

Coping with Triggers

A Practical Workbook for Mental Health & Substance Use Recovery

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A Note to You

If you are reading this, you are likely trying, and trying matters.

Triggers can feel confusing. Sometimes they arrive loudly (a conflict, a place, a person). Other times they are subtle, a thought, a memory, a quiet moment, even success. Many people assume triggers are about willpower. Clinically, they are about learning, memory, emotion, and survival responses in the brain.

This workbook is designed to help you slow the moment down. Not to avoid life, but to respond differently to it. Please remember that no one does a textbook perfect recovery. If you are staying sober, starting to feel positive about yourself, and surrounding yourself with positive people, you are on the right track.

You can return to these pages again and again. Each time you use them, you may discover something new. That's not inconsistency, that's growth.

What Is a Trigger?

A trigger is anything that activates an emotional or physiological response connected to past coping patterns, including substance use.

Triggers can be external, internal, emotional, or cognitive.

Common Triggers in Co-Occurring Disorders

External Triggers

- Being around certain people or environments
- Conflict with family members
- Work stress or performance pressure
- Financial instability
- Medical or legal appointments

Internal Triggers

- Anxiety or racing thoughts
- Loneliness or emptiness
- Sudden mood shifts
- Physical fatigue or pain
- Sleep disruption

Emotional Triggers

- Shame after mistakes
- Grief or reminders of loss
- Feeling rejected or criticized
- Feeling out of control
- Even feeling happy or relieved (fear of losing the feeling)

Cognitive Triggers

- "I can't handle this."
- "Nothing is working."
- "I deserve relief."
- "One time won't matter."
- "I've already messed up today."

The Trigger Response Map

When a trigger occurs, the brain follows a predictable chain.

Trigger → Thought → Emotion → Body Sensation → Urge → Behavior

Practice

Think of a recent triggering moment.

Trigger: _____

Thought: _____

Emotion: _____

Body Sensation: _____

Urge: _____

Behavior: _____

Now repeat the exercise for the same trigger on a different day. Notice what changes.

Core Coping Strategies

Use one or combine several. Different triggers require different tools.

1. Mental Triggers (Cognitive Evidence Testing)

Write the automatic thought that appeared.

Automatic Thought: _____

Evidence For: _____

Evidence Against: _____

Balanced Thought: _____

Bruce's Note: I once worked with a client who believed, "Everyone at work thinks I'm a failure." That felt completely true to him. But when we looked closer, the only evidence was one awkward conversation. The evidence against? His team actually complimented him that same week. Balanced thought? "I had one rough moment. It doesn't mean they see me as a failure." That shift brought relief, and honesty.

2. Coping with Urges

Instead of fighting the urge, observe it like a wave.

What emotion might this urge be protecting you from?

If the urge had a message, what would it say?

What do you actually need right now?

Bruce's Note: I once felt the urge to leave a family event early, blaming it on a headache. But sitting with it, I realized I felt disconnected and insecure. The urge to flee was covering up a need to feel safe. When I asked someone for a real check-in conversation, that urge lessened. Honest reflection creates real alternatives.

3. Managing Triggers

Name the emotion first:

Emotion: _____

What behavior does the emotion want you to do?

Choose a safe opposite action:

Result after 10 minutes:

Bruce's Note: One day, a client told me, "I feel ashamed, so I just want to isolate." But they chose instead to text a trusted friend and say, "Hey, I'm having a hard time." That one small action didn't erase the shame, but it interrupted the cycle. Courage doesn't always look like strength; sometimes it looks like connection.

4. How to Positively Cope with Thoughts

Situation: _____

My Interpretation: _____

Alternative Interpretation: _____

Bruce's Note: A client once interpreted a therapist rescheduling as rejection. But in our group session, we reframed it: "What if the therapist needed rest so they could show up fully next time?" That interpretation allowed for compassion instead of abandonment. Same situation, different outcome.

5. Future Self Dialogue

Write a response from your stable future self (6 months ahead):

Future Me Says:

Bruce's Note: I often ask clients, "If you were six months into stable recovery, what advice would you give yourself right now?" Most say something like: "Breathe. Don't throw away all your progress over one feeling." That voice—their own—becomes their guide.

6. Pattern Interruption Planning

Identify what normally happens next after a trigger.

Typical Reaction: _____

New Planned Action: _____

Backup Action: _____

Bruce's Note: If your usual pattern is snapping at someone, the new plan might be a pause and five minutes alone. The backup? Sending a text instead of talking in person. I remind clients: interruption doesn't require perfection, it requires a plan.

7. Emotional Scaling & Delay Technique

Rate the urge 0-10: _____

Set a 10-minute delay and re-rate: _____

What changed? _____

Now choose a response based on the second number.

Bruce's Note: Urges lie about urgency. One client rated an urge to drink at a 9, but after 10 minutes of pacing and breathing, it dropped to a 5. That was just enough space to call a sponsor. Delays don't solve everything, but they open a door.

4. The 3-Column Perspective Shift

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Alternative Interpretation: _____

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8. Narrative Reframe Exercise

Describe the situation as a story someone compassionate would tell about you:

Now describe the harsh version your mind told you:

Compare the difference.

Bruce's Note: I once had a client say, "I messed up again. I'm hopeless." I asked them, "If this was your best friend, what would you say?" They replied, "I'd say they're trying, and that one mistake doesn't erase all their effort." That story—the one we tell ourselves—can be rewritten. It matters.

9. Values-Based Decision Check

What matters most right now?

- Stability
- Relationships
- Self-respect
- Health
- Responsibility
- Growth

Which choice moves you closer to that value?

Bruce's Note: When urges cloud thinking, I ask clients to anchor in their values. One person chose "Self-respect" over "Immediate comfort." That choice gave them a small win, and many small wins build trust in yourself.

10. Conversation Rehearsal

Write the conversation you need to have — before you have it.

What I want to say: _____

What I fear they'll say: _____

My calm response: _____

Bruce's Note: Honest conversations often feel risky, especially if you've spent years avoiding conflict. But rehearsing the words first can help. One client told their roommate, "I'm not avoiding you, I'm just working through a tough day." That clarity created peace on both sides. Talk therapy starts with practicing truth.

Reuse Page – Daily Trigger Log

Date: _____

Trigger: _____

Intensity (0-10): _____

Skill Used: _____

Outcome: _____

What I Learned: _____

(Repeat as often as needed)

If No One Told You Today, You Are Doing Great



Progress in recovery rarely comes from avoiding triggers forever. It comes from practicing new responses until your brain learns safety in a different way.

If today was difficult, this workbook is still working. If today went well, write down why.

Both are part of change.

You are not trying to become someone else. You are learning how to respond as yourself — with support.

— **Bruce Goldberg**