Triggers And Trau-Minos

This is post #3 in a series of posts that are designed to help illuminate WTF is going on in a life/body that has been shaped largely by neglect, personal and/or cultural traumas. I look back on how lost, how scared and how alone I was before I understood what was happening in my mind and body and there are things I wish some of the professionals I asked for help from would have told me: like how normal my reactions were given the things I had been through. When my massive anxiety and the rolling thunder of flashbacks and triggers took up the bulk of my days, I wish a professional person leaned in closely and said, "you know what? All that electrical fire bursting through your veins is power. You are damn powerful. Would you like to know what is happening inside you?"

Maybe no one I consulted could do that. Maybe it’s too far outside of the therapeutic/doctor/social worker expert-client models of interaction...or maybe I just didn't get the right help...And certainly, in a pathology paradigm, where we look mostly at symptoms, education between professional and client aren't necessarily the focus. Getting ‘fixed’ is. I often felt like professionals looked across the room at me puzzled, trying to figure out how to help me. It was very isolating. What I didn't know was that I didn't know how to trust anyone. So maybe they knew I couldn't receive what they wanted to say anyway. That's one of the reasons I love being an herbalist. My primary offering is education. That's the portal through which the plants rumble through me. I get to explain which herbs and why they may have an impact on a specific body wanting to feel something different. In these posts, I get to build things that I would want to tell someone I am working with into one long ass post and then recommend it as part of my herbal protocol. How cool is that?

Today, we are going to talk about triggers. TRIGGERS. I'm going to do my best to summarize what is happening inside us and also how not alone we are.
'Trigger' is a widely used term now in the mental health and activist realms. It basically indicates something that can set off a powerful chain reaction inside of us, including flashbacks, panic attacks, outbursts, stored body sensations, dissociative episodes and more ambiguous or unsettling feelings which can be hard to identify. Having unresolved trauma in our minds and our bodies is like living in a minefield. Until the triggers are identified and disarmed, we are hyper-vigilant warriors mistrusting every step. The really frustrating and scary thing is how simple or small a trigger can be, creating a reaction which seems disproportionate to both ourselves and those around us. Have you ever had someone stare at you unsure about why you are reacting so strongly to what seems to be a small thing? Or feeling immense amounts of shame because you believe your own reaction to be out of proportion?

The fragmented memories of the traumatic experience(s) are stored in the body/mind/spirit. These are bits of information stored in various places, as opposed to a single file cabinet like space in our brain. Trauma gets stored like a kaleidoscope throughout the whole person and not as a whole piece. Often pieces will be linked together but not fully, like you may remember an audio sound that also makes your stomach upset, but you can't quite access the emotional content or the exact event....or maybe you get the emotional content but no other part of the memory gives you context to where the feelings come from. Or maybe you totally relive a whole traumatic experience, but lose yourself so fully in the present that it is almost impossible to process what you just re-lived. These unprocessed trauma fragments stored within us have HUGE energy stored with them. When we are not triggered, they are being held in place, but knock one ever so slightly with the right force and BOOM! The energetic potential is released and the trauma fragments make themselves known.

This guy explains it best. Think of each domino as a piece of a traumatic experience stored within our minds or psyche. Watch the power of "gravitational potential" do its thing.
BOOM! LOL

Ha, when he says, "Let's see it in slow moooooooo." 13 Dominos. Two Billion times the energy from the start to the finish. That's the process happening when stored trauma is released into action through a trigger. Learned experience is a powerful force. I know it might not feel like that when we are drowning in the after effects when something set off our internal traum-inos (omg, I just laughed and almost peed a little. TRAUM-INOS! I have to put that in the title.)...where was I.....so yeah, I know it doesn't feel that way. But from one survivor to another, we are some of the strongest people I know. Look at all that energetic power we are holding just to make it through every damn day. Just wait until we can reroute that energy to other things which bring us benefit. In the words of our scientist friend above: BOOM!!!!!

A couple things about 'being triggered:

- It is a real, physiological and psychological process that is indicative of unresolved traumatic experience(s)
- Trauma survivors are, in each person to a unique degree, re-wired to experience the world as less safe, and, after talking with many trauma survivors (myself included), the world is literally less safe because we have learned how to often identify the larger cultural causes of our traumas which we have even less personal control over changing to the degree that it impacts us
- Unresolved trauma and the constant fear that we can 'get triggered' literally increases the allostatic load our minds and bodies are carrying, which in turn means we have far less physical and emotional resources to navigate the land mines of daily life. This in turn leads to increased internal tensions and the ability to be triggered more quickly and with greater frequency
Triggers set off flashbacks. Flashbacks don't always look like what we have seen in a movie like where a war vet is reliving a full scene in their mind. They can be so much more subtle and harder to recognize, particularly emotional ones and somatic ones with no context.

Developing a relationship with our triggers can help diffuse some of their intensity and is really challenging work.

A little about memory:

Memory is not really a "thing" and neither are our "memories." Memory is much more of a 'process' than a 'thing.' There are several types of memories and neuroscience is learning more and more information about how complex the process of memory and re-membering is. Basically, 'remembering' is the retrieval of important information from various parts of the mind/psyche/body. It quite literally is putting these pieces together to form a coherent whole, ideally having the original time and space context attached to them. Experiences which overwhelm our processing systems are stored like fragments in multiple places within us, but they are frozen in time, suspended. A flashback, the process that happens when we are triggered, happens not because we are re-membering the trauma typically, but because there are parts of us that are reliving it floating through us without attachment to space and time it actually occurred in. That is a key distinction. These stored traumatic experiences are released from their frozen state and re-experienced. If they remain largely unprocessed or stuck in a loop where the external environment prevents the integration of the trauma, it can happen over and over again. Our triggers can then sort of become ‘true’ when they repeat over and over again.

Re-membering these fragments is a process of exploring the various pieces, stored away from conscious awareness together with the parts that are in conscious awareness (if there
are any) and then creating a whole truth, a whole experience, a whole narrative which includes the when and where parts.

**We move trauma stored as implicit memory into explicit memory, and through that process, uncover new meaning about our traumas, ourselves and how we can use that meaning to honor our lives in the present.**

EXPLICIT memory is largely conscious (able to be recalled, thought about, we are aware of it):

- **Declarative memories** are sort of feelingless, data related memory. The "shopping lists of the memory world" as Peter Levine calls them. This is like remembering that laundry detergent goes in the washing machine, that your key opens your front door, that the gas pedal is on the left. Their role is largely to communicate information that is mostly factual and procedural. It is information which we build learning and knowledge about things we do and it is largely created and stored in the cerebral cortex. These are the most 'concrete' and widely recalled memories that we use, and it is these type of memories that most people presume is largely how memory operates.

- **Episodic memories** are conscious memories that are infused with feelings and/or tones. These are largely autobiographical memories which can be narrated with a beginning, middle and end and placed into the right context of where they happened in the course of lifespan. They are a little less conscious than the declarative memories we use everyday, but can be recalled deliberately or arise spontaneously often due to an external reminder (which is really a trigger). Now, this is a very important part: Episodic memories can evolve, change over time. Think about a break up you experienced with someone. At the time it happened, you only had a certain amount of understanding about it. As years have gone by, as you tell the story, you
are able to add layers of understanding about you, or your partner, or what was happening that you were unaware of at the time, to the story of the break. The memory is able to evolve and grow as you do. This memory is capable of being enriched, and as it is, it helps us constantly reorient ourselves to where we are in space and time. And, as they are updated with new information, these memories allow us to believe that we are capable of growth, of discovering new things and that there are various outcomes possible in situations. <--- that last part is important.

We also have IMPLICIT memory, which is not so conscious and accessible, it lies below our thinking self:

- Emotional memories are necessary to store very important information about survival and connection based information. As social creatures/mammals, information about social connection is essential to our survival and thriving as both a self and a species. They help us signal information to ourselves AND others what we need, how we feel and the context of our internal worlds. IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT EMOTIONAL MEMORIES CAN BE/ARE STORED AS PHYSICAL SENSATIONS IN THE BODY. Emotional memories are generally triggered by the context of a present situation with similar characteristics. It is important to note that emotional memories are not the same as emotional flashbacks. The emotional memory can be one of getting excited by going to the movie theater because your emotional context of watching movies on the big screen is positive, it evokes something positive you enjoy repeating. Emotional flashbacks are definitely accessing emotional memory, but unlike the movie theater above, the flashbacks access traumatic experience that is outside of linear time. Emotional memory evolves and changes based on new information about our experiences.
Procedural memories are the body sensations. They are the learned motor skills, the emergency response systems of fighting, freezing, fawning and/or fleeing, and the somatic intuitions of approaching or avoiding something instinctively. These body based memories are our deepest ones, and play a huge part in the storing and releasing of traum-inos. Procedural memories are powerful sources of information and when they are able to be experiences, explored and trusted, can empower us to integrate knowledge on the deepest levels. These memories, at the deepest levels of the brain stem, which largely is called the 'reptilian brain,' thought to be unable to make decisions which have implications about safety and relationship are a core part of healing traumatic experiences. Procedural memories are the least conscious ones, meaning the information they have to tell us isn't stored in language or narrative but in sensation. Sensation, for us survivors, can be terrifying.

Things that trigger us cause a repeat of stored emotional and procedural memories which are stuck, outside of time and space. They are usually recalled as fragments, like the body sensations are not stored with the the emotional context, or the emotions are not stored with the details of what happened, etc. which makes them less likely to become episodic/autobiographical memories which can grow and change over time. Traumatic memories are buried, frozen, scary little bombs waiting to go off in us with their huge stored energy. When they do go off, our defense mechanisms can get activated causing a flight, fight, freeze, fawn or "fucking push everyone I love away because I am broken" response. That last one was my favorite since it was so effective.

Unprocessed trauma maintains a high state of arousal in our bodies, meaning we are more likely to perceive incoming information as a threat to our being and are carrying a really high physical and emotional load. This state of being hypervigilant, hyper-aroused, frozen,
exhausted contributes to how fast and strong we might react to something which triggers us. It is like we are walking around with the finger already on the domino, vulnerable to the conditions which knock us off balance.

A story:
This is an event which occurred when I thought I was getting somewhere with my triggers even though I was still dealing with the daily effects of feeling unsafe, broken and disconnected from my body. I had started a job in a non-profit serving low-income youth....the culture of this workplace was seriously weird. I felt deeply uncomfortable and somehow disempowered by many of their expectations, interactions with leadership, things other staff would say, etc. But as a new employee with what I would come to discover was CPTSD, a history of panic and a serious need to have food and shelter income, all I knew at that time is that I needed to hide these feelings and "be normal," After all, my rent and food and car payment depended on it. I also wanted to prove to myself that I was/could be 'normal,' and could hold a job past the point of people discovering I had a 'panic disorder.'

So you could say I had a lot of internal pressure on myself.
One day we were having a meeting led by my boss's boss. He is a tall racist, white dude, an asshole, used authority as a weapon, hid his ineptitude behind power dynamics and largely got away with these things because he was very calculating about letting them show and laughed and smiled a lot and bought people things. It was really fucked up. Before I knew all of that about him, I knew that I felt sick around him. I saw myself freezing as soon as he would walk into a room and I would compensate by acting overly cheerful and 'nice.' Each interaction left me feeling...familiar....nothing I quite knew how to name. Just somehow less present, less in my body, less something.... after many of our interactions I would feel a vague shame and would stare off blankly for a while, dissociated.
So in he walks to my first big staff meeting about a month into my employment and wants each of the employees to do a small presentation of where they were at in their job duties. Panic rolls through my body like thunder. I almost stood up and left (I mean ran out of the room in a panic) but at this point I had been dealing with panic attacks for over a decade and so I knew that as long as I could stay seated and tolerate the physical pain of panic and terror, that I could simply read what I wrote on my report and survive. But I was sure that this was the moment I was going to crack and be destroyed forever. I somehow fumbled my way through it or I talked really fast. I don't remember.

What I do remember were the feelings of toxic shame and the loss of trust in my own body that followed. After each interaction with him I would have a day of intense self hatred and loathing, often followed by a period of superficial cheeriness about how I am going to get it right the next time and "be normal." But, I proceeded to get worse and worse working there until I got mental health support from a therapist who believed me when I came in with my library books and said I thought I had CPTSD. I grew up in a home with a racist, homophobic, dominating, power wielding, patriarchal man who resented me for being smart and absolutely hated emotional expression/needs and connection. He did the best he could, after his own traumas, to see all that abuse as an expression of love. And how I was allowed to show I was a good daughter was to empathize with him and assist my mother in the co-dependent management of the home life around his needs. If I had needs or was pointing out how fucked up things were, it was me who was framed as being the problem. So, here I am at this job, with no money in the bank and a desperate need to stay employed. You could say the work environment was replicating my childhood home, where I had to perform in order to get my survival needs met. I was unaware that I was dealing with the natural processes of complex trauma yet. I was living with intense fluctuations of "everything is good and so I am good" to "everything is bad, so I am bad." In comes this authority figure
which I am unable avoid but I could not seem to uncover why I felt 13 around him. Being put on the spot to perform for him in the meeting created enough internal conflict and triggered me into a flashback of deep unsafety and internal conflict. I wanted to flee.....but my survival and my own internal pressures of how "good employees/normal people" react would not allow me to. I was stuck, unsafe and reliving something very, very familiar. This would be the first of many, many panic attacks, emotional flashbacks and disempowering experiences I would have there. I really thought that it was my inability to cope that was at the heart of the matter. It took some serious digging to unearth why he triggered such a powerful reaction in me. But once I identified that it was not just that he 'reminded' me of my paternal person, but that the learned through developmental trauma rules I have around this kind of person make it so that I am not allowed to see them as bad/unsafe/asshole or else I am bad/unsafe/asshole.

Layers of implicit and procedural memory was having a tug of war within me. Triggers are the set up, the catalyst, the instigation, the right set of circumstances to tip over the dominos stacked inside of us. It is important to understand that the trigger is simply that push against a traum-ino that starts the process. We are susceptible to "being triggered" when there is unresolved traumatic experience being stored, typically outside of our conscious knowledge, in our minds and bodies.

Triggers come in varieties:

- **Emotional/Relational triggers** can be some of the hardest to identify and understand. Basically, if the context of our traumas happened in relationship to others (emotional, physical, sexual abuse and/or emotional or physical neglect) then relationships are going to be a nesting ground for triggers. Possibly with everyone, possibly with types who remind us in some way of the abusive person. Usually, there can be varying degrees of being triggered by relationships. And because we are driven to connect
with others as social beings, these types of triggers can be very, very, very painful and isolating. Folks with relational triggers can often have periods of being fine and open in a relationship until some tipping point happens in which there is a sudden need to push the self or the other away, often very dramatically, only for the heightened state of the trigger to pass and the person tries to draw close again. All those states of being are very real. And scary and confusing.

- Inner triggers are seriously a pain in the ass. Our very internal landscape of emotions, feelings, needs, and wants can set off an internal volcano of fear, shame, panic and dissociation. It is like the inner critic takes a dose of steroids and decides to beat us up. These triggers are a bit harder to identify, but usually they come from one part of us having feelings or needs that are deemed “bad,” and the inner critic, whose voice is loud and large and abusive takes over, sending us into deep and fearful states of shame from which there feels no escape. They are similar to relational triggers above, but here it is the relationship we have with our self which can be a trigger. This is often a result of a internal part of us replaying out ways in which we were treated by folks we depended on for our love and safety. Some part of us, early on, had to identify with this abusive voice to establish a map of the world internally. and as we grow up, that internalized abuser can stay with us.

- Place/location triggers can arise when we have traumatic memory which involved a specific type of place or setting. This can arise from single event traumas as well as ongoing traumatic experiences. Place related trauma often causes clear avoidance patterns, such as not getting into any elevators after a traumatic experience in one, or having a dimly lit bedroom evoke fear so the person sleeps with the lights on....the fear of specific places, like an elevator, can evolve over time to become more generalized, such as also now avoiding smaller rooms or closets, narrow hallways, etc....often making the person experiencing this feel crazy, and like they are losing
more control. The response then is simple physics: I feel like I am losing my grip so I try and grip harder...I try and avoid even more things so I don't feel out of control.

- Somatic/sensory triggers are body sensations related to our traumas. They can be touches (any type of touch), emotional experiences, places on our bodies which hold fear or pain, the actual feelings of fear and anxiety, shifts in our body-state such as fever or temperature, blood sugar levels, blood pressure levels, heart rate, need for or rejection of food and hunger, headaches, hormonal fluctuations, sexual arousal or lack of arousal, smells, certain food tastes.....basically, anything that involves our five physical senses can also trigger them. Somatic triggers can be really hard to identify as they are often lacking language, story and a sense of time and can tell us things about our traumas that talking about them usually will not.

As I was typing this, I had a vision of the first time I can remember biting and picking at my nails. I was young, really young (7? 8?), and had just come out of a very chaotic and intense set of circumstances....I would sit on top of the stairs at our new apartment and stare off, spaced out, picking my cuticles until they would bleed. The pain brought me some comfort and grounding into my body. I really didn't recognize the sensation as painful. I always thought I sat there on those steps and did that because I was bored. Sitting here, now, knowing where I am in space and time, I decided to spend a few minutes being with that girl, on the top of the steps. I feel safe right now, not triggered by this memory (meaning it is not creating a set of circumstances in me which are firing off a replay of past emotional states of being), so I can go be with her fully for a few moments. I imagine myself sitting next to her on the steps. I see her picking her hands. I feel into her. I accept that I am her, her knowledge lies within me. I focus on my breathing, slowly letting myself feel her feelings. What I discovered was that 'boredom was a surface level sort of 'cover-up' for what was actually a much larger feeling I didn't quite have the skills to name or process. I was
LONELY. I felt truly, utterly alone. It was the moment, as a young person, that I accepted being alone as a 'true' state of being that I could not change. It was the beginning point for many dissociative behaviors to follow. I wasn't bored, I was aware, for the first time in my conscious awareness of what it felt like to be totally alone, and that reality was too much for me to comprehend at that age. It was also an unsafe reality as I still depended on adults for my food and shelter.

Damn, I love that resilient little girl, stubby ass nails and all. She found ways to ground when the circumstances were beyond her control and the world was cold and scary. I was 7 when I first felt truly alone in the world. Now I know.

One more trigger type:

- Time related triggers can include "anniversary reactions," where there is an involuntary reaction to a time around which something traumatic happened (a death, an accident, a break up, when something happened to you). This can be as wide as a time of year or a specific season (holidays, anyone?), a month, etc. and as narrow as a specific day or a time of day. I would certainly include regular time intervals such as 'meal time,' and 'bed time.' as well. While we would think these would be the most recognizable ones since there would be an obvious pattern or frequency they would occur, truthfully, the pattern may not present itself as a pattern and the connection to why "bath time," or "christmas" or "when the days get shorter," might be very buried in the body and unclear

What I really want to make sure we understand about triggers, is that they have exceedingly more and more power when we are in states of internal conflict and disempowerment. Which, for many of us is how we live everyday: managing and surviving the internal chaos that we have come to know as our normal. Our way of surviving. It is EXHAUSTING. Especially within the vapid culture of systemic racism, colonialism, capitalism, etc.
The ‘healing’ or lessening the impact of triggers, then, is the ongoing process of eliminating the internal conflicts which prevent us from being fully in the present and able to process, in the present, what is happening within, around and to us. When big stuff comes up, but we are able to stay in our minds and bodies in the present, we have creative and adaptive responses to the big stuff, often helping to prevent it from getting stuck inside as stored trauma. But when we are constantly operating from a place of symptom management, economic and psychological survival, our ability to respond to internal and external stress creatively and adaptively seriously disappears. Like seriously. Triggers are only triggers because we are unable to fully process the whole of our realities in the moment, but instead are shot back into some other place where trauma happened and we were stripped of our control, our authority, our safety, our power. Our responses in the present are restrained to whatever skills/knowledge/autonomy/power we had when the original trauma occurred.

The hard part of diffusing triggers in our current culture is having access to the time it takes to explore these layers of being and fully feel and grieve/process them, having the financial resources to take that time or pay the support team of knowledgeable folk which can help hold us through the process and the ability to transcend the trap of financial survival.

Triggers shoot us straight back to the same set of super-powers we had when the original trauma happened: survive.

The way to dis-empower the trigger then, is ultimately to fully explore it. To create a container, slowly, and only as fast and safely as we are able (with no judgement on the process please), to hold all the information that the trigger has to show us. We don't get triggered because we are broken, we get triggered because we are whole, we have parts of ourselves who are still sitting on the steps wanting to tell us the secrets of our hearts and our bodies and our truths. We get triggered because there is some mighty fucking force in us that is willing to withstand the complexities of these traumas. We get triggered because we are not dead, and we can therefore still shift something, still find balance, still transform
what has not been known into what can be known: in our minds, in our bodies, in our hearts, in our lives.

Take the example I shared about asshole-boss and his perverse leadership. I didn’t stop being triggered by him until I was able to sit with my real feelings about how I was treated by my own paternal person who behaved similarly. It was when I discovered that even though I could say to someone, "yeah, my paternal person was an asshole," I was not allowed to feel like that inside. I was unable to react or make decisions about my own personal safety around him or else I was considered a terrible daughter, hysterical and an ugly selfish person. Only when I could see that internal paradox was I able to see why I was so out of control internally when I was around my boss. I had a set of deeply ingrained beliefs formed by traumatic experiences and emotional neglect which were too terrifying to consciously know, so I demanded internally that I feel and behave a certain way when it was in direct opposition to the reality that my boss and my paternal person were both assholes. Once I could see the pattern, I had to do the harder work of letting it sink in that nothing I could have done could actually change my paternal person into a not-asshole person. I never had that power. So, I learned to withstand the feelings of seeing my paternal person as an asshole AND the simultaneous feeling that I was a good daughter…and to grieve the loss of having a loving and safe paternal person in my life. The hardest part of being triggered by my boss was the paradoxical feelings that I really disliked him and yet, still wanted to be approved of, liked, seen.....

It took lots of digging at those layers to understand what all my internal voices were saying and to cut through the inner chaos so that I had the ability to sit in a meeting and totally feel in my body, how much of an asshole he was, and to not be triggered by my own internal conflict.
Is this making sense? The triggers have powers not because we are defunct or permanently broken, but because these shards of trauma are wanting to be freed from their prison of the past and the implicit realms of the self to the realms of explicit memory. To become a conscious and well placed part of our autobiographical self, our mythos.

Traum-inos:
Only a goof off Sagittarius would write about this as if it was actually fun. *Bear with me.*
So, you know how in the video above, the tiny little domino knocks over each bigger and bigger domino? Well, those dominos are all our pent up, ready to be made known on some level, stored traumatic experiences. The trigger is the force which knocks the first domino over. I imagine that uncovering our truths is like removing a domino. Sometimes we uncover something that is just the tiny little first one. But the other ones remain, ready to be knocked over...it will just take a bit more starting force. Sometimes, we uncover something big, something huge!!! And it may be like the last, hundred pound one is removed.
This is sort of what’s happening in a therapeutic relationship (ideally). Some folks have a community of friends, family and/or partner who can support the process by talking us through stuff without judgement/fixing so that the deeper knowledge can present itself. Some of us have exercise practices which drop physical stress levels enough so that stored knowledge can emerge from the body and the mind. Some of us have trance/prayer/spiritual practices which give us access to inner states which can be receptive to allowing memory to surface and be examined. Some of us walk in nature and let the trees and plants shift our nervous system into receptive states of being. Some of us might be barely hanging on for survival and asking questions of our trauma can be so scary that all of this traum-inos talk sounds like crap. <--- at the height of my panic and despair I likely would have thought, still,
that being triggered was mainly epic proof that I was a bad person. It's a real thing the trauma teaches us.

Some guidelines for this game:

- Safety always comes first. If exploring the past, feeling sensation in our body or remembering things evokes panic, there is no medal for pushing our self past what feels safe, in fact, when we respect our own needs, we develop an internal sense of trust and safety with our self, which is seriously the fastest way to healing.
- The slower you go, the faster you get there......one of the hardest lessons on my own personal journey. Often, we can make huge, huge strides in knocking out some traum-inos by paying lots of attention to the small things. Messages that our bodies send us throughout the day, cues as to when we are feeling a bit anxious or 'not ourselves,' or when our guts are trying to get our attention. The "let me lie on the couch and replay my deepest secrets and terrors" approach does not make healing happen faster if you are unable to then handle the after effects of retelling/experiencing such traumatic stuff. Re-playing is not the same as 're-membering,' to re-member is to put the pieces (truths) together into a new whole which is in our conscious awareness. There could be good reason why the conscious mind is trying to hold something out of our awareness: because it is terrifying. Going harder doesn't mean healing faster.
- No matter what happens in the game, love you. Like really, LOVE you. Perfection is bullshit. You are allowed to freak out, fuck up, push people away, make new friends, say no, say yes, laugh and be human, we are learning, in this process, to trust that every incident has an opportunity for healing and that we can love our self along the way. Everything we do or that happens is simply a communication about what is real
in that moment. The goal, when we trust that, is to then discover what those truths are communicating.

- Begin to notice levels of arousal throughout your day, set an alarm on the phone (one with a nice chime, lol) for every 4 hours or so, or 2, and do a five minutes sensory check in: how am i feeling in my body? Am I holding any tension? What is the predominant emotional state I am in? What catches my eyes right now? Do I smell anything? Is what I am wearing comfortable? Is it pleasing? Do I taste anything? would I like to? Do I hear anything? How far down into my belly is my breath going? Does it make past my lungs area? Being in the present moment is a muscle. This helps strengthen that muscle so we can more readily orient ourselves to the present when triggers happen. Also, this might be too much as well. If this exercise feels aversive, it is ok to trust that.

- Have fun. No seriously. You only live once. If there is even the smallest part of us, after a trigger passes and we come back into our self or the present, that can say, "well, shit, that was a wild ride," with a little private grin, we can activate important processes of rewiring your own relationship to the state of being triggered. I do not say this in a 'new agey' think positive kind of way. I mean it in a like, you are your own best friend and you can have a sense of humor about how damn chaotic and wild this being a human being is. It is your journey. Why not see some humor in it. I mean, I almost peed myself and ran out of a damn meeting in a panic because I was unable to hold asshole boss + good employee in my psyche at the same time! I should have peed on the table. That would have been fun. Pleasure is one of the absolute strongest medicines there is for a hyper-aroused nervous system. Whatever brings you true pleasurable joy, no matter how small, bring that in, more of it.

So how do we play traum-inos?
It is gonna be a bit different for each of us, but basically, we want to find safe ways to allow the parts of ourselves that were limited by past experiences to share their truths, explore them, release the pent up body + emotional energy stuck in the experiences into the present, transforming it from implicit awareness to explicit, allowing it to become a slice of our autobiographical pie. It is a long, layered, challenging, wild, chaotic, frustrating, ecstatic, life changing quest. And every new thing we discover about how we really feel/felt, what we really know and what are story is builds on the former. Like momentum, even if in the beginning it doesn't feel like it.

Keeping track of our triggers and finding ways to explore them safely is the key to creating a relationship with them. I am going to offer a set of questions below which can be useful to use as a journal guide to help build that relationship. I like to talk some of the questions aloud when I am doing the dishes as a way to explore them, because I am very auditory and have trouble with journaling and writing things out. Do what works for you, but this is a place to start. There is no right or wrong way, skip any ones you don't want to answer and spend as much time on one as you like.

We can do this process often to help uncover patterns for the same or different triggers. Please only do this process when you are feeling safe to explore and have some tea or food in your belly or things that make you feel cared for. Give yourself some time. Doing it on the bus right before work like I used to is not the smartest, lol....stuff might come up and I want you to have the privacy and time you need to let it out, dance it off, shower it away, cry it out, call a friend, etc. Think ahead of time what helps soothe you if you do begin to feel triggered in the process.

The first step in helping to address triggers is knowing that they are even happening, so see if any of the following applies: (Oh and also, our strongest survival mechanism is to store trauma in a place that makes it hard to know, so if this process seems hard, that isn't
because you aren't doing it right, that is because of how brilliantly designed we are for survival)

- Your reaction to a situation seems way more intense than you or others who you trust think is appropriate or usual
- During the reaction it feels like a tidal wave comes over you and you cannot change the course of your reactions, even when a part of you is watching yourself
- You have a defense reaction that seems familiar: fight, flight, freeze or fawn
- You feel like you are watching yourself have the reaction or as if you are someone else, somewhere else while it is happening
- You go on autopilot and lose connection to parts of yourself, such as your emotional or physical experiences
- You are reacting to a situation you believe is happening when others point out that it is not
- You dissociate
- You manage to 'deal with' and encounter or experience only to have hours or days later a delayed reaction of being triggered

If any of the following questions seem familiar or like they apply to a set of experiences you are having, pick one you want to explore and try answering some of these questions about it. It is VERY FREAKING IMPORTANT to develop a sense of wonder and curiosity about the questions as opposed to a need to answer them right or feel like we "should" know the answer. Go slow. Be honest when the answer is "I don't know" and write that. You can even begin writing about how you feel that you don't know. Because it is damn frustrating. And this is a lot of work! If you feel like this process is overwhelming or unsafe, don't do it alone or do it all at once. Try just one question.
• Where was I when I was triggered?
• What was the circumstances I was in when I found myself to be triggered?
• What occurred right before I noticed that I was triggered?
• Are there any body sensations, mood shifts, etc that I remember? No detail is too small.
• Do I remember what I was thinking about myself as the events unfolded? What was my internal dialogue (if any)?
• Was the inner critic present or saying anything?
• What is my relationship to any of the people involved?
• Is there any part of you that recognizes an old pattern or feeling?
• How did I cope with the trigger and make it through?
• Are those coping skills ones I have used in the past with other people or experiences?
• In your imagination, where there are no actual external consequences to any of your choices, could you image a different outcome or reaction to the trigger? What would it be? If you could react or do anything differently, what would it be? (Don't limit yourself here, if you want to say, "I would become Wonder Woman and use a taser gun to stun the dude on the bus who winked at me," go for it. Remember, you are liberating and giving voice to parts of yourself in this process)
• Did any sensory information get observed as I got triggered? What was in my environment?
• If I have to face this specific trigger again, what do I think will help me stay a bit more in the present context?
• Does my inner-child, or my vulnerable parts have any needs from me?
• Has any particular old memory or set of circumstances made itself present to be explored?
• How do I feel right now?
• Are there any emotions I want to feel or release? Grief, tears, anger....feel free to let the pen free write any thoughts without censoring

Throughout this process, I recommend checking in with our bodies, our senses, and your precious heart to the degree that feels easy or comfortable. Have tea. Make equal parts holy basil + rose + skullcap. Or Oatstraw + skullcap + lavender. With or without honey. Get some fantastic herbalist's heart tea blend or an elixir that makes you feel good. Eat something good if food is a source of pleasure or grounding for you. Play music which nourishes you. Move the self for like 90 seconds. The smallest detail or pattern that we can uncover in this process is significant. All manner of meditating on what is really happening for us in these experiences can help move things around, shrink the size of the trauma-ino, etc. As you do this a few times, you might begin to see a pattern or ask new questions or feel more in tune with identifying the trigger.

Something important to note: I'm not a mental health professional. I share this information from my own research, my own life and experiences and what I see helps folks who are doing this hard work. I encourage you to adapt any of this your own way, take as much if this as you need and throw the rest out or to do none of it. You are, in any given moment, the best source of information on what does or does not work for you. As an herbalist, I work with plants as an aid in this journey, whether that is helping to increase vagal tone and bring down the physiological state of defensiveness in the body, helping to intercept panic as it rises, reduce inflammation levels, assist sleep, etc....other things might be a portal to what feels liberating to you.
I wonder what traum-inos are waiting to be knocked down, removed and re-purposed into some other great wonderful thing in your life your own way, at your own pace. Remember, we are defusing freaking mines here, so be really kind to yourself. Oh and one other thing! If anyone in your life tells you that triggers are all about "letting things go," and that you need to "just move on," or they send you some bullshit meme about life is all how you look at it, you have my permission to smile politely and walk away. This shit is not for the faint of heart and it certainly isn't about putting on a cheery face. It's about us reclaiming more of our life and our truths and our heart as sovereign territory. It's our own personal game of thrones and it takes a bad ass to even consider knocking down some traum-inos! Play on brave heart-warrior, play on♥♥♥

xoxo!

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