

Figure 5.3: Understanding and Transforming Your Triggers

If we want to remain calm when students are pushing our buttons, then we need to understand our own triggers and reactions. Usually, our triggers surface when a student's behavior challenges one of our core beliefs, if we feel like we will lose something we care about, or if we feel like that behavior threatens one of our human needs (safety, competence, belonging, or security).

Sometimes we react to students or student behaviors because they push on a wounded part of our younger self—for example, if you were bullied in school and you have a student who reminds you of the person who bullied you. As humans, we all have wounded younger parts of ourselves, and it's important to remember that the part of us that reacts to those triggers isn't our current teacher self.

We all have triggers, whether it is because behaviors challenge our core beliefs, threaten a human need, or push on a younger wounded part of ourselves. What we do with them makes all the difference. The first step is understanding which behaviors trigger us and reflecting on why.

Part 1: Understanding Your Reactions to Student Behaviors

The first step in transforming our triggers is to understand what behaviors push our buttons, what we think and feel, and how we respond when they do.

- What student behaviors trigger you? What causes you to lose your cool? Make a list of the student behaviors that trigger you and then choose one to focus on as you complete the rest of the activity.
- Why might that behavior trigger you? (What core belief does it challenge? What need might not be met? What might you lose? Are you afraid of something?) Take some time to reflect and identify what threat that behavior creates for you. (Does it threaten your place of authority over the class? Does it threaten your job security? Does it exist in conflict with one of your core beliefs about how humans should behave in the world?) Try to identify why that specific behavior bothers you and describe it.

- What assumptions are you making about a student's beliefs and values because of that behavior? (Do you believe the student doesn't want to learn? Do you believe the student doesn't respect you? Do you believe the student doesn't care about the other students in the class?) Describe what you believe about a student's beliefs and values when they engage in that behavior.

Part 2: Transforming Your Triggers

Now that you understand a little more about your reactions to and thoughts and feelings about that behavior, let's dig in and try to understand why that behavior creates such a strong emotional reaction for you.

Step 1: Think about a specific type of student behavior that drives you crazy. Remember how it makes you feel when a student does that. Try to feel the emotions that come up for you when this occurs. Don't rationalize how you should or should not feel, just be with the feeling.

- How does your body feel?
- What do you think?
- What emotions come up?

- Write down what the behavior is and how you feel when you encounter it.

Step 2: Ask yourself, “Why does that behavior upset me so much?” Don’t try to analyze it. Let the answer come to you. Whatever pops into your head first is probably the answer.

Step 3: Say to yourself, “OK, but why does that upset me?” (Again, let the answer come to you and don’t try to analyze it or rationalize it away.)

Step 4: Keep repeating step 3 until you get a clear answer. You might experience a moment of realization: “Aha! Of course, that is the deeper reason why this bothers me so much.”

Once we understand the root of why something bothers us so much, its strength decreases, and those behaviors often don't upset us as much. This enables us to manage conflict with students more effectively and use behavioral missteps as opportunities to guide growth as students develop into adults. This also helps us find effective solutions to prevent or correct a behavior because we are less emotional about it.

Given your new understanding of why that behavior upsets you so much, how might you respond the next time you encounter it?