

Workplace triggers

A quick guide for employees and leaders

Triggers are internal or external *cues* that activate intense emotional, physical, or psychological responses linked to past difficult experiences.

Trigger responses are involuntary, and their deeper logic may be impervious to the person having them. These reactions are often the body's way of saying, "*This feels familiar, and I wasn't safe before.*"

When someone is triggered, this may look like tension, anxiety, withdrawal, or even hyper-focus.

Anything can function as a trigger, depending on the specific detail of a person's adverse experience, e.g. a smell, a tone of voice, an image, an interaction or experience that echoes a painful - and often unconscious - memory.

Common triggers in the workplace

TYPE	EXAMPLES
<u>Environmental</u> : physical or sensory elements that feel overwhelming or unsafe	Loud open-floor offices, lack of privacy, constant interruptions, sitting with the back at the entrance
<u>Relational</u> : dynamics that evoke feelings of exclusion, control, or judgement	Micromanagement, public criticism, sarcasm, being ignored in meetings, an indifferent line manager
<u>Procedural</u> : processes and ways of working that feel unpredictable or disempowering	Sudden policy changes, performance reviews, lack of clarity in expectations, restructuring
<u>Symbolic</u> : objects, language or rituals that carry emotional weight or past associations	Uniforms, certain phrases (e.g. " <i>calm down</i> "), dates that represent anniversaries of key personal events
<u>Systemic</u> : structural inequities or cultural norms that reinforce harm or exclusion	Discrimination, pay inequalities, favouritism/nepotism, poor communications, toxic culture

The impact of unmanaged trigger responses at work

FOR EMPLOYEES:

- 📺 **Emotional dysregulation:** anxiety, shutdown, hypervigilance, emotional flooding
- 📺 **Cognitive impact:** difficulty concentrating, memory lapses, decision fatigue
- 📺 **Relational strain:** withdrawal, over-accommodation, mistrust, or conflict
- 📺 **Physical symptoms:** fatigue, headaches, racing heart, digestive issues
- 📺 **Career consequences:** burnout, absenteeism, self-doubt, underperformance, stalled progression

FOR LEADERS:

- 📺 **Misinterpretation of behaviour:** triggers may look like disengagement, resistance, or poor performance
- 📺 **Unintended harm:** well-meaning actions (e.g. in-the-moment feedback or spotlighting an employee during a meeting) can retraumatize
- 📺 **Underperformance:** when employees focus on managing emotional and physical responses, fewer resources are available for work tasks
- 📺 **Culture risk:** unaddressed triggers can erode trust, retention, team dynamics and psychological safety

Trauma-informed responses for leaders

Leaders don't need to be therapists to bring out the best from everyone. Their role is to foster environments where safety and dignity are prioritized, and where choice and recovery are possible.

1

Create emotional safety

Alleviate suffering and create conditions for behaviour change by making space for all emotions and withholding judgment.

2

Stay curious about behaviour

Trigger responses offer valuable insights regarding the employee's deep-seated values, needs, and motivations.

3

Model emotional regulation

Help stabilise distressed employees by staying calm, gentle, and respectful.

4

Respect privacy

Treat employees with dignity and protect their reputation, without probing for more details than they volunteer.



Trauma At Work Ltd. helps individuals and teams overcome the impact of chronic stress and adversity through trauma informed practice.

To learn more:

- ▶ visit www.TraumaAtWork.com
- ▶ [register your interest](#) for one of our workshops
- ▶ email Adina@traumaatwork.com for a confidential chat.

