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## Coping with Triggers

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### **FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT—COPE WITH TRIGGERS**

◆ **A trigger is anything that sets off PTSD symptoms or substance use:** seeing a crack vial, hearing sad music, having money, hearing a sudden noise. Just about anything can be a trigger. The more you learn to actively avoid and fight them, the stronger you'll be.

◆ **What are the most common triggers?** For substance abuse, one major study found that the most common triggers were negative emotions (35%), social pressure (20%), relationship conflicts (16%), urges and temptations (9%), positive emotions with others (8%), testing personal control (5%), positive emotions alone (4%), and negative physical states (3%).

◆ **Stay far away from triggers.** The safest plan is to stay away from triggers whenever possible. Don't watch the upsetting TV show; don't go near the bar. Avoid "avoidable suffering" by protecting yourself from triggers ahead of time.

◆ **Never "test" yourself" with triggers.** This is a mistake some people make in early recovery. They may think, "I'll go to a party tonight to see if I'm strong enough to tolerate drug triggers." Don't do it! Just as you would not test yourself by getting into a new trauma, never test yourself to see whether you can tolerate triggers. It is hard enough to recover without setting yourself up.

◆ **Triggers are part of life—but you can "fight the good fight."** Even if you do everything you can to avoid triggers (and hopefully you will!), some will occur just because it is impossible to live "in a bubble." As you go through your day, you will be faced with triggers at times. The main point is to cope heroically when they do occur. Fight them; resist them; do not give in to them.

◆ **Strive for balance.** With PTSD you may feel too much at times (e.g., overwhelming, intense emotions) and too little at other times (e.g., numbness, dissociation). With substance abuse you may also feel too much (e.g., intense cravings) or too little (e.g., the "pink cloud" in which you feel you'll never be tempted to use again). To best fight triggers, the goal is *balance*: being aware, conscious, and in touch with reality so that triggers will not control you.

◆ **Cope with triggers before, during, or after they occur.** The best way is to cope before by preparing in advance, but you can cope well at any time in the process. Never give up!

◆ **Triggers can be very sudden.** That's what makes them so dangerous. They may appear when you least expect them.

### **CHANGING WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE TO COPE WITH TRIGGERS**

*You can get to safety by changing who, what, and where.*

#### **Who Are You With?**

Detach from unsafe people (dealers, users, abusers). Move toward safe, positive people. Call your sponsor, or a safe friend or family member. Call before, during, or after a trigger occurs (preferably before!). You can talk about

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how you are feeling, or just discuss “light” topics such as movies or sports to distract yourself. Also, stay connected with important people in your life by carrying photographs of them. If you get triggered, pull out the photos and ask yourself, “What do I need to do right now? How will my substance use affect them?”

### **What Are You Doing?**

Switch to safe activities. Try reading, TV, calming music, exercise, taking a walk, or doing a craft or hobby. Keep busy in general by having a structured schedule that focuses your attention away from triggers.

### **Where Are You?**

Change your environment. If you feel triggered, find a safe place by leaving the room, the area, or the neighborhood; taking a drive or a walk; throwing out the drug accessories; or changing the TV channel.

In short, put as much space between you and the trigger as possible.

Create a safety zone by changing ***who, what, and where***.

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*Acknowledgments.* This topic and the major study mentioned in the handout are drawn from Marlatt and Gordon (1985). The concept of who, what, and where is similar to the phrase “Change people, places, and things” in the AA literature. Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate either of these sources.