

Navigating Difficult Situations in the Workplace

How to control your reactions
and respond effectively



Program Workbook

Video Session 2

By **Kathy Obear, Ed.D.**

Part 2

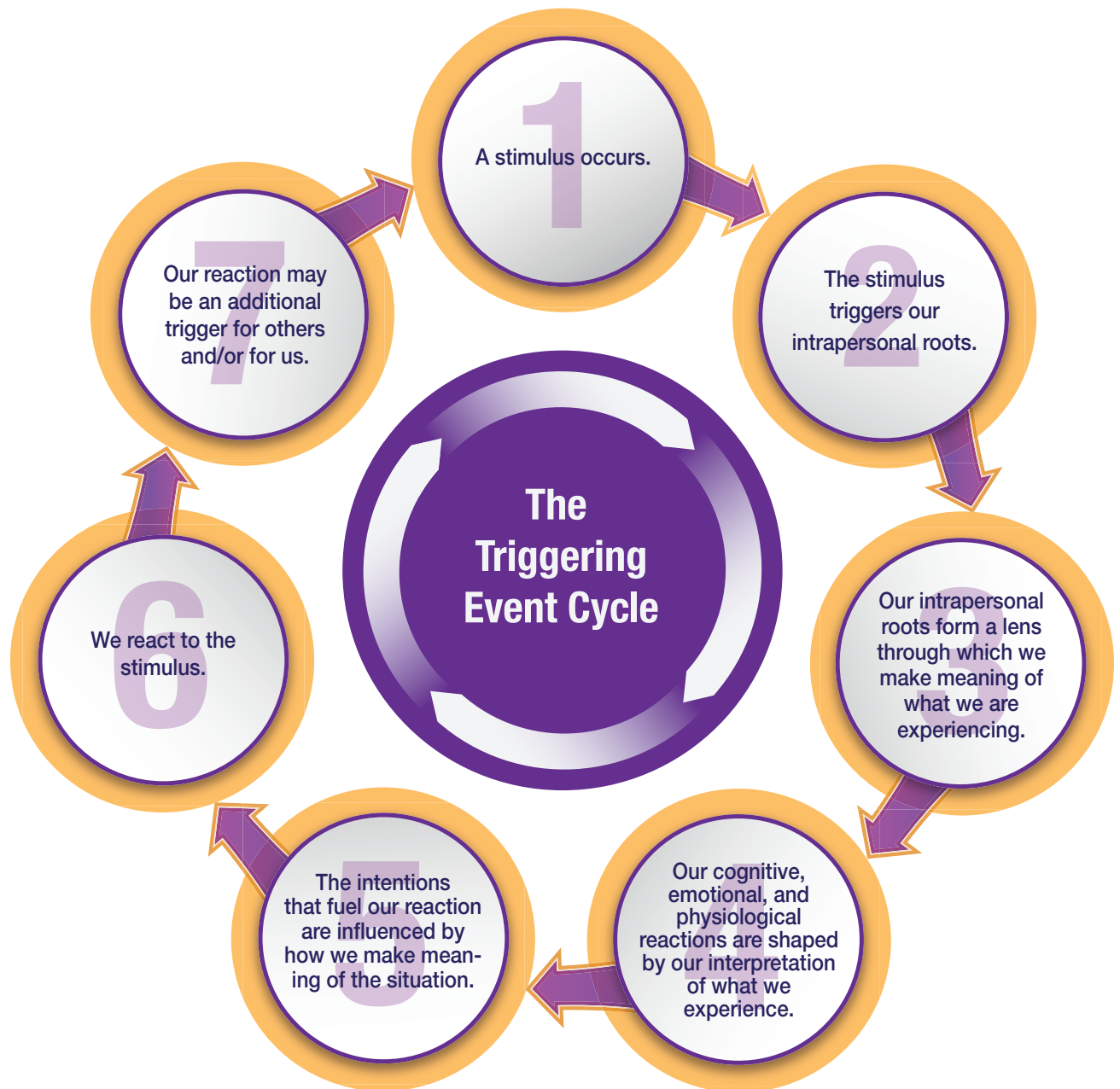
Identify Why You React

Video Session 2

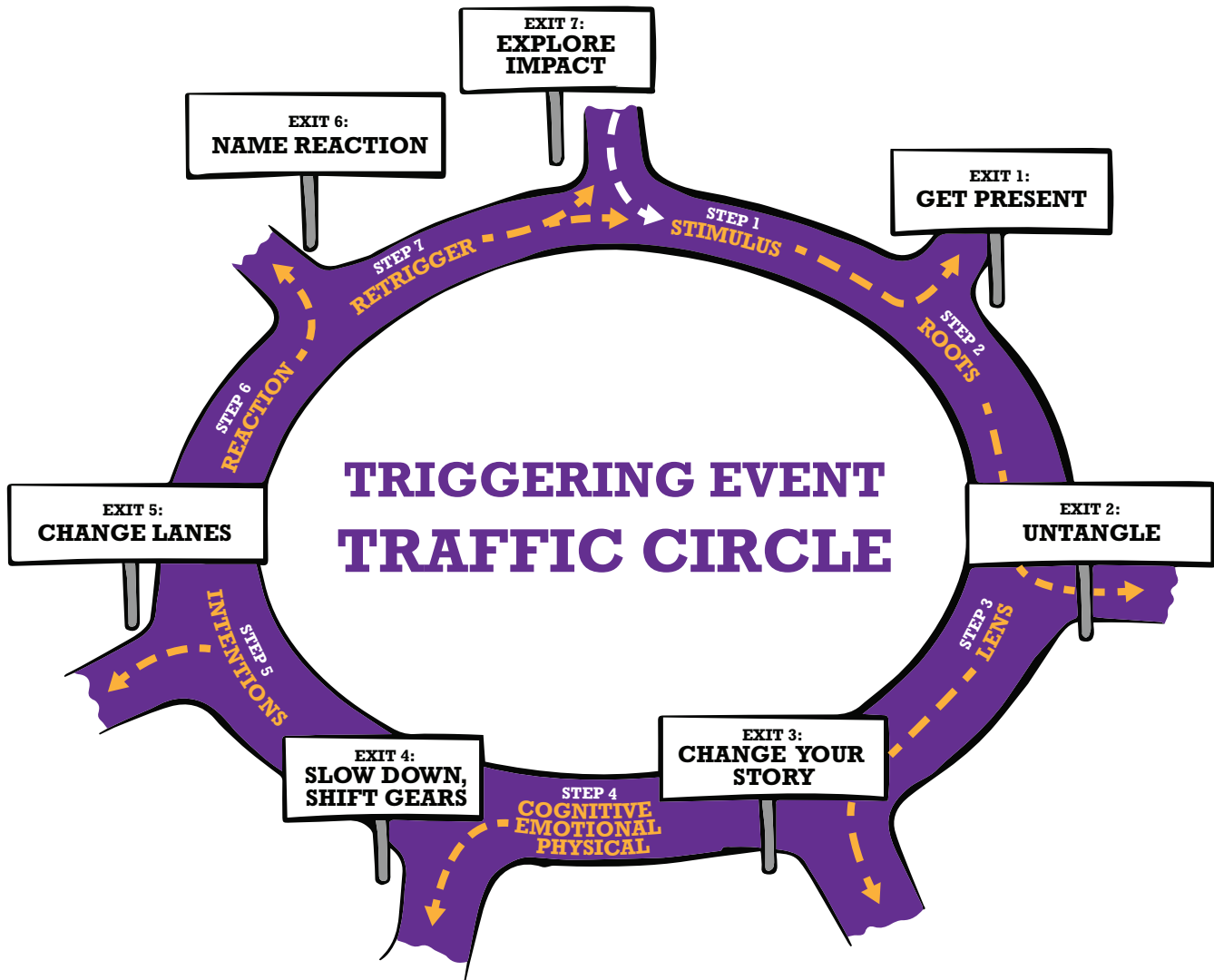
I used to think that everyone else caused my emotions. I gave all my power away when I said, "You made me angry!" or "You embarrassed me!" The truth is that other people's comments and behaviors may "push your buttons," but you have been carrying those buttons around, often for a long time.

In this session you will explore the seven types of "intrapersonal roots" that fuel your automatic reactions. You no longer have to feel out of control and overwhelmed. You can take back your power and choose how you want to respond.

The Triggering Event Cycle

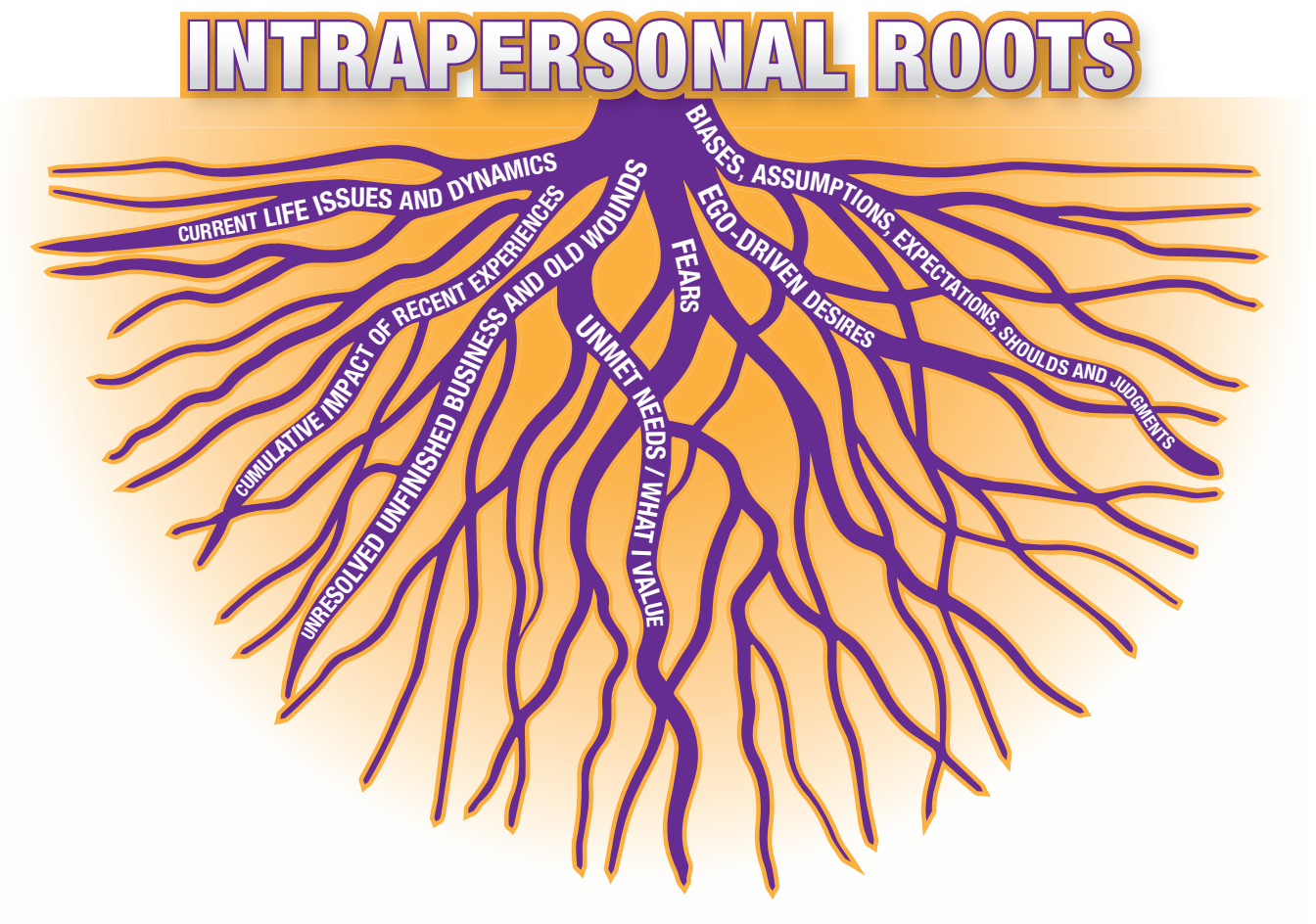


Triggering Event Traffic Circle



Adapted from graphic developed by Sam Killermann
in *Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation*. Used with permission.

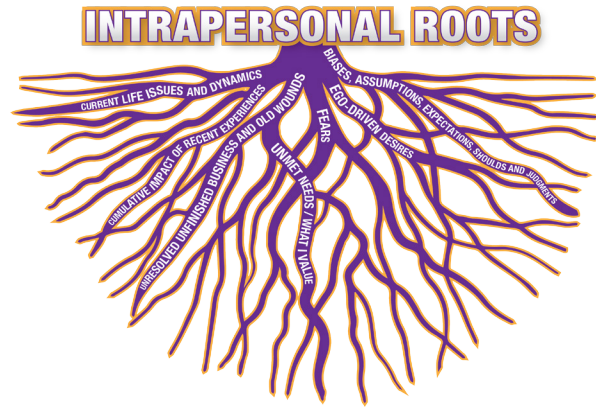
Intrapersonal Roots



Identifying Your Intrapersonal “Roots”

Directions: Think about a recent triggering situation in the workplace. As you review each of the 7 types of intrapersonal roots, make some notes about what you believe were possibly the various factors or “roots” that contributed to your feeling triggered.

Root 1: Current Life Issues and Dynamics



When things are going well in our lives, we are generally less likely to feel triggered and we let comments “roll off our backs.” But when daily stressors build up and deplete our protective shield, we are far more likely to feel triggered. Examples of current life issues and dynamics include: financial concerns, fatigue and burnout, relationship dynamics, illness, problems at work or among family members, deadlines, and angst over national or world crises.

Question: A helpful question to ask ourselves when we feel triggered is, “How might the current dynamics and issues in my life be impacting my ability to feel centered and respond effectively in this moment?”

Directions: What are some of the current life issues and dynamics that may have contributed to your susceptibility to being triggered?



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UNWET MEETS WHAT NATURE

CURRENT LIFE ISSUES AND DYNAMICS

BIASES, ASSUMPTIONS, EXPECTATIONS, SHOULD AND OUGHTS

FEARS

EGO-DRIVEN DESIRES

CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF RECENT EXPERIENCES

UNRESOLVED UNFINISHED BUSINESS AND OLD WOUNDS

COPING STRATEGIES

This intrapersonal root involves the cumulative impact from similar situations that occur within a short period of time, like the “final straw.” If we hold in or stuff our emotional reactions to earlier incidents, our feelings build up over time. The intensity of our triggered reaction in the moment may be disproportionate to the current circumstance because we are reacting out of the cumulative impact of several previous situations. These similar situations may be related to the same person or different people. They may have happened to us or to people we know and care about.

Directions: What are some of the recent triggering situations that may have contributed to the cumulative impact you experienced in this moment?



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Recognizing Cumulative Impact

Directions: Think about a time you felt triggered that may have been related to cumulative impact. Make some notes below:

(-) Negative Triggered Emotions

Positive Triggered Emotions (+)

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
High			Moderate			Mild			Mild			Moderate			High					

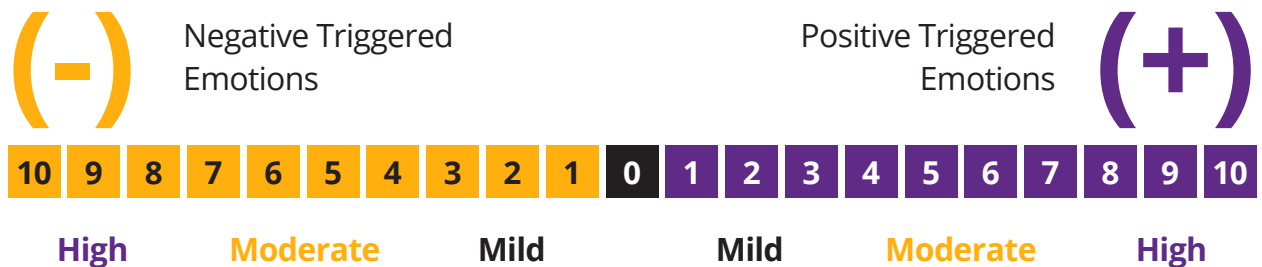
- How triggered did you feel the first time it happened?
 - The second?
 - The third?
 - The fourth?

How effectively did you respond each time?

[illegible]

Recognizing the Impact of Social Identity Groups

The social identity groups of the person whose behavior is the source of our trigger is usually a significant factor in how emotional we feel. We may be more or less reactive given their combination of group memberships, including their age, hierarchical position, years of experience, race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, disability status, religion/spiritual practice, etc. Given the same behavior, we give some people a pass and the benefit of the doubt while, for others, we may have a more intense reaction.



Directions: Use the -10 to +10 scale to note how triggered you might feel given the different social identity groups of the various people involved. In addition, note 1-2 reasons for your varying reactions.

- Someone challenges and criticizes you as you are making a presentation.

Would you feel any differently if the comments came from someone who was a male colleague? Or one of the youngest members of the group? Or a close female friend of yours?



- Someone is having a side conversation during a meeting while you are talking.

Would you feel any differently if the behaviors were from your supervisor? Or from someone who is a different sex or race than you? Or an older, more experienced colleague you do not particularly like?



- During a casual lunch, a colleague is making demeaning and belittling comments about another co-worker.

Would you feel any differently if the colleague is female, male or transgender? A brand new employee? Or the executive secretary to the leader?



Social Identity Groups Matter

Directions: Think about a difficult workplace situation in which you had an intense emotional reaction and make some notes below:

Briefly describe the situation.



How intense was your emotional reaction on the scale -10 to +10?



What were the key social identity groups of the key people involved?



Imagine what different social identity groups of those involved might have resulted in your:

➤ Feeling less emotional?



- Feeling more emotional?



Why do you think you might have had these varying reactions, given the different social identity groups of those involved?



As you continue to reflect on your common triggers, it is useful to think about the following questions:

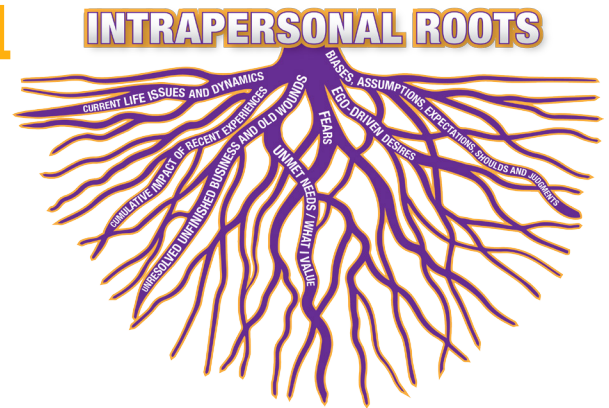
- Do you have the same level of emotional reactions to everyone who exhibits this behavior?



- Are there patterns related to the social identity groups of the people involved in these difficult situations that may cause you to feel more or less emotional?



Root 3: Unresolved Unfinished Business and Old Wounds



I may have pushed my buttons, but I didn't install them.

– Marshall Rosenberg

Current situations may reactivate memories and emotions from our past. If we do not feel resolved around past situations it is like we wear them on our bodies like “buttons” that can be pushed by others. When we have “hooked our history” we may unconsciously relive the past event in the moment. As a result, our triggered reactions are more directly connected to these unresolved issues, not necessarily to what is occurring in the present moment.

Question: During times I wonder if I may have restimulated old issues and wounds, it is useful to ask myself, “How, if at all, does this situation remind me of any old, unresolved issues or past traumas?” “Who comes to mind as I think about the possible connection between the current situation and old issues or wounds?” and “How is this person a mirror of me?”

Directions: Below, think about a difficult situation. Note the possible unresolved old issues and unfinished business that may have been retriggered in this situation.



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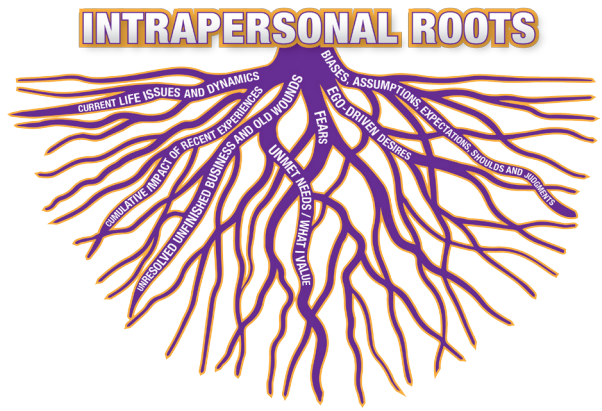
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Root 3: Identify Unresolved Issues and Old Wounds



Directions: Recognizing how our current reactions may be powered by unresolved old wounds and unfinished business can help us to differentiate between the retriggered roots and what is actually occurring in the present moment. Take some time to create a quiet comfortable, supportive, and safe space for yourself. When you feel centered and present, think about a time you felt deeply triggered and reflect on the following questions:

Does this situation remind me of one or more past experiences?



Do any specific people from my past come to mind as I think about this current incident?



The following prompts may be helpful when you identify an old issue or situation that feels connected to a current trigger:

Write out the details of the old situation. (Choose a format that you are confident will be secure and confidential.)

Who was involved?



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What happened?



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How did you feel?



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How did you react?



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Did anyone speak up or try to help/support you?



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How were you impacted by this situation?



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As specifically as you can be, write out what you now wish you had said or done in that situation.



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Write about what you wish someone else had done to interrupt the situation and/or support you in the process.



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Then write out what you would like to say to this person(s) now if you had the opportunity (I am not recommending you confront them, just that you reclaim your voice and personal power.)



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What feelings are coming up for you as you reflect and write about this situation? (Give yourself the gift of release and express these feelings fully ~ to a trusted friend or counselor; through art; as you go running; or by yourself in a safe, comfortable space.)



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After you have identified and expressed your feelings, you may gain some deeper insights into the situation and yourself. It may be helpful to collect these in a journal or below.



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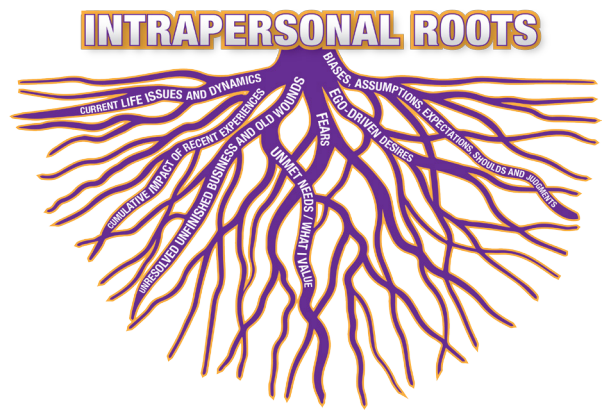
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Root 4: Identify Your Fears



When we are carrying any fear or anxiety into a situation we are more likely to feel triggered than during times we are centered, grounded, and confident. Deepening our capacity to identify the types of fears that may be driving our triggered reactions can help us more quickly recognize them in the moment and increase our ability to choose courage over fear.

Question: It is important that we identify the fears and anxieties that could be the root of our triggered reactions. Helpful questions to ask include, “What am I afraid could happen?” and “What am I afraid of losing?” After recognizing each fear, it can be useful to use the tool called the “Ladder of Fear” to search for any deeper issues or anxieties by asking over and over, “So if this fear were to come true, then what else am I afraid could happen?”

Directions: Review each fear below and check off (☑) all that feel familiar to you:

- ☐ My personal issues will become the focus of the conversation: all eyes will be on me.
- ☐ I will lose credibility
- ☐ If I cry and show emotion, people will think less of me....
- ☐ I won't be able to manage the situation.
- ☐ The conversation will “get out of control.”
- ☐ I won't know enough
- ☐ If I challenge, I will be alone without any support.
- ☐ I won't be able to express myself clearly; I'll be misunderstood.
- ☐ If I am too confrontational or angry, then people will judge me, be mad at me, reject me, ostracize me, etc.

Step 2: Identify Your Fears, page 2 of 3

- ☐ I will be seen as incompetent and “not good enough.”
- ☐ I'll let people down.
- ☐ People won't like me or approve of me. Things won't change.
- ☐ I will make a mistake and be wrong.
- ☐ People will be disappointed in me.
- ☐ If I don't handle this well, people could be hurt.
- ☐ Things will be worse off than before.
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

Next, reflect on how you reacted in a recent difficult situation that you think may have been fueled by some of your fears. Review the lists of fears as you write about the following:

What fears and anxieties might you have brought into this situation?



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What fears and anxieties may have been restimulated by the triggering situation?



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How did you react based on these fears and anxieties?



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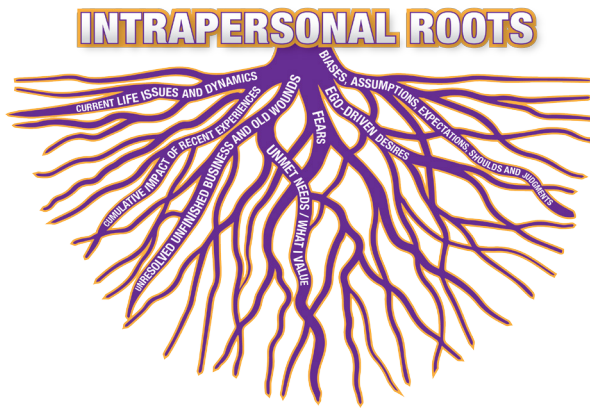
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Root 5: Unmet Needs/ What I Value

I am grateful to Marshall Rosenberg for his work in NVC, Nonviolent Communication, in which he identified a full range of needs and values that he believed to be universal human needs. If some of our core needs or values are not being met in a situation, we could be triggered.

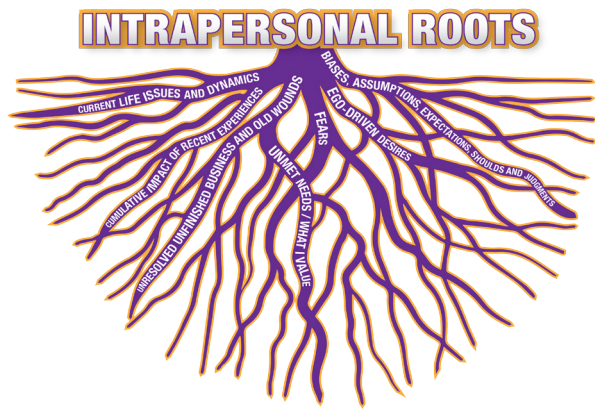
Question: When we feel triggered it is helpful to pause and search for any of our unmet needs or values. Helpful questions include, “What might be my unmet needs in this moment?” and “What do I value that is not being honored right now?”

Directions: Think back to a situation at work in which you behaved in ways you wished you hadn’t. Check off (☑) all of the needs and values that were not being met in this triggering situation, and add any additional ones below:

- ☐ Respect, dignity
- ☐ Trust
- ☐ Planning, order
- ☐ Fairness
- ☐ Clarity, understanding
- ☐ Openness, honesty
- ☐ Direct communication
- ☐ Respectful disagreement
- ☐ Recognition, acknowledgment

- ☐ Appreciation
- ☐ Competence, effectiveness
- ☐ Success, to make a difference
- ☐ To be kept informed and updated
- ☐ Harmony, peace of mind
- ☐ Safety, security
- ☐ Integrity
- ☐ Innovation and creativity
- ☐ Ease and simplicity
- ☐ Connection
- ☐ Mutuality, partnering, collaboration
- ☐ Approval
- ☐ Acceptance, belonging
- ☐ Inclusion
- ☐ Consideration
- ☐ Dependability, follow-through

Rosenberg, M. (2005). Nonviolent communication: A language of love. Encinitas, CA: Puddle.



Root 6: Identify Your Ego-driven Desires

As many of us were growing up we may have learned some very useful skills and tools to take care of ourselves and navigate our lives. However, it is also common that we also developed some unproductive survival strategies in response to any number of dysfunctional and unsafe situations. Although some of these beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors may have helped keep us safe and out of harm's way in the past, most likely they are no longer productive approaches for meeting our core human needs of self-worth, safety, belonging, and mattering.

I use the term “ego-driven desires” to describe this intrapersonal root and the constellation of dysfunctional thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that often fuel ineffective triggered reactions. In contrast to the needs and values that add value to our lives and those of others, these ego-driven desires often result in win-lose, power-over situations that only “benefit” some at the expense of others.

Question: In moments when our triggered reactions are fueled by ego-driven desires, we are over-focused on getting what we want and may have little or no concern for the needs of others or how our behaviors negatively impact them. Questions to examine if we are reacting out of ego-driven desires, include: “Am I focused on what would be helpful to others or on what I think should happen, regardless of the impact on them?” “Am I more concerned about how I will be judged and evaluated than on achieving productive goals and outcomes?” and “Am I over-emphasizing my desire for acceptance, approval, and control with little thought to how my actions impact others?”

Which of the following ego-driven desires feel familiar?

Power and Control

- To be in control
- To reassert or regain power and authority
- To win the argument at all costs
- To prove others wrong
- To get my way
- To make people change and learn
- To make others do as I think they should
- To gain certainty and predictability

Status and Approval


- To be right
- To prove I am competent
- To be perfect
- To be seen as the expert
- To gain prestige and status
- To gain the approval of others
- To look good, competent, or acceptable

Belonging and Admiration

- To be liked at all costs
- To be admired and revered by others
- To avoid disgrace by any means necessary
- To create harmony and avoid dissatisfaction at all costs
- To keep people happy all the time
- To fit in and belong at all costs
- To be seen as one of the “in group,” the “chosen one”

Directions: Think about a difficult workplace situation when you reacted less effectively.

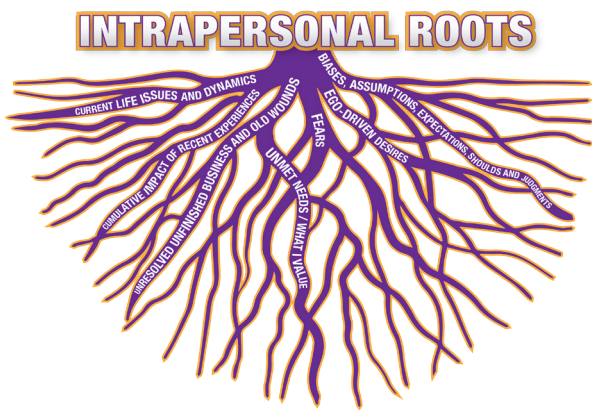
Which of these ego-driven desires might have fueled your reaction?



A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

What was the probable impact on others?

[illegible]



Root 7: Biases, Assumptions, Expectations, Shoulds, and Judgments

Whether we know it or not we all carry baggage with us into every situation—baggage full of our biases, assumptions, expectations, and judgments. Most of these attitudes and beliefs are grounded in our past experiences and cloud our ability to accurately assess what is occurring in the present moment.

Question: Questions to explore include, “What assumptions am I making?” “What biases might be affecting my assessment?” “What ‘shoulds’ and expectations am I placing on others, or on myself?” “What is my ‘pay-off’ for judging and criticizing in this moment?” “How am I just like this person?” and “What am I trying to avoid in me by over-focusing on them?”

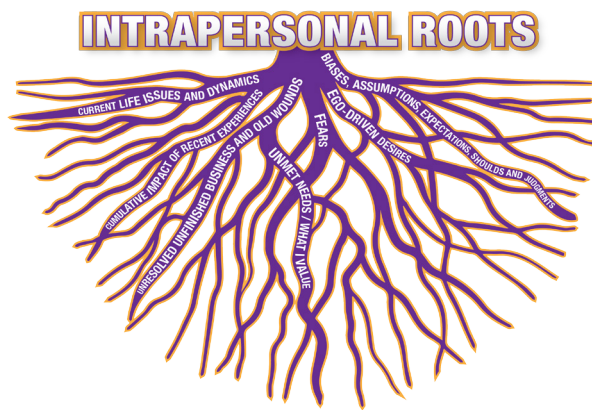
Directions: It is critical that we continually examine our thoughts for any beliefs or assumptions that may be grounded in biases or stereotypes. When we find some bias it is important that we interrupt our thoughts and shift our thinking to more closely align with the facts of the situation.

The following are examples of biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that could influence our triggered reactions in the workplace. Check which (☑), if any, seem familiar to you:

- ☐ Older employees are resistant to change.
- ☐ Younger employees are brash and do not respect authority.
- ☐ New employees are green and “wet behind the ears.”
- ☐ Female managers are aggressive and demanding.
- ☐ Male managers are domineering and part of the “old boy’s network.”
- ☐ Staff of color have a chip on their shoulders.
- ☐ White staff only care about getting ahead.
- ☐ Very quiet people are not as productive or creative.
- ☐ Very talkative staff are usually just out for themselves.

Think back to a triggering event and examine your thoughts for any assumptions, stereotypes, or unconscious bias. Write them in the left-hand column below. Then rewrite any assumption/bias to more accurately reflect the facts of the situation.

Assumption, stereotype, or bias	More accurate perspective
Example: New employees rarely have anything useful to add until they have been here 2 or more years.	While new employees may not be grounded in our organizational culture, they bring with them new, innovative perspectives and ideas.
	
	
	
	
	



Root 7: Expectations and “Shoulds”

The second aspect of the 7th intrapersonal root involves the types of “shoulds” and expectations we place on ourselves and others. When I am strongly attached to what I think others should or should not do or say, or if I have a rigid expectation that I want met, I have most likely set myself up to feel triggered into disappointment and frustration.

Instead of clinging so tightly to shoulds and expectations, it is more helpful to stay fully present in the moment and respond to what is actually occurring: to respond to what is, instead of pushing or trying to force what we think should be. The ability to “go with the flow” and respond to what is actually happening is a critical competency for effectiveness.

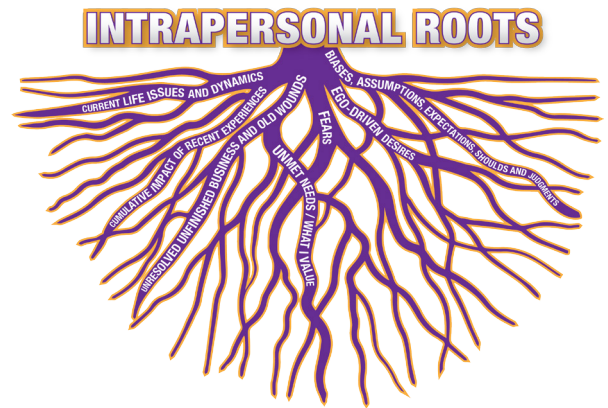
Directions: It can be insightful to develop a list of our innermost beliefs, convictions, rules, stances, and shoulds and then explore where and when we first heard them. Check (☑) any of the following that resonate with you:





- ☐ Don't make waves
- ☐ Don't rock the boat
- ☐ Leaders have to be calm and control their feelings
- ☐ It is unacceptable to make a mistake
- ☐ Leaders have to know the right answers

- ☐ Leaders should meet the needs of their employees
- ☐ Boys don't cry
- ☐ Don't air dirty laundry
- ☐ People should always be kind and thoughtful
- ☐ You have to fight for what you want
- ☐ Never ask for help; just do it yourself
- ☐ It's not ladylike to be assertive and state what you want
- ☐ You should never interrupt someone
- ☐ Don't raise your voice
- ☐ Always dress and act in a professional manner
- ☐ Smart people are logical and analytical
- ☐ Everyone should always get along
- ☐ Everyone should always be included in decisions that impact them

Root 7: Shift Your “Shoulds”

Directions: Instead of adhering to fixed shoulds and expectations, it is helpful to shift them to be less righteous and absolute. Below, make a list of 3-4 of your common shoulds and expectations of others or yourself. Then next to each of these, rewrite them into more of a preference or desire.



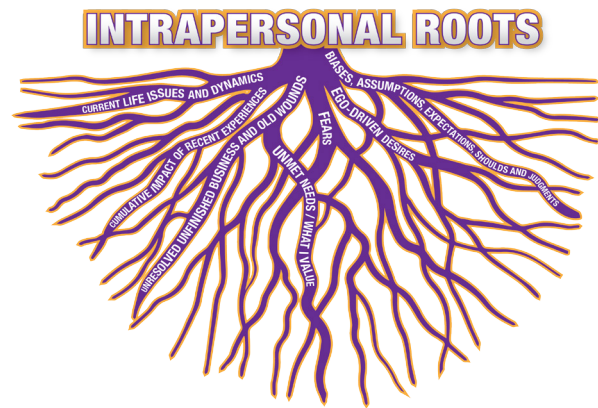
"Should" or Expectation	Preference or Desire
Example: Everyone should wait their turn and not interrupt others.	While I prefer not to be interrupted, if someone feels so passionately about an issue that they talk over me, I can listen to their point and then tie it into mine as I finish sharing my thoughts.
	
	
	
	

Reread each of these shoulds or expectations and notice how you feel. Then reread the corresponding preference or desire and see how, if at all, your feelings change.

What did you notice?

[illegible]

Root 7: Shift Your Judgments



Many of us readily judge people and situations using either-or frameworks: something is either good or bad, right or wrong, perfect or worthless. When we operate out of these rigid polarities we usually end up harshly judging and criticizing ourselves or others. The “pay-off” for this type of thinking is we either get to feel superior to others or we get a painful hit of shame and worthlessness.

Judgments and either/or thinking are closely connected to viewing people as either victims or perpetrators. I believe this mindset is a particularly dangerous trap. When I judge others as perpetrators I no longer see them in their full humanity and I can distance myself from them. Seeing myself or others as victims reinforces the illusion of helplessness and powerlessness to influence our life experiences.

“Whenever you are about to find fault with someone, ask yourself the following question: What fault of mine most nearly resembles the one I am about to criticize?”

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

There is a spiritual principle: We are what we judge. When I have criticized others in the workplace, I often realize that their behaviors reflect back and mirror something that I do not like about myself. The key is to recognize when I am being judgmental and to explore the roots and reasons I may be focusing on others in that moment.

Questions: Useful questions to explore when we notice we are judging and criticizing others include, “How am I just like this person?” and “What am I trying to avoid in me by over-focusing on them?” and “What is my ‘pay-off’ for judging and criticizing them?”

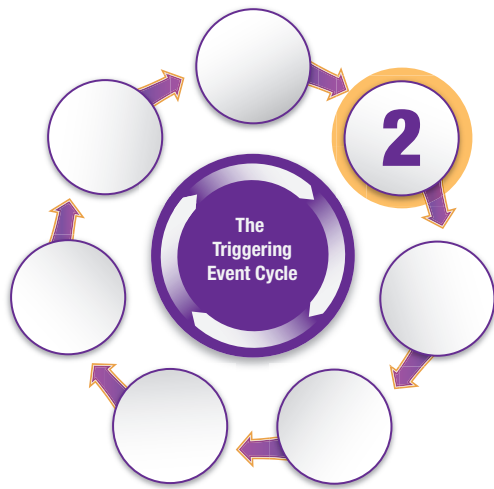
Questions to explore when we are judging ourselves include, “What am I getting out of this self-criticism?” and “Where did I first hear this type of criticism about myself?” and “What are more reasonable, accurate assessments of the situation? Of me?”

Shift Your Judgments

Directions: When we notice we are stuck in a right/wrong thinking pattern we can choose a more useful approach by identifying what is more productive or less productive given the intended outcomes of the situation. This shift away from judgments to focusing on the usefulness of actions or comments within a given context opens the possibility of exploring a wider range of solutions and approaches.

Reflect back on a difficult situation and in the left-hand column, write any judgments or right/wrong thinking that might have fueled your triggered reaction. Then rewrite these beliefs.

Judgment or right/wrong thinking	More useful thought
	
	
	
	
	



Step 2: Putting It All Together ~ Identify Your Intrapersonal Roots

Directions: Reflect back on a difficult workplace situation where you didn't react very productively. Use the questions below to explore the possible intrapersonal roots that were restimulated at Step 2 of the Triggering Event Cycle.

1. What **current life issues and dynamics** may have been depleting your protective shield and leaving you more susceptible to feeling deeply triggered? (fatigue, burnout, illness, crises, stressors, relationship or family dynamics, problems at work, recent life transitions, death of a loved one or pet, etc.)



2. **Cumulative impact** of recent experiences: Does this situation remind you of recent events?



3. Unresolved unfinished business and old wounds: Does this person remind you of anyone from your past? Does this situation remind you of unhealed traumas?



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4. Fears (check-off ☐ all that are related and add any others).

	My personal issues will become the focus of the conversation: all eyes will be on me.
	I will lose credibility and be seen as less competent.
	If I cry and show emotion, people will think less of me....I won't be able to manage the situation.
	The conversation will "get out of control."
	People will get too emotional and I won't have the skills to manage the situation.
	I won't know enough about the issue to engage in conversation.
	If I challenge this issue I will be all alone without any support.
	I won't be able to express myself clearly; I'll be misunderstood.
	People will be disappointed in me.

	If I am too confrontational or angry, then people will judge me, be mad at me, reject me, ostracize me, etc.
	I will be seen as incompetent and "not good enough."
	They will see how prejudiced I really am.
	I'll let people down and disappoint them.
	People won't like me or approve of me.
	Things won't change.
	I will make a mistake and be wrong.
	If I don't handle this well, people could feel uncomfortable...be hurt.
	Things will be worse off than before.

5. Unmet Needs/What I value* (check-off ☐ all that are related and add any others)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Respect, dignity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Trust
<input type="checkbox"/>	Planning, order
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fairness
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clarity, understanding
<input type="checkbox"/>	Openness, honesty
<input type="checkbox"/>	Direct communication
<input type="checkbox"/>	Respectful disagreement
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recognition, acknowledgement
<input type="checkbox"/>	Appreciation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Competence, effectiveness
<input type="checkbox"/>	Success, to make a difference
<input type="checkbox"/>	Inclusion

<input type="checkbox"/>	To be kept informed and updated
<input type="checkbox"/>	Harmony, peace...
<input type="checkbox"/>	Safety, security
<input type="checkbox"/>	Integrity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Innovation and creativity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ease and simplicity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Connection
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mutuality, partnering, collaboration
<input type="checkbox"/>	For approval
<input type="checkbox"/>	For acceptance, belonging
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consideration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dependability, follow-through

6. Ego-driven desires (check-off ☐ all that are related and add any others)

<input type="checkbox"/>	To assert, regain my power and authority
<input type="checkbox"/>	To have control
<input type="checkbox"/>	To win the argument; prove them wrong
<input type="checkbox"/>	To get my way
<input type="checkbox"/>	To make people change; "fix" them
<input type="checkbox"/>	To make people learn
<input type="checkbox"/>	To be right
<input type="checkbox"/>	To shut them down, put them in their place
<input type="checkbox"/>	To make them feel the pain and hurt I feel
<input type="checkbox"/>	To avoid deep emotions and conflict

<input type="checkbox"/>	To be seen as the expert, smarter than others
<input type="checkbox"/>	To prove I am competent
<input type="checkbox"/>	To gain prestige and status
<input type="checkbox"/>	To be admired; avoid disgrace
<input type="checkbox"/>	To be liked
<input type="checkbox"/>	To fit in
<input type="checkbox"/>	To be seen as the "chosen one"
<input type="checkbox"/>	To be perfect
<input type="checkbox"/>	To gain certainty and predictability
<input type="checkbox"/>	To make others engage as I want them to
<input type="checkbox"/>	To make them feel the pain and hurt I feel
<input type="checkbox"/>	For everyone to feel happy

7. Biases, assumptions, expectations, shoulds, and judgments: Which ones may have fueled your reaction?



Anticipate A Future Difficult Situation

Anticipate a triggering event you might experience in the next couple of weeks. Below, note which of these intrapersonal roots might fuel your triggered reaction in this situation.



*References:

Gill, R., Leu, L., & Morin, Judi (2009). NVC Toolkit. BookSurge Publishing.

Rosenberg, M. (2005). Nonviolent Communication: A language of life. Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press.

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EXECUTIVE/LIFE COACH



choose courage. speak your truth. live on purpose.

If you are interested in inviting me to speak to the members of your organization or if you would like to explore ways to work with me as an Executive Coach or Life Coach, please contact me:

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