Section 1
Dealing with “Triggers”

1. “That was then, this is NOW … !”
2. “This is normal …”
3. “Breathe it away …”
4. Welcoming triggers through “mindfulness”
5. The 5-4-3-2-1 method

A trigger is something (e.g., a sight, sound, smell, taste or bodily sensation) that sets off a reaction, taking you back to a particular event or situation. Triggers are highly unpredictable. Fearing and fleeing from triggers does not work. It is better to face them and deal with them. So instead of going for avoidance – go for acceptance. Dealing with them takes out their sting, and enables us to remain in control. Also, it prevents the trigger developing into a “flashback” (see Section 2).

The strong suggestion in this manual is not to run from or try to avoid triggers, but to welcome them. This allows us to take control, practise the

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necessary techniques and to gain mastery over them. The result is often (surprise, surprise!) that the triggers occur less often and, when they do occur, are dealt with easily and effectively. Welcoming them enables us to expose ourselves to events or situations, in a way that’s not harmful.

The Tools and Techniques

1. “That Was Then, This Is NOW ... !”

This technique is very powerful for arresting a trigger in its tracks. It ensures the locus of control remains with the serviceman and not with the trigger, which could easily lead into a flashback.

The secret is to practise saying “That was then, this is NOW ... !” on a regular basis, so that it is ready to use in an instant. It is important for workers to encourage service personnel to slow down their pace of speech, lower their tone of voice and say the sentence forcefully, with the emphasis on the “NOWWWW ... !”

With this technique held in readiness, triggers – which are highly unpredictable – need not be feared; instead, they may be welcomed.
“Bring on the triggers!”

One service user, who was traumatised over a number of years, has reported that, on average, he encounters one trigger roughly every two weeks, but that this is now not a problem. By using this technique for just a few seconds on each and every occasion, he continues to live life to the full, regardless. He added that he looks forward to the triggers occurring, so he can both practise and prove to himself that the technique works.

“The smell of the pork ribs”

An infantryman, who had been involved in an incident where several comrades had been badly burned, said that, as a result, he avoided going to barbecues. He found the smell of the cooking meat – especially where pork ribs had been provided – just too much to bear.

Clearly, he had been missing out on many potentially enjoyable family and other social gatherings, for a few years.

However, although being able to avoid barbecues to which he had been invited, he could not avoid the smell of neighbours’ barbecues, wafting across his back yard.

By learning and practising “That was then, this is NOWWWW … !”, in addition to accepting invitations to others’ barbecues, he proved he had gained full control of his trigger by holding one of his own.

2. “This is Normal …”

Another way to gain mastery over a trigger is to train the service user to say quietly and firmly to himself, “THIS IS NORMAL …” Instruct him, as soon as the trigger is observed,
to become consciously aware of it; to see it for what it is; and to say to himself, “This is normal. These experiences occur from time to time. I am noticing it fully. And it will pass.” In addition to this statement being so simple and easy to learn, it has great reassurance value.

A soldier, who had returned from a six-month tour of Afghanistan, happened to be walking his dog along a riverside path, well out in the country. Suddenly, he heard the sound of short bursts of machine-gun fire from an army barracks in the distance. Naturally, thoughts of Afghanistan entered his head rapidly, and in particular a sticky situation his platoon was in on one particular occasion. He was able to prevent this trigger developing into a full-blown flashback by calmly and firmly saying out loud, “This is normal. I am bound to hear the sound of gunfire or other similar sounds from time to time, when I am out and about.”

3. “Breathe It Away ...”

This is another powerful technique for gaining control over triggers. Often triggers can lead to a serviceman taking a sharp in-breath. As I will describe, this technique enables people to maintain control by controlling their breathing. As a welfare worker or practitioner, you can provide the following instruction:
When the trigger occurs, take control first by naming the experience (sight, sound, smell, taste, bodily sensation) as a trigger. Then slowly breathe out, using your diaphragm (this means ensuring your stomach goes in on the out-breath, and out on the in-breath).

This is easy. Breathe in, slowly and gently, for the count of 7 (ensuring that your stomach goes out on the in-breath). Then, breathe out, for the count of 11. It is known as “the 7/11 technique”. Practise this for a couple of minutes about six or seven times a week, over a period of six to eight weeks. This ensures it is bedded in fully as a technique for you to use at any time. It is worth practising this type of breathing under normal circumstances anyway, when no triggers are in sight. Not only will you be ready for the trigger when it occurs, but you will feel good, generally. This type of breathing is widely recommended for people who want to get control back for themselves, on occasions when they are feeling out of control.

“Breathing away loud bangs”

A former sailor, who had served on a destroyer that had taken a direct hit from an Exocet missile, was affected by any loud crash or bang. Most often, it would be a vehicle back-firing, objects being thrown into a metal skip or an up-and-over garage door slamming.
After regular practise, he was able to switch instantly the sharp in-take of breath into a slow out-breath, then follow the 7/11 breathing routine just described.

4. Welcoming Triggers Through “Mindfulness”

This fits well with replacing avoidance with acceptance, as outlined in the introduction to this section.

The technique counters powerfully the “fight or flight” response by disarming it. This is how it works:

At the first whiff of a trigger, say “Ah. I recognise you!”,” “Welcome!” etc. This response is the complete opposite to trying to run from it or push it down or away. Simply acknowledge the trigger and how you feel about it right now. There is no need for the brain and the body to become activated, ready for a fight, for it will pass. Once you have welcomed it, use the techniques 1, 2 or 3 described earlier.

5. The 5-4-3-2-1 Method

This method is very useful for dealing with triggers, pulling the serviceman back to the here and now. (Also, it is good for inducing sleep if woken at night by internal or external events: see Section 5.)

Service personnel may be instructed as follows:

“Open your eyes.
Notice five things that you can see.
Close your eyes.
Notice five things that you can hear.
Notice five things that you feel in your body (e.g., warmth, pillows; not emotions).

Open your eyes.
Notice four things that you can see.

Close your eyes.
Notice four things that you can hear.
Notice four things that you feel in your body.

Open your eyes.
Notice three things that you can see.

Close your eyes.
Notice three things that you can hear.
Notice three things that you feel in your body.

Open your eyes.
Notice two things that you can see.

Close your eyes.
Notice two things that you can hear.
Notice two things that you feel in your body.

Open your eyes.
Notice one thing that you can see.

Close your eyes.
Notice one thing that you can hear.
Notice one thing that you feel in your body.”

Repeat if necessary (it often requires two repetitions to induce sleep, see Section 5).

After using the exercise four or five times, it will become easier and the calming effect will be greater.