contacts and threads, photo memories that resurface themselves, feeds, money apps, late-night scrolling. The screen kind matters for one reason: you can move away from a corner. The phone comes with you.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. Something has pulled my mind toward using before I had a single thought about it. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I have triggers I didn't recognize as triggers until later. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Something on my phone has triggered me. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2

Write about your strangest trigger, the one that makes no sense to anyone but you. What got linked together to make it one?

Part 2: Your Trigger List

EXERCISE 3: THE FULL LIST

Check everything that has a real pull for you. All four kinds.

Feelings:

- ☐ Stress
- ☐ Boredom
- ☐ Loneliness
- ☐ Anger or resentment
- ☐ Celebration / good news
- ☐ Shame after a mistake

People and places:

- ☐ Specific people (initials only): _____
- ☐ A neighborhood or corner
- ☐ Certain stores, bars, or houses
- ☐ Paydays and money in hand
- ☐ Certain times (Friday night, late night)

Senses:

- ☐ Songs or a whole genre
- ☐ Smells
- ☐ The look of certain packaging or gear
- ☐ A taste (including certain drinks or foods)

Screens:

- ☐ Contacts or threads still in my phone
- ☐ Group chats
- ☐ Photo memories that resurface
- ☐ Feeds or accounts that glamorize it
- ☐ Money or banking alerts
- ☐ Late-night scrolling itself

My three strongest, from any of the four kinds: _____

Brianna

Brianna did the hard work: moved across town, new number, new people. She thought she had left it all behind. Then one Tuesday her phone serves her a "memory": a photo from three years ago, her and two old friends, everyone's eyes bright in a way she now recognizes. She stares at it for most of a minute. The phone did in four seconds what the old corner would have needed a drive to do, and she never even left her couch.

EXERCISE 4

1. Brianna avoided every old-world trigger. What found her anyway?

_____

2. What's the minute of staring doing to her, in trigger terms?

_____

3. What's still in YOUR phone that belongs on your trigger list?

_____

_____

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- Which kind of trigger fills most of your list: feelings, people and places, senses, or screens?
- What's one trigger you've been calling harmless?

Part 3: The Four-Step Chain

A trigger doesn't jump straight to relapse. It runs a chain, and every link is a chance:

- **Step 1, TRIGGER:** the cue fires. Automatic, no fault, no choice.
- **Step 2, THOUGHT:** the using thought arrives, sometimes just a flicker. Still no emergency; thoughts are not actions.
- **Step 3, CRAVING:** if the thought gets entertained, the body joins: the pull, the restlessness, the bargaining voice. Harder now, still beatable.
- **Step 4, USE:** the end of an unbroken chain, and by this step it barely feels like deciding.

The chain is easiest to break at the start and hardest at the end, and most people fight it exactly backwards: they let the trigger sit, entertain the thought, and then try to fight off a full craving. Break it early instead.

EXERCISE 5: WALK ONE CHAIN

Take a real moment from your history and name its four steps:

Trigger: _____

Thought (the exact words, if you remember): _____

Craving (what the body did): _____

What happened, and where the chain would have been easiest to break:

_____

EXERCISE 6

Answer yes or no:

1. I usually notice my chains at step 3 or later. ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. I've broken a chain at step 1 or 2 before, even without naming it that way. ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. There's a chain that runs in my life on a schedule (payday, Friday, a person's name on the screen). ☐ Yes ☐ No

Part 4: Breaking It Early

Three moves, starting with the easiest:

- **Avoid what can be avoided.** Delete the contact, leave the chat, mute the accounts, kill the photo memories feature, change the route, move the money day. Avoidance isn't weakness; it's skipping a fight you don't have to have. Screen triggers are the easiest kind to avoid: most of them can be turned off in your phone's settings.
- **Interrupt what can't be.** Some triggers are woven in: paydays, Fridays, stress itself. For those, the interrupt: name it out loud ("that's a trigger, not a plan"), change what your body is doing (move, cold water, long exhale), and put ten busy minutes between you and the thought.
- **Tell someone, every time it was a real one.** Saying a trigger out loud takes away a lot of its power, and the telling builds the record that keeps you honest.

EXERCISE 7: THE AVOID LIST

From your list, what gets removed this week? Be specific:

One contact, chat, or account: _____

One phone setting (photo memories off, notifications, app limit):

_____

One route, place, or routine change: _____

EXERCISE 8: THE INTERRUPT PLAN

For your strongest unavoidable trigger:

The trigger: _____

My naming line: _____

My body move (walk, cold water, long exhale): _____

My ten busy minutes: _____

The person I tell: _____

EXERCISE 9

Last honesty check:

The trigger I've been protecting (the one I don't want to give up):

_____

What it's really still giving me:

_____

_____

SKILL OF THE DAY: BREAK ONE CHAIN AT STEP ONE

This week, catch one chain at the trigger, before it turns into a thought, and run the interrupt: name it, move your body, ten busy minutes, tell somebody. Catching it early once teaches you more than fighting a full craving ten times.

Take it to the group

- What did the phone add to your trigger list that the old world never had?
- Where do you usually notice your chains, and what would catching them two steps earlier change?
- What's on your avoid list this week, and what made you protect it this long?
- Who gets your "that was a real one" call?

Session summary

Triggers are built by repetition, not chosen, and today they come in four kinds, including the one in your pocket. A trigger becomes relapse through a four-step chain that is easiest to break at the start. This session you listed your triggers across all four kinds, walked one of your own chains, built an avoid list and an interrupt plan, and picked the person who hears about the real ones.

Words used in this session

- **Trigger:** anything your brain has linked to your use through repetition: a feeling, person, place, sense, or screen.
- **Conditioning:** how the link gets made. Automatic, like a mouth watering.
- **The four-step chain:** trigger, thought, craving, use. Easiest to break early.
- **Avoid / interrupt / tell:** the three moves, in order of cost.

Takeaway: You did not choose your triggers, and wanting them gone does not remove them. What you can do is list them, avoid the avoidable ones, interrupt the rest at step one, and say the real ones out loud. Breaking a chain early is easy; breaking it late is hard. Catch them early.