Think about your daily life while using substances. Many people report their entire day revolved around using. Things as simple as paychecks had suddenly become triggers for drug use. Paychecks weren’t always triggers, so what happened?

Triggers develop from habits you form while using. Eventually, these habits turn into learned behaviors. Let’s examine this process more closely! We’ll start with an example of learned behaviors in dogs.

When you give a dog food, you may notice they tend to drool or salivate much like we do when we see something delicious. The scientist Pavlov wanted to see if he could teach dogs to drool when experiencing something unrelated to food. He began ringing a bell every time he fed his dogs. After many times ringing the bell at the same time the food was given, Pavlov decided to see what would happen if he just rang the bell and didn’t present the food anymore. Pavlov discovered that the dogs drooled just from hearing the bell! Why would dogs drool over a bell? It turns out the dogs began associating the bell with eating (i.e. they knew that typically when the bell rang, food was coming soon after). So what does this have to do with triggers? Similar to the bell, you have come to associate things with getting high. Consider the paycheck example:

Originally people receive their paycheck and do many different things with the money:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paycheck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When someone begins using, they begin to spend their money buying drugs and alcohol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paycheck</th>
<th>Buy drugs/alcohol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When someone uses drugs/alcohol, they experience a high:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paycheck</th>
<th>Buy drugs/alcohol</th>
<th>Getting high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

After the paycheck has been paired with buying drugs or alcohol several times, the body and mind begin associating the paycheck with getting high, even after you are no longer buying or using drugs and alcohol! The paycheck has become a trigger!

Along with triggers, sometimes people feel urges or cravings to use. Some people even report feeling sick to their stomach! Once your body has associated something like a paycheck with getting high, is begins a process of preparing itself for drug use by releasing chemicals that will counteract some of the effects of the drug. When the drug
Triggers and Cravings

stops entering the body, the chemicals your body has released can feel unpleasant and cause you to feel sick or give you the urge to use.

Just as behaviors can become learned, they can also be unlearned. Let’s return to Pavlov and his dogs. Pavlov continued to ring the bell without giving his dogs food. Eventually, the dogs stopped salivating at the sound of the bell because they realized that the bell no longer meant food was on its way. It will take some time, but eventually your body will begin to realize that your triggers no longer mean you are about to use. A word of warning: if you begin to pair your trigger with using again, the association between your trigger and getting high will return just as strong as it was before you tried to stop your use!

Triggers are not always external (activities, situations, and things you encounter in the environment. Some of the most common triggers are actually internal (feelings, emotions, thoughts)! Use the questions below to help identify what some of your internal and external triggers are (you may also use the Triggers Worksheet):

Start by thinking about your cravings to use. Are there certain environments where you feel cravings? Where?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Do you feel craving when you are around certain people? Who?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Do you feel cravings at particular times of the day or night? When?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Do you experience cravings when you are feeling a certain way? Which feelings?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Triggers and Cravings

Your answers to the questions above are the start of identifying triggers for your drug and alcohol use. Why is it important for you to know what your triggers are?

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______________________________________________________________________________
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Look the items you identified. Which triggers can you avoid?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Which triggers are unavoidable?

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______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
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What can you do to make it through an unavoidable trigger without using?

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What are some ways you have dealt with cravings and triggers in the past?

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______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What worked?

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______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What didn’t work?

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______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Triggers and Cravings

You may have identified numerous ways you could or have coped with triggers. Here are some additional coping strategies for you to consider:

1. Avoid triggers. Some triggers may be easy to avoid like the seeing the bar in the next town over. Others may be impossible to avoid like seeing the bar that is down the street you live on.
2. Plan ahead. Many times, you can anticipate a trigger situation. If Saturday night is a trigger for you, plan a sober activity ahead of time.
3. Escape. If you find yourself in a situation that is causing you to want to use. Leave and go to a safe place or person.
4. Ride out the craving. Cravings don’t last forever, although it may feel like it. Cravings are often like a wave, increasing in intensity (till they peak) and then decreasing again.
5. Delay making a decision to use. If you are feeling a strong craving, instead of giving in right away, wait 10 minutes. Re-evaluate how you feel.
6. Talk to someone. Talking to a friend may help you alleviate anxiety and sort out your feelings. If you don’t have anyone to talk to, try writing in a journal.
7. Do something. Do something else that requires your body or mind. Exercise, eat, read, listen to music, etc
8. Challenge your thoughts. If you are starting to think about giving in to your craving, for example “I need a drink to relax”, challenge yourself with a new thought such as “I can relax in other ways besides drinking, like taking a long walk or a bath”.
9. Remember all of the positives of being sober and the negative consequences of using. Sometimes this is hard to do in the moment. Some people will make a list to carry with them.
10. Call a sober friend, support person or go to a support meeting.

Is there something on the list you have tried before? Did it work?

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Is there something on the list you would like to try? Can you anticipate a situation where this might be helpful?

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Remember cravings to use drugs and alcohol are NORMAL. They are going to happen to you! You might not always beat the cravings, but keep track of your successes rather than failures. Remember, it takes time to unlearn old behaviors and learn new ones!