Session 5: Triggers: People, Places, Things, and Feelings

Duration: 60 minutes • Recovery education group. Ensure all participants are seated and ready

Materials: Trigger Map worksheet (workbook page); whiteboard; the Session 5 handout (Top-5 Trigger Map)

Learning objectives — by the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Sort triggers into external (people, places, things) and internal (feelings, body states, thoughts)
- List their five highest-risk triggers with a rating
- Pair each top trigger with a specific 'way of escape' plan

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 1 — Foundation. The one idea today is that a trigger is information, not a character flaw, and it can be mapped and planned around. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. A trigger is not a character flaw; it is information — a learned association we can map, rank, and plan around. Today everyone leaves with their five highest-risk triggers named, rated, and paired with a written way out.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: “What is the trigger that has caught you off guard most often — the one you did not see coming until you were already in it?” Log every craving score on the roster.

Passing is honored — you may pass any question, prompt, or practice without explanation, step out and rejoin, and choose a partner-only option where one is offered.

Teaching (20 minutes)

A trigger is anything that switches on the urge to use: a corner, a payday, a certain person's name on the phone, an argument, loneliness at a particular hour, pain, boredom, celebration. Triggers are learned associations — the brain linked the cue to relief — which means they can be mapped, anticipated, and gradually weakened as we repeatedly experience the cue without using. We sort them because the strategy differs: external triggers are handled first by distance and design (routes, contacts, cash handling), while internal triggers are handled by skills (naming feelings, HALT checks in Week 2, thought records in Week 3). No one white-knuckles a trigger that a plan could have removed.

- **Triggers are information, not failure** Being triggered means the old learning fired — it says nothing about your sincerity today. What you do in the next ten minutes is the recovery.
- **Rate them honestly** A trigger list where everything is a '10' helps no one. Ranking forces the real question: which three situations actually endanger me this month?
- **The way of escape is written down** In the moment, the brain argues. A plan made in advance — who I call, where I go, what I say to leave — argues back.

- **Feelings are triggers too** For many people the strongest triggers are internal: resentment, shame, loneliness, and also joy and success. Feelings are not commands; they are weather reports.

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

Relapse prevention research treats return to use as a process with identifiable warning signs and high-risk situations that can be planned for in advance (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985). Key sources for this session: Marlatt & Gordon (1985); Gorski & Miller (1986); National Institute on Drug Abuse (2018). Evidence strength: Moderate. Spiritual practice: Scripture meditation — correlates with rumination replacement and attentional training; evidence: Moderate (Beck et al., 1993; Goyal et al., 2014). Full citations: Appendix H. The session's Scripture material is in its optional handout (Appendix I), as theological foundation, quoted from the King James Version.

'Evidence strength' grades the correlated mechanism, not the spiritual practice itself

Pause midway through teaching: ask, "What part of that sounds most like your life right now?" Take two or three answers, connect them to the teaching, and continue. Teach in your own words — the bullets are your map, not a script to read aloud.

Discussion questions (10 minutes)

1. Which category — people, places, things, or feelings — carries most of your risk right now?
2. Is there a trigger you have been protecting (keeping the number, keeping the route, keeping the 'just in case')? What keeps you holding it?
3. What 'ways of escape' have actually worked for you, even once?
4. Who needs to know your top trigger so they can help you guard it?

Skill practice (12 minutes)

Each participant builds a Top-5 Trigger Map in their workbook: trigger, risk rating 1–10, the way of escape in one sentence, and the person who will hold them to it. Volunteers share one row. Facilitator checks that every escape is concrete — 'call Marcus and go to the house meeting' passes; 'try harder' does not.

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

Run the experiment: choose your highest-rated avoidable trigger and avoid it all week by design (route, contact, or cash plan). Log any moment the internal triggers fire and what you did. Report the data next session. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave.

Facilitator notes and cautions

Watch for participants disclosing triggers involving people in the program or the residences. Do not process conflicts between participants in group; note it, redirect to the plan, and inform the Program Director the same day. Also guard against graphic detail when places and rituals are described — redirect to category, not scene.

Closing (2 minutes)

No one white-knuckles a trigger that a plan could have removed. Run the experiment this week and bring the data. Next session: cravings — and the fact that every wave comes down.

Fidelity check for this session: objectives named at the start ☐ craving scores logged ☐ skill practice completed in full ☐ homework written down by participants ☐ session note filed today ☐

Week 2 — Stabilization