

The 5 Questions: A Tool for Managing Triggers

Brief Instructions:

- 1.) **What am I feeling? Where am I feeling it in my body?**
- 2.) **Does the feeling remind me of anything specific from the past? When have I felt this way before?**
- 3.) **In what ways are this current situation and the past situation similar?**
- 4.) **List all the ways in which the present situation is different from the past situation**
- 5.) **What action(s), if any, do I want to take to feel better in the present?**

Detailed Instructions:

When you think your emotional response is stronger than it should be to a present day situation/stimuli, it can be helpful to ask yourself whether something from your past has been triggered. Sometimes the answer is no, you are simply upset by something that has happened in the present. Often, however (especially if you are surprised and/or confused by the strength of your reaction), the present day situation is triggering feelings from the past that serve to amplify your distress in the present.

To explore the source of present day distress, ask yourself **The 5 Questions**. The first few times you use this tool, it can be helpful to **write down your answers**. Over time you will become more comfortable with the tool and you'll be able to work the steps in your head fairly quickly.

1.) What am I Feeling? Examples: shame, fear, anger, sadness, terror, helplessness.
If you can, locate the feeling in your body: **where am I feeling that in my body?**

2.) Does the feeling remind me of anything specific from the past? When have I felt this way before?
(It can be one situation from the past or something that happened many times).

3.) In what ways are this current situation and the past situation similar? For example, is the time of year, setting, or the sights, sounds, body sensations in any way similar to the past situation when I felt this way? If the current situation involves another person, how is he/she similar to a person from the past who evoked similar feelings?

4.) How is the current situation different from the situation in the past in which I felt similar feelings? List every way you can think of that the present day situation is different from the past situation(s) you identified. For example: I am not a child anymore, this person isn't my parent, I have choices now that I didn't have then, this person has no power over me, this is what I can do differently now, I have resources now that I didn't have then, the setting or life circumstance is different now, etc.

This step serves to activate your logical brain (frontal lobes) at a time when your brain is hijacked by its emotion centers. This may help to lessen or eliminate your feeling of distress. Once you've identified that the feeling is the same in the present situation as the past situation(s), but in fact the present situation is quite different from the past, that awareness alone can help to dissipate the distress. If you find the awareness to be helpful, but the feeling doesn't go away immediately or completely, that's fine, be patient with yourself. You might need to use other coping skills as well to recover from being triggered. See Question 5 below.

5.) What action(s), if any, do I want to take to feel better in the present?

This can be **concrete action** to address the present day problem, for example communicating your feelings to the person who upset you, deciding to set a new boundary in your life, or choosing how to engage with a particular person or situation differently in the future. Sometimes self-protective actions should be taken to change the current situation if you are in an unsafe circumstance.

This can also be **self-care action(s)** to help dissipate the distress even further, for example using Calm Place, Container, or Safe State exercises; walk the dog, take a bubble bath, watch a comedy, yoga-- things you've already identified that help you to soothe and calm.

Taking action in some way serves to remind that although what you're feeling today is the same as how you felt in the past, the present is actually different from the past, and you have choices and options now that you can act on to take care of yourself.