



# **HOW TO COPE WITH BFRB TRIGGERS – BUILDING A BFRB TRIGGER SAFETY PLAN**

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Triggers are almost a constant discussion in the body-focused repetitive behaviour (BFRB) world. This document will explore what triggers are, why they are a sensitive topic, and how to develop a safety plan or toolbox with coping strategies.

## What Are Triggers? What Do They Look Like for BFRBers?

**Trigger**, by definition, is something that causes an event or action to happen or something that brings something else into existence. In the mental health sphere, the word is typically used to describe something that negatively changes the way a person is behaving or reacting, such as people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who might be triggered by sounds, places, or thoughts that cause them to re-experience their initial trauma.

For those with BFRBs (BFRBers), it is used to refer to something that causes a person to feel uncomfortable or the urge to engage in their disorder's behaviour, whether that's picking, pulling, or biting. For instance, if someone with excoriation (skin-picking) disorder, also called dermatillomania, sees scabs, acne, or other imperfections in the mirror, it may cause them to pick their own skin. Likewise, someone experiencing high anxiety might be triggered to pull their hair if they have trichotillomania.



Triggers can be **internal** (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etcetera) or **external** (images, comments, locations). Because of that, it can be very difficult to manage triggers, especially if you're not aware of what they are.

## **Why Are Triggers a Sensitive Topic?**

While it may then seem prudent to simply label everything with a trigger warning, that is an unrealistic expectation. The biggest reason for that is because people are triggered by various things and, as mentioned, may not even know what their triggers are. With that in mind, a trigger warning would be required for everything.

Another complication with that expectation is when it comes to support groups, such as those available online. People with excoriation disorder, trichotillomania, and other BFRBs are often open and honest for the first time in those groups and end up feeling shamed or repressed when sharing their stories if they're being reprimanded for not having a trigger warning. There can be a cathartic nature to sharing something that's been hidden for so long and being open can be a key factor in healing, so there is a reluctance to quash that with something like a trigger warning.

The community then comes to a crossroads of trying to balance both sides of the equation without leaving one side feeling silenced or the other feeling vulnerable.

## **Creating a Trigger Safety Plan or Tool Box**

Because triggers can crop up at any time, anywhere, one of the best plans of action is to prepare for that by learning tools and strategies to implement when feeling triggered. Doing so helps alleviate the sense of helplessness that can come when facing triggers.

CBSN reached out to Dr. Mark Sinyor, psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, ON, about what some of the best practices are for people with BFRBs to cope with feeling triggered.

“The most important issue is finding something else to do to allow the feelings to pass,” he said.

In the case of BFRBs, the key to these strategies are redirecting both

thoughts and energy. Triggers often are what they are because our minds get stuck on the thought, but they can also cause restlessness and a need for action, which is why we act.

With that in mind, the safety plan may include some of the following methods.

**Distractions**, including fidget toys or using a mobile device to play a game.

**Writing exercises** such as journaling, keeping a thought record, or goal affirmation.

**Mindfulness exercises**, which will help you sit with thoughts and feelings without automatically acting on them. Sinyor suggested the mobile app Headspace.

**Physical exercise** can help release pent up energy and give you something else to focus on.

**Leaving the situation.** That could look like walking out of a room or closing out social media for a bit.

Another way to cope with triggers is to **reach out to our support networks**. That could be as simple as posting in an online group asking for advice or distractions of how to get through feeling triggered, but can also include getting in touch with friends, family, or other in-person support people to help get through it.

Sinyor also spoke of implementing **pre-emptive measures** when you can such as covering mirrors, having something nearby to keep your hands busy, and other such methods that are usually discussed at length in the online communities.

If you're still feeling stuck and not sure what to do, **seeking help from**



**a licenced professional** is also something worth exploring. While there aren't many doctors, counsellors, or therapists trained specifically in BFRBs or that have BFRB knowledge at the moment, a professional should still be able to help you with the basic concepts of coping with triggers.

Ultimately, knowing what your triggers are will help with being prepared to the fullest extent, so if you're not sure what yours are, start paying closer attention. Start with taking note of when you are triggered and how you feel. It may take a while to really become in tune with what your BFRB triggers are and the ways they affect you, but it is possible. Also pay attention to what works and what doesn't when you try to cope with feeling triggered. If something doesn't work, don't give up, just try something else instead.

From there, you will be well on your way to building a solid plan for coping with both expected and unexpected triggers.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BFRBs, PLEASE VISIT US AT  
CANADIANBFRB.ORG OR ON SOCIAL MEDIA.**

## **Sources**

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