

## CHAPTER 9



# Triggers



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**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**

Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:  
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know  
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# Triggers

*"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."*

*- Alice Walker*

When you're driving your car in your neighborhood, it's easy to be relaxed, even to the point of autopilot. You cruise around corners, know when there's a railroad crossing or pothole to watch out for, where kids generally run across the street—you're always one step ahead. When you're driving in a new place, or driving a vehicle you're unfamiliar with (e.g., a friend's car, a rental), the opposite is usually true: you're on high alert, where little surprises can lead to huge overreactions.



All of this became evident to Sam when he and his friend decided to rent motorcycles (that they didn't *exactly* know how to drive) in Chiang Mai, Thailand (where they didn't *exactly* know the traffic laws, language, roads, etc.). Learning how to “go” on the motorcycles was a hurdle, then they had to quickly figure out how to do so on the left side of the road (being Americans, this served up another hurdle). After about 30 minutes without dying, lulled into a false sense of confidence, Sam turned to his friend at a stoplight and said, “We’re really getting the hang of this.” Then they accelerated, rounded a bend, and saw, up ahead in the distance, a massive, congested traffic circle.

Navigating traffic circles, if you’re not used to them (as many of us in the U.S. aren’t), are tricky in and of themselves. Navigating a traffic circle on the opposite side of the road on a vehicle you barely know how to drive in a country where you don’t know the language or traffic laws — well, that’s what this chapter is all about.

In this chapter, we’re going to talk about triggers: what they are, how they work, and how we can best navigate our own triggers as facilitators.

And that last part is the most important—and perhaps most controversial—because we’re going to tell you that it’s not just in your best interest to learn how to navigate your triggers as a facilitator, but it’s your responsibility. If you’re hung up on that idea, let us build the ladder before we ask you to leap, but know that everything we present in this chapter is anchored in vulnerability and courageous compassion.

## WHAT ARE TRIGGERS?

At the time of this writing, the term “trigger” has

achieved its zeitgeist moment in popular media. There are calls for “trigger warnings” in writing and teaching, and a sizable amount of controversy around the entire issue. In fact, in doing train-the-trainers recently, when we’ve brought up the term “trigger,” we’ve noticed many educators reacting in what could only be described as a triggering response. Yes, folks are being triggered by “trigger.” We’ve achieved the trigger singularity: the meta-trigger.

If you’re familiar with the term from popular media, we ask that you take a huge step back, and consider the word without all of the context, prejudice, controversy, prescriptions, or other preconceived notions you may have attached to it.

In this book, **a trigger is a stimulus that invokes a disproportionately negative response**. And that’s it. A trigger doesn’t have to be as extreme as an oppressive remark (though those often are received as triggers); or something that resurfaces PTSD, or a traumatic experience (though, again, these certainly are also triggers). It can also be something as comparatively minor as an eye-roll, a sarcastic comment, or someone saying “I don’t care.”

Similar to how we discussed that no one experience may be universally vulnerable, no one stimulus is universally triggering. You need to *have* a trigger for someone to pull it, and we all have different triggers.

## HOW TRIGGERS WORK

Dr. Kathy Obear’s<sup>1</sup> writing on navigating triggers was,

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<sup>1</sup> We highly recommend that every facilitator read Dr. Obear’s “Navigating Triggering Events: Critical Skills for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues” chapter, which you can find at this link: <http://bit.ly/UTMnt>. All of the

for us, a turning point in our understanding of the concept. It also reframed for us what our role as facilitators is when we are triggered.

Dr. Obear created a model called The Triggering Event Cycle, noting the recursive nature of how we experience triggers as facilitators—and how our poor handling of our own triggers can often retrigger someone else (or ourselves, but we'll get into that in a bit). This is a great way to think about how triggers work in the context of facilitation.

In the section above, we said someone must have a trigger in order for someone else to pull it. Dr. Obear would call this a person's "intrapersonal roots." Obear describes intrapersonal roots as being any or all of the following: "current life issues" (e.g., "fatigue, illness, crises, stressors"), "unresolved or unhealed past issues, traumas," "fear and anxiety," "needs" (e.g., "for control or approval"), and "prejudices and assumptions." Her model has seven steps, which are as follows:

**Step 1:** Stimulus occurs.

**Step 2:** The stimulus "triggers" an intrapersonal "root."

**Step 3:** These intrapersonal issues form a lens through which a facilitator creates a "story" about what is happening.

**Step 4:** The story a facilitator creates shapes the cognitive, emotional and physiological reactions s/he experi-

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direct references we make to Obear throughout this chapter pull from that writing. Further, the traffic circle model that we propose in this chapter would not exist without her work that inspired it, and only serves to build upon the powerful ideas she introduced to us. To dive even deeper into how to navigate triggers with Dr. Obear, check out her book *Turn the Tide: Rise Above Toxic, Difficult Situations in the Workplace*.



ences.

**Step 5:** The intention of a facilitator's response is influenced by the story s/he creates.

**Step 6:** The facilitator reacts to the stimulus.

**Step 7:** The facilitator's reaction may be a trigger for participants and/or another facilitator.

While this experience is described above neatly in seven discrete steps, we aren't always cognizant of these steps happening, and can move through the entire triggering event cycle—from being stimulated to retriggering someone else—in an instant. It's often only through experiencing the cycle several times from the same stimulus that we are able to identify that stimulus as a trigger.

With these steps in mind, let's consider an example of a trigger a facilitator might experience, and how they would move through the cycle. Imagine a facilitator who cares passionately about the topic they're facilitating, and who asks the ever-great question "Why do you think I had you do that activity?" and a participant's response is "Because you like wasting people's time." Ouch.

1. The stimulus of "Because you like wasting people's time" occurs.
2. It hits the facilitator's intrapersonal roots of a need for approval in the content being covered, because they care so deeply.
3. The facilitator sees the statement as a personal attack on them, their profession, and everything they've done in their life.

**4.** This starts to make them want to fight back; they feel angry; their pulse quickens.

**5.** An intention of “giving that person a taste of their own medicine” is formed, and the facilitator thinks of something to say that will hurt the participant just as much.

**6.** The facilitator says “If you were better at your job, I wouldn’t have been hired to have this conversation with you.”

**7.** The participant (or another participant) is triggered, having their competence attacked directly; and/or the facilitator is triggered by their own reaction, realizing they’ve just compromised their own values and ethics. The cycle restarts.

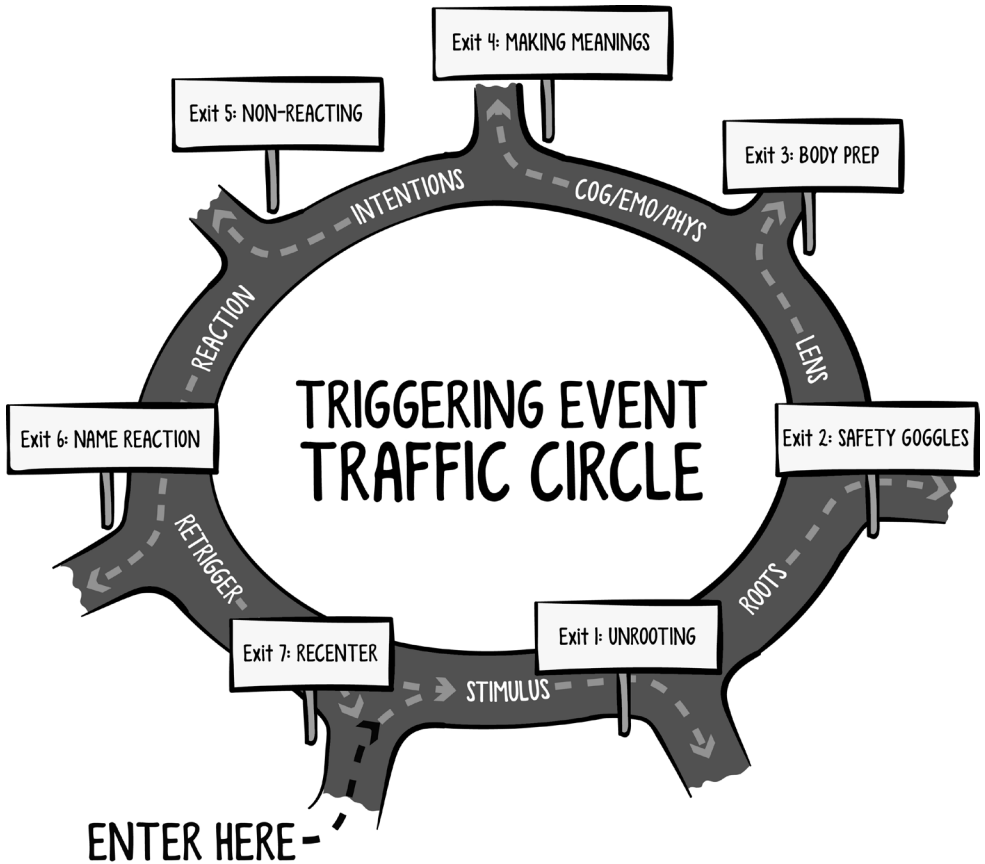
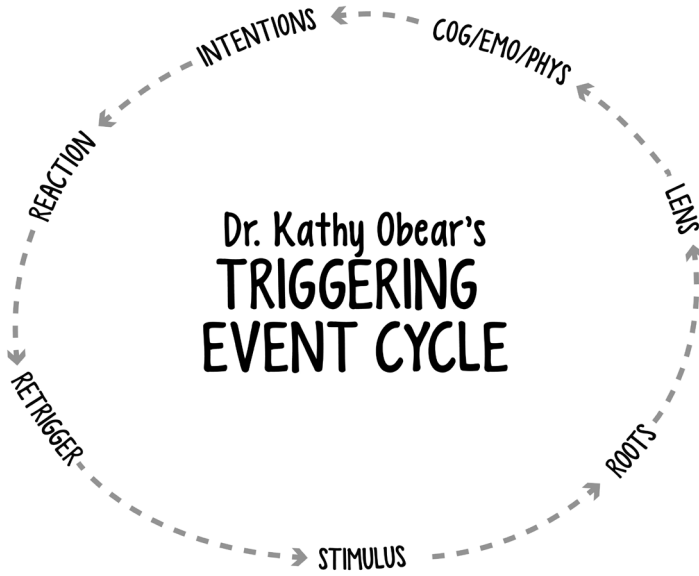
This is a relatively minor trigger, as you’ll likely note. The trigger wasn’t an experience of PTSD, or even that nasty a remark. It was a snide, petty statement. And yet, it had the power to derail the learning, knock the facilitator off kilter, and in retriggering, it has the potential to escalate to a point that it derails the entire training.

So what can we, as facilitators, do to prevent this from happening? Well, we have just the thing.

## THE TRIGGERING EVENT TRAFFIC CIRCLE

In teaching facilitators to navigate their own triggers, often using Dr. Obear’s model as a launching off point for the discussion, we found it difficult for folks to separate “this is a thing that often happens” from “this is how this will always happen.” That is, we had a hard time helping facilitators

Triggers





realize that while this often happens, we're not suggesting it *has* to happen. In fact, that's the opposite of what we're suggesting.

Inspired by Sam's [triggering] experience in a Chiang Mai traffic circle (also called *roundabouts* or *rotaries*), we began to use this metaphor to help folks shift their focus from the cycle itself to the exits we have available to us.

We're going to discuss this model in-depth, but first we want to highlight that the traffic circle itself — the seven segments of the road, not the exits — is the phenomenon discussed above, the seven steps of Dr. Kathy Obear's Triggering Event Cycle. Here they are presented by themselves, in case it's helpful to hold them as separate in your mind as we build on the idea.

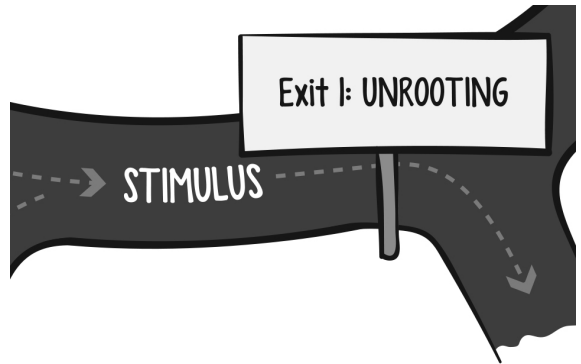
As we said above, in our model, we are going to focus on the exits. With that in mind, know that you can only take a particular exit on the traffic circle provided that (1) you know you're on the circle to begin with and (2) you've made it far enough along to get to that exit. But if you've made it through a step of the triggering event cycle, and raised your awareness to knowing that you're on that step, you can focus on the corresponding exit.

Once on the traffic circle, you have five exits ahead of you before you do something externally that you might regret, another exit that might prevent harm in the moment, and a final exit that might keep you or others from taking another lap around the circle.

We're going to start with Exit 1: Unrooting, which is without question the most difficult exit to take. If you're feeling your hands clench on the steering wheel, know that things get easier as we go along.

## EXIT 1: UNROOTING

A stimulus has occurred. You likely don't need us to tell you that stimuli are unavoidable in facilitation (unless you're doing it really, *really* poorly<sup>2</sup>). Similarly, stimuli that lead to triggers are also unavoidable. They're going to happen. And as soon as a stimulus that is connected to one of your triggers happens, you're cruising along the traffic circle.



Taking your first exit, Unrooting, requires that (1) you've encountered this stimulus triggering your intrapersonal root before; (2) you've had the opportunity to engage in healing work around that intrapersonal root; and (3) through that healing work, you've managed to "unroot" this issue (i.e., disconnect it from your core sense of self in relation to stimulus, preventing it from creating the lens through which you see the stimulus).

The healing work we mention may be anything from internal, extended dialogue, to discussions with a co-facilitator, to time with a helping profession (like a therapist or counselor). This is not something that everyone has access to, the ability to engage in, or the capacity for the time and effort it takes, and as such, many of us will never be able to take the **Unrooting** exit when we're triggered, and will keep

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<sup>2</sup> "For this next activity, everyone is going to take a nap. And I'm going to leave."

cruising along the traffic circle to form a lens. And that's okay.

## EXIT 2: SAFETY GOGGLES

The stimulus triggered your intrapersonal root. Damn. This is already starting to feel bad. But you've felt this before, and as such, you've prepared yourself for just this occasion.



You reach into your mental utility belt and pull out a pair of safety goggles, and it's through these goggles that you will see the stimulus.

The goggles might be "This isn't about me. My job is to facilitate their learning." Before any training, you remind yourself what your role is,

and you decide that you'll take the high road if this stimulus triggers you.

Or maybe your safety goggles are more of the "Haters gonna hate" variety, and you are able to rest in comfort knowing sometimes people are jerks.

Or, if you're like Sam, perhaps you go with the "I blame society" goggles, and you are able to process the stimulus through a lens that it wasn't intentional, it wasn't malicious, and even if it was, the person was socialized to respond in that way. It's not their fault. Similarly, Meg's go-to safety goggles are "They learned that," which helps remind her that they learned what they shared from somewhere (making it not their fault) and giving her hope for unlearning.

Whatever your brand of safety goggles might be, make



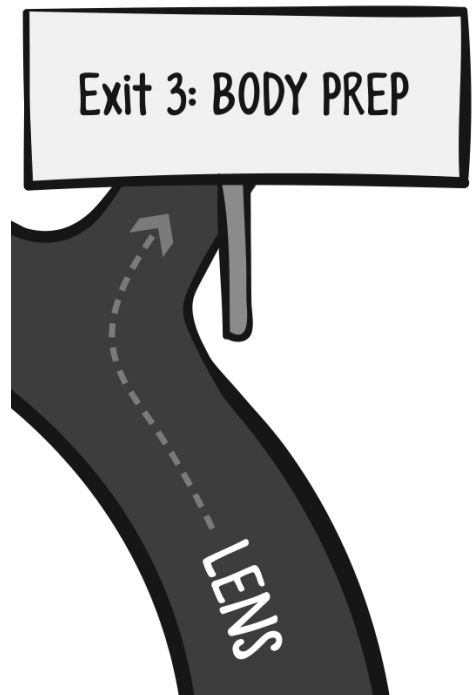
sure they're strong enough to hold up to being triggered by this particular stimulus. And, more importantly, create a pair of safety goggles that are appealing enough to you that they keep you from allowing your intrapersonal roots, having been triggered in that moment, to form the lens through which you'll see the stimulus for you — because it's rarely a safe one.

If you can put your safety goggles on, you can exit to the right. If not (and, again, that's okay!), let's start prepping our bodies.

### EXIT 3: BODY PREP

Your intrapersonal roots formed the lens through which you see the stimulus. Instead of seeing best intentions, or rising above, you have a thought in your head that is less-than-positive. In the facilitator example way above, this is where the facilitator saw the stimulus as an attack on them and their profession. We've created a story now, and we are heading quickly toward reacting to that story. But we still have a few tricks up our sleeve.

As you know (both because you read it above, and because you've experienced being triggered before), the reaction generally starts internally in our body, before it manifests externally. To prevent this from making things worse,



there are a few different tactics we can use to prepare our body consciously, instead of letting the subconscious take control.

Remember back to the last time you were triggered in this way. Did you close up physically? (e.g., cross legs, arms, hunch shoulders). Did your pulse or breathing quicken? Did you get angry or sad? Want to fight back or run away? Knowing what your cognitive, emotional, and physiological reactions to being triggered tend to be can help you prepare your body to get off the traffic circle.

Generally speaking, body prep is practicing adjusting your body intentionally to counteract what you end up doing unintentionally.

If you close up when triggered, body prep is practicing opening: uncrossing your legs and arms, raising your chin a bit, sitting up or back in your chair, placing your palms facing upward on the table or on your lap. If your breath or pulse start to race, body prep is slowing them down: circular breathing and other mindfulness practices can accomplish this. These are prescriptives for everyone, but they are general pieces of advice we've noticed being helpful for many facilitators.

Again, the important thing here is to think about what your body generally ends up doing when triggered, and adjusting your body in ways that intentionally offset those habits. It is you shaping the way your body reacts cognitively, emotionally, and physiologically, instead of letting the story the trigger inspired do so.

#### EXIT 4: MAKING MEANINGS

The story shaped your cognitive, emotional, or physiological reactions. You're noticing this in how you're thinking

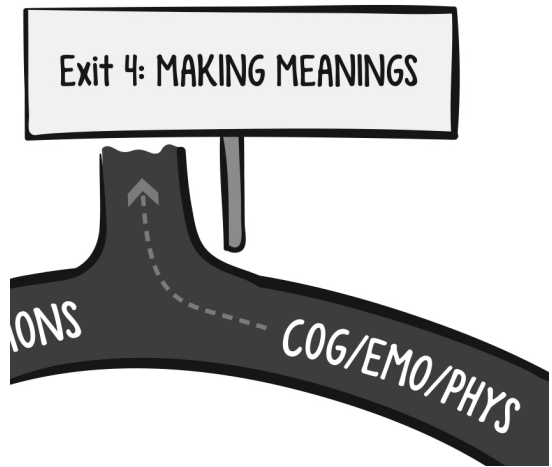
and feeling, and you recognize that you are on the verge of losing control. But you haven't lost control. In fact, you're approaching an exit we find to be one of the most within our control.

Consider yourself J.R.R. Tolkien, because it's time to shape some fantasy worlds. This exit is all about writing new stories (the more the merrier: meanings) to consider alongside the one your body is reacting to. Our triggered roots formed a lens through which we told our body a story—a convincing one—and if we don't come up with something else, it will be this story that forms our intentions in reacting to the stimulus.

When it comes to these stories, there are three important realizations that will be helpful for you: (1) realize that you are telling yourself a story; (2) realize that this story is not reality; and (3) realize that our stories can shape our reality, or our reality can shape our stories, or we can hold them separate.

The “reality” we talk about here is the as-close-to-objective facts about the situation as you can muster. The temperature of the room, the number of people, the ways people are sitting, and the words being exchanged.

The “story” is the meaning behind all of those things. For example, a story might be *it's hot so everyone is irritated; or there are too few people in this training, so that individual person*





*is feeling threatened and put on the spot; or that person is leaning back because they are disengaged; or they said that because they wanted to hurt me.*

Now, with the distinction between reality and story in your mind, you're ready to start constructing some worlds. If in between reality (what's happening) and story (why it's happening) you can imagine a wall: being able to separate these concepts gives you power. If your trigger is telling one story, and you are able to come up with a second one, that first story loses its power. This is even more true if you can come up with three, four, or five different stories. These can be stories you make up in the moment, or ones you have prepared.

A great story to have in your back pocket is "I'm feeling really triggered because I care, and I care enough not to make someone else feel this way." All of the Safety Goggles that you have access to can also serve as stories. From each of these stories, or all of them combined, you can make meanings from your body's reaction, and from your time thus far on the traffic circle, and choose the one that best aligns with your goals as a facilitator.

The more meanings you can make, the more likely you'll be able to exit the traffic circle here and not let the One Story form the intentions with which you react.

## EXIT 5: NON-REACTING

So, you didn't make your own meanings, and instead, the intention of your response was shaped by the story formed by your intrapersonal roots. It's time to start thinking about Non-Reacting, instead of Reacting. This is our last chance to handle this internally, so it's a worthwhile exit to devote some thought and practice to. First, let's distinguish what

we mean by non-reacting.

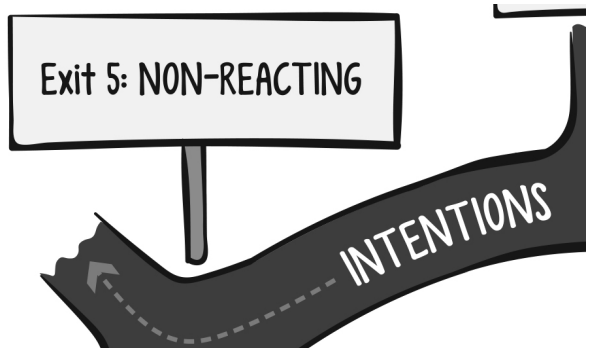
Reacting is the effect that comes after a cause. There is no separation between the two, and the effect is determined entirely by the cause. For example, “If you push me, I’ll push you back.”

Non-reacting is a cause without an effect. For example, “If you push me, you pushed me. That’s it. I was pushed.”

Instead of a cause leading to an effect, another cause might follow a cause, something we would describe as being proactive. In a facilitation setting, this can look many different ways: (1) it can be the facilitator providing a prompt for reflection; (2) asking a question instead of providing an answer; (3) taking a moment of pause, and waiting until a participant acts; or more.

All three of the above practices are what we’d call non-reactive responses to a stimulus, and all three will help you avoid retriggering someone else, or yourself. When in doubt, the third option above is always powerful (even when not triggered), and taking several deep, silent breaths before responding (three, five, ten, etc.) is usually all it takes.

For the first two, if you’re reaching for what your prompt or question might be about, the triggering event you are experiencing can sometimes provide guidance. Briefly explaining what you were experiencing, then prompting a silent reflection, or asking a reflective question, might remove you from the traffic circle. That said, this is riskier, and is something we wouldn’t recommend until you’ve had experience



navigating this particular trigger.

Finally, the most true non-reaction is no response at all. This is a time where having a co-facilitator is clutch, and they can jump in if they notice you're triggered (or you can signal them) and respond for you. Or you can ask the group to respond, "Other thoughts?" is a wonderfully generic prompt. You can take a brief break, if your schedule allows it (we are always pro-break).

Or you react. And everything that was happening internally is now visible, in one way or another, to the group. Hey—we've all been there. Let's see what we can do about that.

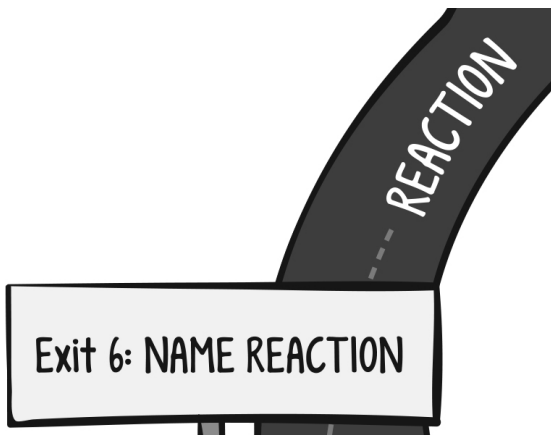
## EXIT 6: NAME REACTION

You reacted to the stimulus. Now it's dig yourself out of a hole time<sup>3</sup>, and we'll give you two steps to do so: name and apologize.

Saying what you are feeling or thinking is powerful. To share what is happening with you in a particular moment

is an undervalued tool, both in ourselves as facilitators and for our participants.

When we say "name," what we mean is to describe—for others in the room and also for yourself—how you just reacted. In naming



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<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with "a-hole time", which is when you respond to a stimulus in a harmful way and don't attempt to make things better.

a triggering response, don't focus too much on the "why," or it may sound like you're defending yourself.

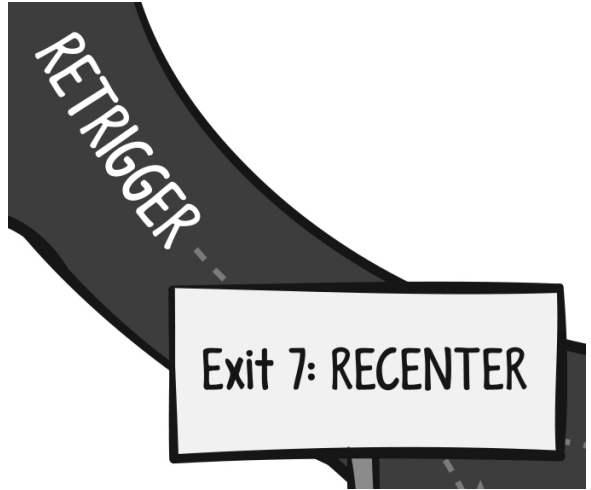
Often, all it takes to defuse a triggering event is to name that it is happening. "I'm feeling triggered," might do that, and can come in handy at any point

earlier in the circle, as well as now. Adding more context can also help: "I'm feeling triggered, but what was said wasn't *wrong*. It just struck a particular chord in me."

In naming how you felt and what happened, be sure you use as much "I" language as possible. For example, instead of "you triggered me," you can say "I was triggered." After naming, move swiftly into apologizing.

Your apology can be short (and it really should be). "I'm sorry for reacting that way." Or it can be a pivoting point to turn this experience into a teachable moment for others, if that fits within the goals of your facilitation. "And I'm wondering...has anyone else ever reacted in a way they weren't proud of? Can you explain what that feels like?"

Our goal here is to prevent our reaction from retriggering someone else, or from retriggering ourselves. But if we can't do that...



## EXIT 7: RECENTER

Your reaction triggered someone else. What are you going to do about it? We have only one thing to say, in addition

to the two steps we suggested above: validate.

If you notice that you've triggered someone else with your reaction (or, just in general, that someone is being triggered), (1) name what you're seeing, (2) apologize for it happening, and (3) validate their experience of it.

This all might sound like, "I'm noticing that you are feeling angry. I'm sorry that my reaction caused you to feel that way, *and* I just want you to know that it's entirely valid you're feeling angry." Or something similar. The order doesn't matter so much as the "and"-ness of it all. Make sure you don't accidentally invalidate your validation by following it up with a "but."

It's not always apparent when you've triggered someone, or when someone is feeling triggered. Different people have different triggering responses. We recommend that if you notice yourself reacting from a place of being triggered, or when there is a statement made that is likely to trigger others, you check in with the group, "How is everyone feeling after that comment?" And, if someone mentions a triggering response, do your best to help them recenter.

## BE A RESPONSIBLE DRIVER

As a facilitator, you are putting yourself in a role of responsibility. It is this choice that allows us to feel comfortable stating that it is your job to navigate your own triggers, and not retrigger someone else--something we would never say about a participant in a training, or a person at large.



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