



## **Triggered: A Discussion on Coping with Mental Health and Substance Use**

- ❖ Trigger - *n. a stimulus that elicits a reaction. For example, an event could be a trigger for a memory of a past experience and an accompanying state of emotional arousal.*

Quite often, when people hear the word “trigger” in a therapeutic context, one may immediately think of substance use and “relapse triggers”. Although substance use is part of this discussion for this exercise, it is important to consider that the idea of feeling “triggered” can also relate to many mental and emotional situations and disorders. Here is a brief list of some life areas where triggers can come into play. Discuss how triggers can come into play in the following areas when they apply:

### ***Substance Use***

***“Behavioral Addictions” such as gambling, sex, spending, etc.***

### ***Anger/Frustration/Annoyance***

### ***Aggression***

### ***Depression***

### ***Stress***

### ***Trauma***

### ***PTSD***

### ***Mood Swings***

### ***Fears/Phobias***

### ***Eating Disorder***

### ***ADHD/Attention problems***

### ***Insomnia/Sleep Disorder***

### ***Insecurity/Self-doubt/Self esteem issues***

### ***Psychosis***

### ***Anxiety in all of its forms including these:***

- ***Generalized anxiety***
- ***Panic attacks***
- ***Social anxiety***
- ***OCD***

### ***Others...?***

**So, remember, that a “trigger” is anything that stimulates or instigates a problematic set of symptoms, emotions or behaviors. We can feel “triggered” in many different ways and in many life areas**



## Exercise: Trigger Wheel

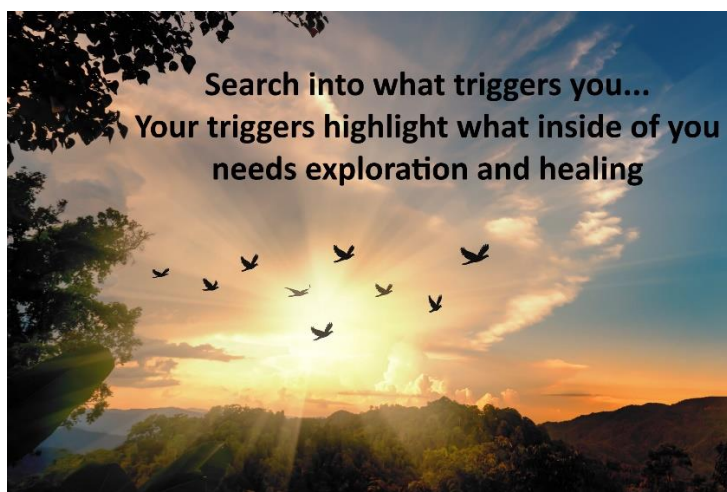
Directions: Use the previous list we just reviewed or add some of your own ideas. Then, choose 5 of these life areas where you could possibly experience feeling “triggered” (If you cannot come up with five, just X out the sections of the trigger wheel that you do not use.) Start your list of 5 life areas where you experience triggers below:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

The blank Trigger Wheel on the upcoming page has five sections. Write your five identified trigger life areas in the wheel by writing one in each section of the wheel (See the example on the next page). Then, write down some of your actual triggers for these trigger areas within each section. **Keep in mind that there are a wide variety of types of triggers including some of the following areas:**

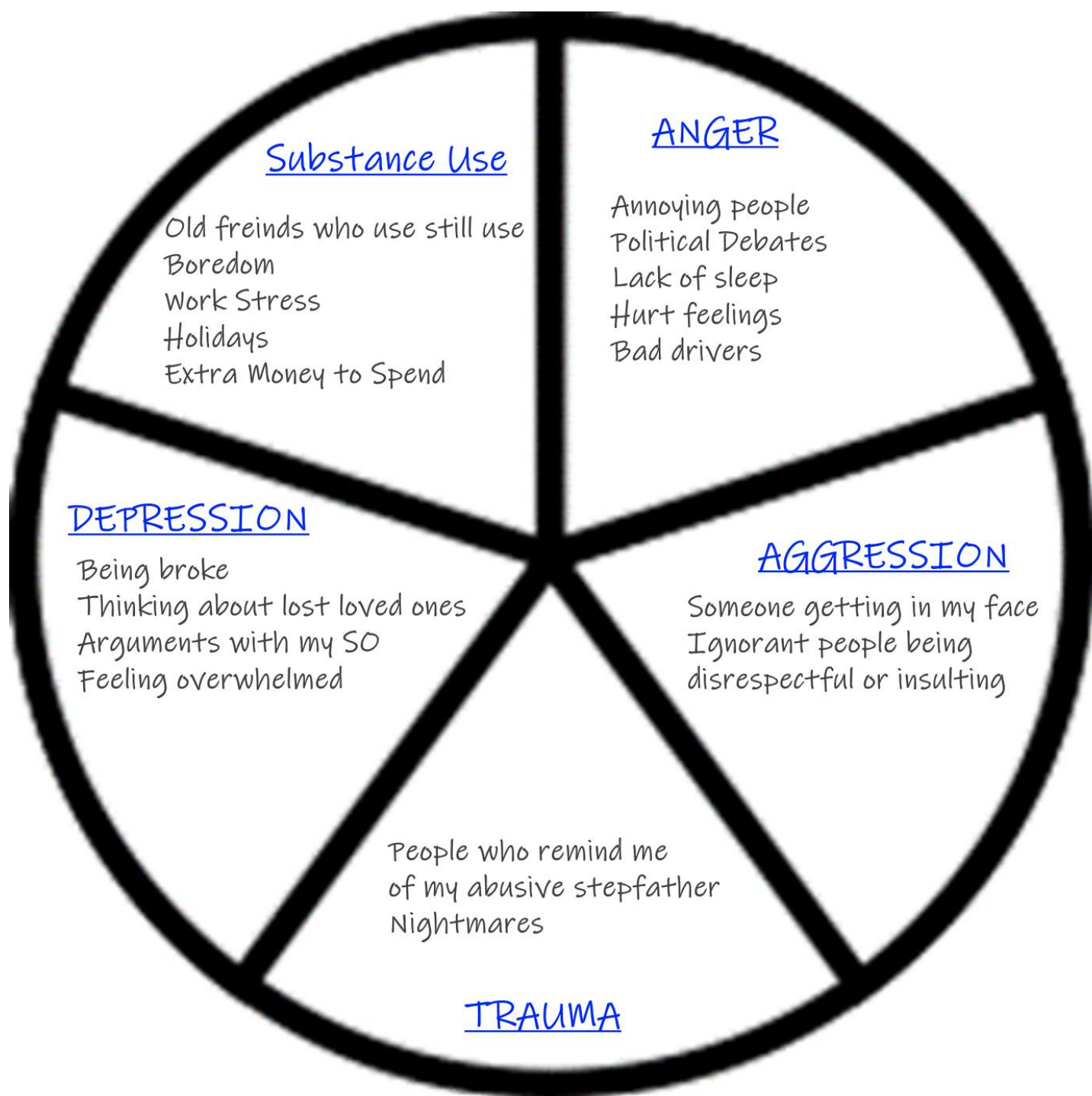
People	Places	Things
Thoughts	Feelings	Habits
Physical Conditions	Mental Conditions	Impulsivity
Events	Routines	Attitude

It may help to discuss some different examples of each of these types of triggers. Taking the Escalator has a worksheet on this topic called [“External and Internal Setback Factors”](#) which can be a reference if needed  
**When the group is ready, everyone should work on completing their own trigger wheel**





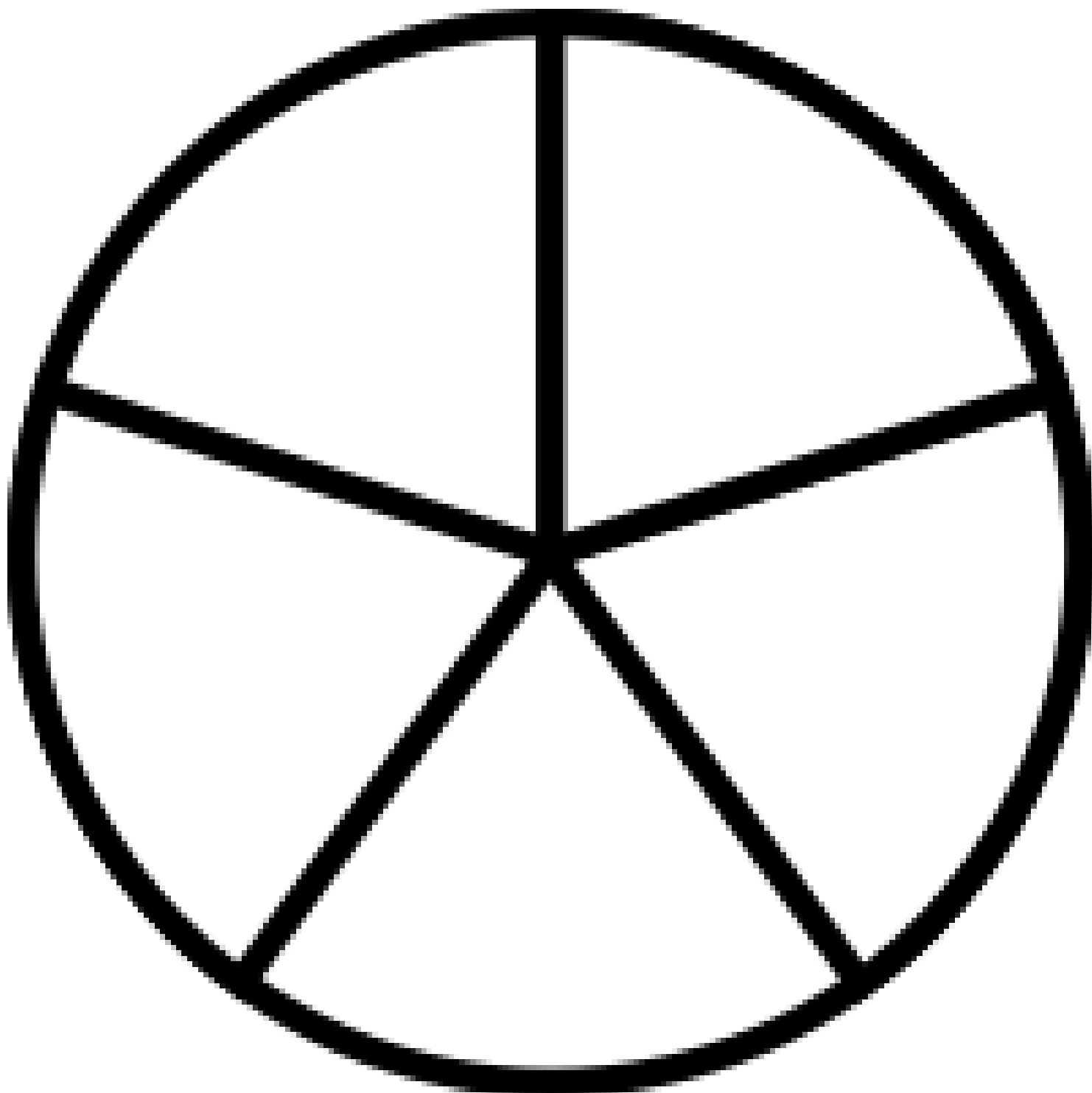
## An Example of a Completed Trigger Wheel:



**ON THE NEXT PAGE COMPLETE YOUR OWN  
TRIGGER WHEEL**



# Trigger Wheel





## Share and discuss your Trigger Wheels as a group

**Closing Discussion: Trigger Tools** - Consider the following Trigger Tools for effectively dealing with triggers for both mental health and substance use:

- 1) **Plan and Prepare**— If you are fortunate to know that you may be soon encountering a trigger, plan ahead to cope with that trigger. For example, if tomorrow is the anniversary of a loss or traumatic event, then make sure that you have supports and positive mental “escapes” prepared for that day. Or if you know you might encounter someone who may have drugs and you are trying not to use, prepare what you may say to refuse drug offers or prepare to avoid that person altogether. *This trigger tool is used earlier in the process of dealing with triggers*
- ✚ **Group Question – What is a trigger on your Trigger Wheel that you can learn to plan and prepare for. How do you think you could effectively do that?**
- 2) **Avoid or Escape** – When possible, if there is a trigger that may be too much to handle, and there is a safe way out, then take it. Cancelling the plans to go to the bar for your college roommate’s bachelor party to avoid drinking could be one example. If you know a situation triggers your stress level, like long lines at the store, then go at another time or order online. Some triggers can be strategically avoided. (Unfortunately, some cannot or there are some situations when triggers need to be faced)
- ✚ **Group Question – What is a trigger on your Trigger Wheel that you can learn to avoid or escape and how would that work?**
- 3) **React (Positively)** – If there are emotional or substance use triggers in your life you can learn to change your reaction from negative to positive. This takes practice and may require therapy or support, but it can be very effective. Example: *“I used to feel triggered when people were rude and I often got into fights because I couldn’t control my anger sometimes but in therapy, I learned to take a long deep breath, change my thinking and calmly respond to people rather than engage in arguing*
- ✚ **Group Question – What is a trigger on your Trigger Wheel that you can learn to react to in a positive way? What do you need to be able to do that effectively?**
- 4) **Cope** – If there is a trigger in your life that is getting to you and it is unavoidable, then you can work on your coping skills and self-care strategies to stay positive and healthy. For example – *“By the time I get home from a long day of dealing with customers and coworkers at work I used to come home, and my anxiety was off the charts. Now I have learned coping and relaxation skills that I do in the car on my drive back from work and then when I get home, I take another 10-15 minutes to destress by playing my guitar. Then I can feel calm the rest of the night!”*
- ✚ **Group Question – What is a trigger on your Trigger Wheel that you need more coping skills for to manage effectively? What specific coping skills would help you?**

