

What Are Your Triggers for Abusing Alcohol or Drugs?

Objective: To make more positive choices and avoid unwanted slips by learning about your triggers.

You Should Know

Most people in recovery have heard the term *trigger* before, especially if you've tried quitting or cutting back on drug or alcohol use in the past. A trigger can be a person, place, or object (external triggers); a memory, emotion, or sensation (internal triggers); or a situation (internal or external) that makes you think about using and that might cause you to pick up.

Triggers can often seem to have a life of their own, controlling your moods and behaviors, outside of your conscious awareness: “. . . and the next thing I knew, I was at the liquor store (or calling my dealer).” Knowing your personal triggers is key to self-awareness. And self-awareness is key to your recovery!

Does This Sound Like You?

Angela, 31, is nine weeks abstinent from alcohol. She nearly lost her job as a result of chronic alcohol-related absences. Her employer referred her to an Employee Assistance Program, and she attended a thirty-day residential program, followed by a two-week day treatment program. She now sees an individual therapist and attends AA meetings four times a week. She has daily urges and thinks about alcohol a lot. Angela is making some sober friends, but 90 percent of the people she knows drink, and they don't know about her problem. At a friend's wedding shower, Angela thinks she's "strong enough" to resist drinking, but once the mimosas are passed around and everyone's laughing, Angela starts to feel sad and angry. She wishes she, too, could drink socially, "like a normal person."

How are you like Angela? How are you different?

What were Angela's external triggers? Her internal triggers?

What to Do

In this exercise, you'll identify your personal triggers. As with all the exercises in this book, be as honest and nonjudgmental as you can as you make your lists. Don't hold back. Once you know your triggers, you can make more positive choices and avoid an unwanted slip or relapse.

List the people in your life with whom you might use alcohol or drugs:

List the people in your life who are possible triggers to your picking up alcohol or drugs, besides the people you are likely to use with:

List the places where you might be likely to use alcohol or drugs:

List the time(s) of day when you might be likely to use alcohol or drugs:

List any objects (paraphernalia, books, magazines, bank machine, phone, and so on) you might encounter that might trigger you to want to use alcohol or drugs:

List any specific memories or experiences (a certain song, a romantic encounter, a traumatic event, loss) that are likely to trigger your desire to use:

List any emotions (anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, jealousy, loneliness, happiness, excitement, and so on) you're aware of that might trigger you to use. These can be positive or negative emotions:

List any physical sensations (aches, withdrawal symptoms, cold or flu, pain) that might trigger you to use:

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area of your recovery?
