

# Flying off the Handle

## How You Become Triggered

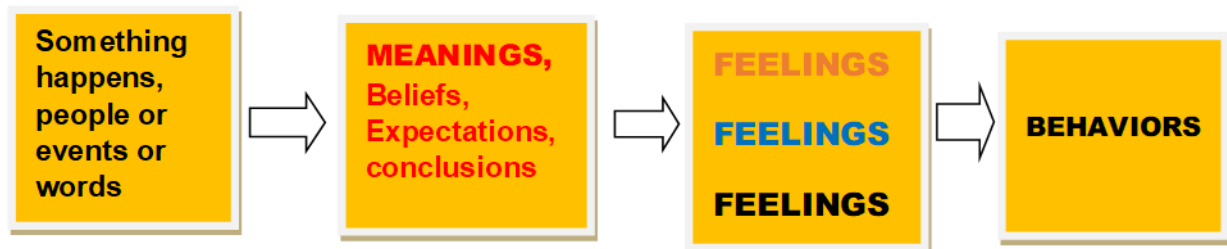
*“Yesterday, something triggered me.”*

Have you ever wondered why some people react like a hot pistol while others seem to be able to remain calm and rational?

This works because something in the here and now has triggered unpleasant memories or a picture from your past. These memories included all the unpleasant emotions and feelings that you had from that past event. At the time it happened, you put a meaning to that experience. (That was embarrassing; he put me down; I am stupid; all men are A-holes; this is not a safe place; people are going to use me, etc.)

When something triggers these old memories and pictures, the feelings and judgments from that old event are reexperienced. People who are easily triggered by their past experiences are reactors.

Something happens, a dramatic event or an unpleasant interaction happens, and you put on meanings about yourself and the other person. The meanings will determine what you feel. You choose to react to one of your feelings from what you feel. Most people are totally unaware of this process. The model for this is:



Someone who tends towards histrionics reacts to what they feel when they feel it, to the degree they feel it. Their feelings drive them. Meanwhile, the person who can remain calm and collected chooses the meanings that create the feelings.

Something happens (a triggering event). The individual decides what the triggering event means, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Let's compare two different scenarios. One person is raised in an environment that is unsafe both physically and emotionally. As a small child, the person was left alone to fend for themselves for long periods of time. They would watch as their parents fought through to the point that blood was spilled. They hid under the bed and watched as the cops came. They watched as the family broke up.

They choose which feelings they will experience by deciding the meanings that they will assign to the triggering event. Here are some possible meanings you might choose to put on those events.

- The world is not safe, and I am not safe in this unsafe world.
- The only way to protect myself is to lash out and verbally or physically attack.
- The only way to protect myself is to avoid situations where intense feelings are involved.

Or

- The cops came, meaning the world is safe and I am protected.
- I have learned ways of protecting myself without physical or verbal violence.
- The world is neither safe nor unsafe. And I can protect myself in this world.

The second person is raised in a family where there is no expressing of strong feelings. They never saw their mother and father fight, work through it, and be loving again. For these people, even the smallest amount of anger can produce fear and the need to shut down the anger. These people are often more afraid of anger than a person raised in an abusive environment. Any amount of anger is unacceptable in themselves and in others. Their fear is based on the unknown, what might happen. They tend to think that all anger will lead to a catastrophe.

Yes, you can choose to think whichever way you want. Many people are unaware that they choose to think and believe the thoughts that deceive,

delude, and mislead them. They believe they have no control over what they think or feel.

Negative thoughts do not just happen. They do not just pop into your head from outer space. Yes, you consciously or unconsciously choose what you think and what meanings, beliefs, and conclusions you put on what is happening, creating your feelings.

Choosing the meanings is one way to set yourself up to be triggered.

**There is a second way to become triggered.** An old Chinese saying: “To repress a feeling is to give it unlimited power.”

Anger that is repressed or denied tends to grow and get bigger and bigger, so when it is finally released, there is a major eruption. This is when things are said and done that can cause irrevocable problems in the relationship.

There are two extremes of anger: First, there is out-of-control hate, rage, and fury. This is where you can have blackout anger and not even remember what you said or did. This is when put downs, threats, the B word, and the F word are used, bones are broken, and people are killed.

When it comes to expressing feelings, you have three choices. The philosopher Aristotle labeled them Excess, Virtue, and Deficiency.

An Excess expression of anger is when someone goes “postal.” These people are often described as loners, quiet people who keep to themselves and never get angry. They are often triggered by some event that they refer to as “the last straw.” You can see this in both spousal and child abuse, which happens to both men and women.

There is a middle point between those two extremes that the philosopher Aristotle called **The Virtuous Expression of Anger.**

Aristotle emphasized the importance of expressing anger virtuously. “This involves anger directed at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way.”

- At one end of the continuum is **Excess**: these people exhibit irascibility and hostility, which is excessive or uncontrolled anger, rage, and fury.
- At the other end of the continuum is **Deficiency**: these people are known for being long-suffering, which is a complete lack of anger or the inability to feel anger when appropriate.
- **Virtuous anger** is the midpoint between excess and deficiency.



**Excess**



**Virtuous**



**Deficiency**

Everyone gets angry. What do you do with your anger? Aristotle said that virtuous anger is directed at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way.

So, who is the right person to be virtuously angry at?

- The right person would be someone doing something that could harm the person or someone else.
- The right degree would depend on how dangerous the situation is.
- The right time is as close to the time of the problem as possible.
- The right purpose is to use honest manipulation.

- The right way. That would not include the use of putdowns, name-calling, threats, demands, controlling, and silence.

Therefore, the opposite of virtuous anger could be considered irascible (easily angered) or even-tempered, calm, depending on which extreme you compare it to.

**Excess** is irascibility, hostility, and rage (the tendency to become angry easily or have a persistent angry mood. Synonyms of irascibility include quick, short, bad, and ill temper).

**Deficiency** is calm, never gets angry, even-tempered.”

If we live by these means and strive never to be angry,” the world will never change! We will all live our daily lives with a facade of “good temperament” and brush away issues of concern without a second thought.

Every person who has been influential, powerful, and admirable has been angry. The most influential individuals have been just what Aristotle condemns: irascible.

Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mandela transformed their fury into a beneficial organization that improved and protected the lives of other sentient beings. These people learned, “It is not what you say; it is how you say it.” Excess anger can be expressed in positive ways for positive outcomes. [Google: Verbal Aikido.]

Anger is a fantastic tool for good or evil. Which are you using your anger for, good or evil?

*Myron Doc Downing, PhD*

Email: [docdowning103@gmail.com](mailto:docdowning103@gmail.com)

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