

# Ways to avoid triggers and get the result you want



Two of the most useful processes in goal achievement are substituting a positive action for a negative action and rearranging your surroundings to get the results you want.

## Finding positive substitutes<sup>1</sup>

Almost any positive, healthy activity can be an effective substitute for a negative action. The challenge lies in finding the ones that will work for you. Five effective techniques are discussed below.

### 1. Active diversion

The most common technique, active diversion, provides endless possibilities. You can distract yourself by doing a puzzle, keeping busy with a household chore or refocusing your energy by going for a brisk walk. Select a diversion that is enjoyable, healthful and compatible with and supports your goal.

### 2. Exercise

By substituting exercise, you can avoid a “trigger” and receive the many benefits of a good workout. (A trigger is something that may produce a negative response or action.) A minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise (equivalent to brisk walking) is recommended for healthy adults. Exercising for 30 minutes a day, five days per week, is an excellent plan. You can even break a 30-minute exercise session into three bouts of 10 minutes each.

### 3. Relaxation

When you can’t exercise in response to a negative cue or trigger, relaxation is a good substitute. An effective relaxation practice should include a quiet environment, a comfortable position/posture, an internal focus and letting go of tension/thoughts. Deep breathing, visualization, meditation, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation are effective ways to relax. Taking 10 to 20 minutes to achieve a state of deep relaxation can have numerous benefits, such as increasing your energy level, decreasing anxiety and improving concentration.

**4. Thinking differently**

This process replaces inaccurate, negative thoughts with more accurate and positive ones. You can use this technique under almost any conditions that prompt you to act in a negative way. By becoming aware of the thoughts that go through your mind in a given situation you can start to challenge and replace inaccurate, negative thoughts with more accurate statements. When you do, you are more likely to be in control of your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Also, be prepared to accept thoughts that are accurate, even if they are unpleasant, and put them in perspective so you can deal with them.

**Activity: Challenge your thoughts\***

Practice challenging any negative thoughts you may have. How accurate are these thoughts? Develop new, positive thoughts to replace them. Practice saying the new thoughts over and over. Notice how you are feeling when you think in positive ways.

Negative thought	Is this accurate?	What is a new, positive thought to replace it?

**5. Assertiveness**

Assertiveness means you are exercising your right to communicate your thoughts, feelings, wishes and intentions clearly. It helps you substitute feelings of helplessness with feelings of confidence. Assertiveness doesn't pursue or accomplish your goals at the expense of another person, as aggression does, nor does it deny your rights, as does passivity. Rather, assertiveness grants all parties their rights.

**Rearranging your surroundings<sup>1</sup>**

You can restructure or rearrange your surroundings so that the probability of a positive outcome is increased. Here are some techniques to try:

- **Avoidance**

Simply remove a trigger from your surroundings. Avoidance doesn't have to be limited to objects. There may be times when you need to avoid specific people or specific places.

- **Visualization**

Imagine a trigger or cue that you might face and then visualize yourself dealing with it in an appropriate way. You'll be better prepared to deal with the real cue when it actually presents itself.

- **Reminders**

Clocks and calendars are not the only reminders for controlling behaviors. Posting inspirational quotes, photos and other types of signage in visible locations can serve as reminders. A "to-do" list is one of the best types of reminders. Marking something off a list is one of life's little rewards.

**Activity: Personal triggers<sup>4</sup>**

Potential triggers	Problem?		How confident are you that you can cope? 10 = Extremely confident Not at all confident = 0										
Boredom	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Too much going on at once	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Loneliness	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Happiness, anger, sadness	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Hunger	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Tired/fatigued	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Anxious	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Difficult people (list)	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Trying to please too many people	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Specific places (list)	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Specific objects (list)	Yes	No	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Encouragement:**

If you remove a trigger or negative response without providing a positive, healthy substitute, you risk returning to your old patterns.

Sources:

1. Prochaska, JO and Norcross, JC. *Systems of Psychotherapy: A Transtheoretical Analysis – Ninth Edition*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.
2. INTERVENT International. Lifestyle management program: Thinking differently, 2020.
3. INTERVENT International. Lifestyle management program: Communicating assertively, 2020.
4. INTERVENT International. Tobacco cessation program: Preparing to quit (smoking), 2020.

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