

How to Use Trigger Cards

What is a Trigger Card?

Trigger cards are an effective and inexpensive way to make a plan for safety. They are useful both in the hospital and at home. The plans begin with identifying stressful situations, then exploring helpful strategies to manage emotions and behaviors.

- Emotion regulation—learning to name and control emotions
- Distress tolerance—skills that are used to handle distress from “negative” emotions, such as anger management and relaxation skills
- Problem solving skills

How can Trigger Cards Help Me?

Trigger cards can help me:

- Understand what causes or “triggers” distress, such as sadness, anger or urges to self-harm
- Learn the warning signs and bodily cues that are the first signs of distress, such as a flushed face, shaking, clenched fists or quietness
- Learn the ways I’ve coped in the past, such as destroying property, threatening others, self-harm, social isolation and avoidance
- Identify and practice new ways to cope in the future, such as distraction, belly breathing or talking it out
- Assess whether the way I chose to cope with my distress was helpful
- Make a COPE Sequence or coping action plan that includes:
 - Calm: What can help me stop, slow down and develop a plan?
 - Options: Think of and list what skill might be most useful in the given situation.
 - Plan: Of the options, chose a skill to try.
 - Evaluate: Was the chosen skill helpful in the moment?



How Do We use Trigger Cards?

Trigger cards can be used to help learn which situations lead to emotional and behavioral distress. They can also help you learn when a coping skill may be helpful and outline a plan for using one. Having a plan can help prevent a crisis.

For example, if loud, crowded places are a trigger and you are going to the shopping mall, you can use the trigger card to make a plan for how to cope with possible triggers. We encourage you to continue using the trigger cards at home.

The plan might include:

- Going to the mall for a short time
- Taking breaks away from the crowd and noise
- Deciding that it is not a good time to go to the mall and making a plan for another fun activity that will not be noisy or crowded

The trigger cards can help support you in times of distress.

Changes Over Time

Trigger cards are a work in progress. What is stressful to you now may not be later on. You will develop more coping skills as you practice them. Over time, as you develops more skills, those that were once helpful may be replaced with others. As you develop and change, we encourage you to add and subtract from the trigger card. It may also be helpful for parents to make their own personal trigger cards, as they partner with you to help build skills and improve outcomes.