

Why Did I React That Way?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies [Why Do I Get Triggered So Easily? The Four Stages of an Emotional Reaction](#) at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains each stage, why the first spike is not a failure, and how one reaction shapes the next. Search “triggered so easily” on the site to find it.

Every emotional reaction moves through four stages, and the fourth writes back into the first, so the stages form a circle. Choose one moment from the last few days that felt like a three to a six out of ten. The method works the same way on the hardest moments, and it is easier to learn on the middle ones. A few words per space is enough.

STAGE ONE

The spike

Start here. Name what arrived in the body, and every feeling, since stage one is rarely one feeling. The spike comes from three layers: the instrument we are born into, the attachment system, and the history this cue touches. The first layer is ours to understand, not to train away.

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

Unconscious. No thought seems to go by, and the interpretation was still made. We find it by working backward from the feeling in stage one, since a feeling is the evidence of a rule.

For this feeling to make sense, what would I have to believe?

What does this moment resemble, and when have I felt this before?

What did I expect would happen next?

What would have to be true for this event to hold so much authority?

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

What we told ourselves once part of the moment reached awareness, and what we did. Thinking counts as doing: justifying, blaming, explaining and proving the interpretation right all belong here. Stage three either feeds the loop or opens a way out of it.

STAGE FOUR

Return, resolution, and recataloging

How the body settled, where the moment landed, and what got written into the system for next time. We never erase an old entry. A new one can sit beside it.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

THE CUE

Someone takes the parking spot we have been waiting for and holds up a middle finger.

STAGE ONE

Heat in the chest, a flash in the forehead. Anger 8, humiliation 6, a little fear.

STAGE TWO

Worked backward: people being inconsiderate is intolerable, and I have to make it stop. Under that, he did this because I am short. It resembles being made small.

THOUGHT

“He thinks he can do that to someone like me.”

BEHAVIOR

Getting out of the car to confront him, or sitting in it and replaying the moment for an hour.

RETURN

Staying in the car until the heat passes, then telling someone steady who stays with it.

RECATALOGING

Old entry: inconsiderate people leave me powerless. New entry beside it: it is hard, and it makes me angry, that people can affect my body and I cannot guarantee they won't. What I can control is me.

The moment

THE CUE

What happened, in a sentence or two. Where was I, and who was there?

How big did it feel? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

BEFORE IT BEGAN

What I was
carrying

Stage one depends on the state of the instrument when the cue arrives.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Short on sleep, food, or movement | ☐ Already stressed or overstimulated |
| ☐ Alone, or with someone I trust | ☐ Already activated by something earlier |

STAGE ONE

The spike

Where did it arrive in my body? Name each feeling and give it a number from 0 to 10. Several at once is common.

IN THE BODY

FEELINGS AND HOW STRONG (0-10)

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

Work backward from each feeling. Finish the sentences, and leave room for more than one answer.

FOR THIS FEELING TO MAKE SENSE, I WOULD HAVE TO BELIEVE...

THIS MOMENT RESEMBLES... (A PERSON, A PLACE, AN EARLIER TIME)

I EXPECTED THAT NEXT...

Stage two is a guess built from history, and it arrives with the authority of perception. Finding it does not make it wrong. It shows us which library it came from.

What I did, and how it ended

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

Separate the thought from the action. Both belong to this stage.

WHAT I TOLD MYSELF

WHAT I DID (OR ALMOST DID)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

☐ It kept the reaction going or spread it to someone else

☐ It moved me toward settling, repair, or a different setting

STAGE FOUR

Return, resolution, and recataloging

Three movements. Some moments only reach one or two of them.

RETURN TO BASELINE: HOW MY BODY SETTLED, AND WHO OR WHAT HELPED

RESOLUTION: WHERE IT LANDED (RELIEF, PRIDE, CONNECTION, SHAME, A NEW SPIKE)

RECATALOGING: WHAT I LEARNED TO EXPECT NEXT TIME

THE CATALOG

The old entry stays. Write it down, then write the entry we want sitting beside it.

THE OLD ENTRY:

A NEW ENTRY BESIDE IT:

Putting it together

An account that holds the whole reaction without dismissing it and without mistaking it for proof.

THE WHOLE ACCOUNT, IN MY WORDS

This resembles... I was already carrying... My body registered... My mind began building a story about... The feeling is real, and it is not evidence that...

ONE PLACE THE CIRCLE COULD OPEN

Pick one stage. Stage one is rarely where change starts. Stage three usually is, and stage four decides what gets written down.

THE STAGE:

WHAT I COULD DO THERE NEXT TIME:

WHO COULD HELP ME COME BACK SOONER:

A SECOND EXAMPLE: AN ORDINARY CHOICE

THE CUE	A friend asks: "This concert is Friday at seven. Do you want to go?"
STAGE ONE	Guilt, excitement, frustration, nervousness, and curiosity, all at once.
STAGE TWO	Worked backward: short notice means I was an afterthought. Concerts are paired with drinking.
THOUGHT	"That was inconsiderate of them to ask so late."
BEHAVIOR	An automatic no.
RESOLUTION	Relief, then shame, because the no repeated a pattern we no longer value.
RECATALOGING	The relief makes the next automatic no more available. Going anyway would have written a different entry: I can feel guilt and frustration and still act on a value.