

This is the 5th article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit. You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

13 Tools for Recovering Your Sanity

Leaders, like all human beings, must deal with emotional reactivity. The practice of state-shifting helps train us to manage ourselves and our reactions when our capacity to think and act has been disrupted by the fight/flight response.

There are four steps to the state-shifting practice:

- Step 1** **Name it.**
- Step 2** **Take space appropriately.**
- Step 3** **Shift your state.**
- Step 4** **Deal with the situation.**

In Step 3 – Shift State – we consciously use any one of a number of tools to speed up our recovery out of being triggered back into our zone of leadership – a state of being where we are centered, our mind is clear, and we can focus on the tasks at hand.

It is useful to have a variety of such tools in our toolbox. Some techniques work when we're just a little triggered. But when we've gone spiraling down into historical pain and/or deep emotional reactions, we need industrial strength state-shifting techniques.

There are many tools that can help our body and mind rebalance and return control to our neo-cortex. What follows is just a sampling of the range of these effective state-shifting techniques.

For a more complete review of the 4-step state-shifting practice, see the 3rd article in this series: *What to Do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting*

Tool #1. Breathing

Mind-body practices such as yoga and Tai Chi always begin by teaching us to regulate our breathing. When we're triggered, we typically start either holding our breath or hyper-ventilating. Carbon dioxide builds up, creating that panicky feeling like when we've been underwater too long. The simplest state-shifting tool is to begin taking deep breaths, increasing the amount of oxygen coming into our lungs. Simple but effective – especially if we catch our triggering early before we spiral out of control.

Tool #2. Move energy

One of the most powerful and quickest ways to shift out of a triggered state is to engage in any form of vigorous physical exercise. Dancing, jogging, working out, biking – anything that gets the heart pumping. Also sounding, singing, using our voice--all these increase the flow of oxygen, help consume the excess energy created by the fight/flight response, and release endorphins that evoke feelings of well-being.

Tool #3. Feel your feelings

Nature has provided us with a simple and effective method for dealing with emotions. Watch any young child. If they are sad or hurt, instantly the tears begin to flow. They cry. Then, it passes. Sometimes when we've been triggered what we actually need is to allow ourselves to feel, especially the deeper emotions that lie underneath our first, triggered response. Sometimes we need to soften our heart, to give space for our more tender, more vulnerable feelings.

Tool #4. Self-soothing

When we're triggered we're a bit like a frightened animal or young child. Various forms of self-soothing can be useful options for shifting our state. This might look like sitting down with a cup of warm tea, taking a bath, lying on the earth, or listening to soft music – whatever you find nurturing and helpful in calming your nervous system.

Tool #5. Meditation/prayer

Mediation, prayer, chanting, and other forms of spiritual practice are all powerful tools for shifting our state. They are highly effective, having been field-tested for thousands of years. But, it helps to have developed a foundational practice before you try to make use of these in a triggered situation.

Tool #6. Mind-Body Practices

Similarly, those who have developed practices such as yoga, Tai Chi and Chi Kung or other forms of martial arts, often find these to be powerful methods for state-shifting when triggered.

Tool #7. Connect to purpose

Leaders are usually dedicated to serving some greater purpose, a calling, a mission or a community. We can draw on the power of this dedication to help us when we're triggered. For example, when triggered with a colleague, by remembering the power of our commitment to this purpose, we put our disturbance in perspective. We hold fast to that higher purpose like a lifeline, and it lifts us out of our triggered state.

Tool #8. Self-humor

Humor is one of the greatest healing forces for human beings. Rather than getting frustrated at ourselves for being triggered, it can be immensely liberating to begin to cultivate a sense of self-humor about our triggers. Especially as we become intimately familiar with our own triggers, it is possible to begin gently poking fun at ourselves. (But be *very* careful about making fun of other peoples' triggers!)

Tool #9. Change your physical environment

When triggered, our primitive brains often associate threat with our physical surroundings. This remarkably simple maneuver can be surprisingly effective. Go to a different room. Even better... if you can, go outside.

Tool #10. Deep relaxation

Our muscles tense up when we're triggered. If the surroundings permit, sit back or lie down. Close your eyes. Slowly bring your awareness to different parts of your body. As you find any areas that seem tight, breath . . . and invite those muscles to relax. Whether or not you have studied yoga, you might try the corpse pose (also called *savasana*), in which you lie down on your back with your palms facing up.^{1*} It has been shown to decrease heart rate, lower blood pressure, slow respiration, decrease muscle tension and metabolic rate – in other words, the perfect antidote to the fight/flight characteristics of triggering.

Tool #11. Self-reflection/inquiry

When we are triggered, our rational mind has been hijacked by the *amygdala*. The perceptions that drive the trigger are often distorted, and the assumptions and beliefs that fan the flames are almost always flawed. With this tool, we begin to use our now-functioning neo-cortex to unpack what actually is and is not going on and inquire as to why our reactions are out of proportion to the situation. We might reflect on such questions as:

- Why did I react so strongly?
- What is being triggered in me from my past?
- Am I absolutely sure that the meaning I have made of this situation is completely true?
- Is it *absolutely* true that... this person is out to get me; the situation is hopeless; this will definitely lead to something terrible, etc.?
- Is there another interpretation of events that might also be true?
- Is there possibly some opportunity for me in this situation?

Tool #12. Anchoring

When a boat is becalmed, it is possible to move it by tossing and securing the anchor in the desired direction, then pulling on the chain (aka *kedging*). **Anchoring** is a psychophysical tool we use in an analogous way to pull ourselves out of our triggered state into a state of power and clarity.

We create anchors before we get triggered so we can draw on the tool when we need it. We begin by identifying what it feels like in our body when we are in touch with our inner power, our zone of leadership. We then create a physical, visual or auditory cue than can serve as an anchor to pull us back into our zone.

- The physical anchor:
We find a body posture that embodies the experience of being in our place of power. When triggered, we physically assume the body posture then take a number of deep breaths. As we continue to settle more deeply into the posture, it increasingly evokes our felt sense of power and our zone of leadership.
- The visual anchor:
We visualize a source of power that has particular meaning for us: an image from nature like the river or the sun, an animal, a revered person who inspires us, a spiritual symbol, etc. When triggered, we meditate on this image. With a series of deep breaths, we literally imagine we are drawing the power

^{1*} For complete instructions on doing the corpse pose, see: www.yogajournal.com/poses/482

represented by this image into our body, until we start experiencing that power within us.

- The auditory anchor:
We create a short phrase, a series of words that evokes our sense of inner power.

“I am deep peace.”

“Like a river, the power of love flows through me.”

“I am a warrior of justice.”

When triggered, linked with deep breaths, we repeat our phrases like an affirmation or mantra, to help evoke our inner power, our zone of leadership.

Because it's performed internally, the beauty of the anchoring technique is that it can be done in a public setting.

Tool #13. Drop It

As we become “old friends” with our triggers, there are times when our feelings just don't seem to have such a strong grip on us. It's like when Velcro on a jacket starts to become less sticky. You're about to go down the rabbit hole of triggering... then you realize, *“I don't have to go there. I can just let it go.”*

It's important to know that the **Drop It** tool is available to us. However, we want to be careful of P.T.S. – *Premature Transcendence Syndrome*. This common phenomenon is when we're trying hard to convince ourselves that, *“It doesn't bother me.”* Meanwhile we're completely triggered, in denial that we're upset, and prone to passive aggression and a variety of inauthentic behavior.

But do watch for those times when it's actually possible to just... let it go.

In conclusion

As leaders, we want to be balanced and clear in exercising our power to achieve our goals. When we've been triggered, these 13 state-shifting tools can help bring us back into a resourced and centered state of being – our zone of leadership.

For a complete description of the practice of state-shifting, see our article:

What to Do When Triggered: The 4-step Practice of State-shifting