



## Guidance from Holy Spirit Vs Triggering

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**I. Triggered negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors:** Triggered negative thoughts and emotions will be produced by anything in the present that activates, or triggers, the memory content from traumatic experiences that have not yet been healed. When this happens, the toxic negative thoughts anchored in the memories and the painful emotions carried in the memories will come forward and feel true in the present. Furthermore, this content from the traumatic memories will usually come forward as implicit memory, so that the person has no awareness that it is memory content, but rather perceives that it belongs in the present and that it is valid and appropriate in the present.

Not surprisingly, we feel subtle (or not-so-subtle) motivation to avoid situations that trigger negative thoughts and emotions. And, unfortunately, this avoidance of situations that trigger us will impair our discernment, pushing us into making poor decisions as we pursue the temporary relief of avoiding the painful triggered thoughts and emotions.

For example, various painful experiences in Charlotte's childhood were the source of negative emotional learning along the lines of "I don't have anything of value to contribute," and "No one wants to hear what I have to say," with anxiety, insecurity, and self-doubt accompanying these negative thoughts. And then later in life, Charlotte would feel resistance to doing things that would trigger these negative thoughts and emotions. When someone suggested that she speak at an important conference for church leaders, or offered to promote her material for publication in a prominent church periodical, or encouraged her to expand a conference presentation into a book, the memory-anchored negative thoughts came forward and felt true, she felt anxious and was riddled with self-doubt, and she felt subtle emotional/intuitive pressure pushing her away from these opportunities that would have activated these same triggers much more intensely.

Furthermore, the perceived validity of triggered negative thoughts and the intensity of triggered negative emotions will be exaggerated because they will match the perceived validity of the trauma-anchored lies and the intensity of the emotions associated with the underlying trauma (as opposed to being appropriate for the current situation in the present).

**II. Triggered "positive"<sup>1</sup> thoughts, emotions, and behaviors:** Triggered "positive" thoughts and emotions will be produced by anything in the present that comforts, covers, or counter-acts

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<sup>1</sup> The "positive" in "positive triggering" is in quotes because positive-triggering thoughts, emotions, and behaviors initially appear to be positive, but actually have subtle toxic aspects as discussed below. Also, I am not sure "triggered" is the best word to use in "triggered positive emotions," since we usually use "triggered" to refer to thoughts and emotions that come from directly activating the toxic content associated with unresolved trauma. I chose to use "triggered" because the subjective experience is so similar with respect to the exaggerated intensity, and with respect to the intense *subjective feeling* that the thoughts and emotions are reasonable *in the present*, even though careful investigation reveals that there is actually no adequate source *in the present*.

the pain in traumatic memories. The triggered “positive” thoughts will be the opposite of the distorted negative beliefs anchored in the trauma, and the triggered “positive” emotions will be the opposite of the emotions usually associated with the erroneous trauma-anchored beliefs.

For example (continuing the story about Charlotte’s trauma-anchored self-doubts and insecurity), Charlotte temporarily felt better when people really seemed to perceive the value of something she had said or something she had created. When people displayed an in-depth understanding of the details, and expressed intense interest and appreciation, “I *do* have something to offer” and “People *do* want to hear what I have to say” would temporarily feel true instead of the negative thoughts. And she would temporarily feel seen, heard, valued, and affirmed instead of feeling the subtle insecurity, the self-doubts, and the subtle sense of not being seen, not being heard, not being valued, and not being affirmed that often smoldered in the background when her trauma-anchored lies were close to the surface.

And just as we feel subtle (or not-so-subtle) force *pushing us away* from situations that trigger *negative* thoughts and emotions, we feel subtle (or not so subtle) forces *attracting us towards* situations that trigger *positive* thoughts and emotions. Unfortunately, this attraction towards situations that trigger positive thoughts and emotions will impair our discernment, drawing us into making poor decisions as we pursue the temporary relief and/or gratification provided by the triggered positive thoughts and emotions.

For example (again continuing with Charlotte’s story), a number of years ago, before she became pastor, a group of visitors came up to Charlotte immediately after the Sunday morning service and explained that they were intensely interested in, and impressed with, the Children’s Church program that she had developed. They were also lay-ministers and were developing a children’s program as well. Charlotte was thrilled that they were so interested in her work, and thoroughly enjoyed describing the program, showing them the teaching accessories she had designed, and answering their questions. But she had also agreed to be some place else fifteen minutes after the service.

This is where positive triggering comes in. Instead of explaining that she had a prior commitment and making plans for more time at a later date, and then giving them a brief description of the program, a quick glance at the Children’s Church room, and answering a few questions, she described the program in detail, gave them the deluxe tour, and answered all of their questions, even though she knew that this was making her late for her prior obligation. Even as it was happening, she was aware of a compulsive push to keep talking about her Children’s Church program – she was aware of how her continued conversation was making her increasingly late for her next commitment, but she just couldn’t stop. Pursuing the triggered positive emotions stirred up by the interest and affirmation from these visitors made her feel like somehow she simply *had* to answer every question and tell them about *every aspect of the program, in detail, right then.*<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, just as with negative triggering, the perceived validity of positive-triggering thoughts and the intensity of positive triggering emotions will be exaggerated because they will

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<sup>2</sup>Note that this was all very unusual for Charlotte. She is usually very responsible regarding anything she has agreed to do, she is usually very considerate regarding being on time, and she usually does a good job of balancing various life challenges so that she actually is on time. And that’s the whole point of this example – the attraction towards the triggered positive thoughts and emotions impaired her discernment and life-balance.

match the perceived validity of the trauma-anchored lies and the intensity of the emotions associated with the underlying trauma (as opposed to being appropriate for the current situation in the present).<sup>3</sup>

**III. Triggered emotions mistaken for guidance from the Holy Spirit:** Triggered *negative* emotions are often mistaken for a “check in the Spirit” (guidance from the Holy Spirit that we *should not* do a certain thing), and triggered *positive* emotions are often mistaken for a “prompting from the Spirit” (guidance from the Holy Spirit that we *should* do a certain thing).

This actually makes a lot of sense when you think about it for a minute. The subjective experience of guidance from the Holy Spirit usually includes several qualitative features:

- A true *check* from the Holy Spirit often feels subjectively like an emotional, intuitive nudge/pressure *away from* doing a certain thing, and a true *prompting* from the Holy Spirit often feels subjectively like an emotional, intuitive nudge/pressure *towards* doing a certain thing.
- This nudge/pressure inherently feels like more than the ordinary “I don’t want to do such and such” or “I do want to do such and such.” (If it did not feel like more than just ordinary preference, we wouldn’t think it was a check or prompting from the Spirit).
- And this nudge/pressure inherently feels somewhat mysterious -- we can’t identify an adequate, logical explanation. (If we could see an adequate, logical explanation, we wouldn’t think it was a check or prompting from the Spirit).<sup>4</sup>

And the subjective experience of “guidance” from triggered emotions usually includes several very similar qualitative features:

- Triggered *negative* emotions will often feel subjectively like an emotional, intuitive nudge/pressure *away from* doing certain things; and triggered *positive* emotions will often feel subjectively like an emotional, intuitive nudge/pressure *towards* doing certain things.
- The inflated perceived importance and exaggerated emotional intensity of triggered emotions cause this nudge/pressure to feel like more than the ordinary “I *don’t* want to do such and such” or “I *do* want to do such and such.”
- And we usually can’t identify an adequate, logical explanation for the nudge/pressure produced by our triggered emotions because our psychological defenses usually hide the connection to the underlying wounds and lies.

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<sup>3</sup> For additional discussion and examples of positive triggering, see the essay “Positive Triggering,” available as a free download from the “Special Subjects/Advanced Topics” section of the Resources page of [www.immanuelapproach.com](http://www.immanuelapproach.com).

<sup>4</sup> We sometimes feel a “check,” with the usual absence of a logical explanation, but then as we consider the matter more we realize that there is a logical explanation regarding why the “check” is indeed good guidance. My perception is that the initial feeling could be a true check from the Holy Spirit, and that this true check from the Spirit accomplishes its purpose by prompting us to slow down and think about the situation more carefully.

Our verbal logical explainers (VLEs) will happily explain that our oddly intense avoidance of situations that trigger negative emotions is actually just an appropriate, discerning response to a check in the Spirit, and that our oddly intense attraction to situations that trigger positive emotions is actually just an appropriate, discerning response to a prompting from the Spirit. I would much rather believe that I am perceiving guidance from the Holy Spirit, confirming that my discernment is good and that my sense of how to best navigate the situation is correct, as opposed to acknowledging that I am triggered, indicating that my discernment is seriously impaired and that my sense of how to best navigate the situation could easily be wrong.

Furthermore, triggered implicit memory always comes with the intense subjective perception that it is real, and valid, and important in the present. This aspect of implicit memory adds conviction to triggered “guidance” that we mistake for a check or prompting from the Holy Spirit.

Our perception is that many people, including ourselves, have mistaken triggered emotions for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

**IV. Discerning between triggering and guidance from the Holy Spirit:** The good news is that it is reasonably easy to tell the difference between triggered emotions and true guidance from the Holy Spirit once you learn to recognize both triggered negative emotions and triggered positive emotions.

***A. Check in the Spirit vs Triggered Negative Emotions:***

1. Negative emotions: A check in the spirit feels like a quiet sense “this is not a good plan,” a reluctance to proceed, a lack of peace/confirmation, *but does not include negative emotions*, such as fear or shame or discouragement. *In contrast*, negative triggering inherently includes negative emotions, such as fear, shame, discouragement, overwhelm, anger, guilt, etc.

2. Relational circuits: If you are not *also* triggered, your relational circuits should be online while receiving a check in the spirit. It is possible to be triggered, with your relational circuits offline, and also be receiving a true check in the spirit at the same time; but if you are triggered and your relational circuits are offline, *I would be very, very cautious regarding any perceived “check in the Spirit.”* In my own personal experience, I assume the supposed “check in the Spirit” is merely part of the triggering until proven otherwise.

3. Other clues indicating triggering: Relational circuits are the best clue to watch, but occasionally one will notice some other clue to indicate that one is triggered. For example, I will sometimes recognize a familiar implicit memory package before I notice that my relational circuits are off. (For example, “This whole constellation of thoughts and emotions feels familiar and young...Oh, yeah. This is the whole implicit memory package from my memories of being bullied on the grade-school playground.”) If you notice any indicators of triggering -- relational circuits offline or any other clues -- the principle with respect to guidance from the Spirit remains the same: *If you are triggered, assume that your supposed “check in the Spirit” is triggering until proven otherwise.*

***B. Leading of the Spirit vs Triggered Positive Emotions:***

1. Aspects of addictive behavior: A positive trigger will usually (always?) have aspects of

addictive behavior. For example, an addict can be fun, pleasant, and polite as long as he is getting free access to his addictive substance/behavior. But he will immediately become irritable, frustrated, and very unpleasant if anything gets in the way of access to his addictive substance. Similarly, if something gets in the way of fulfilling a positive trigger, the person will usually (always?) become irritable, frustrated, and unpleasant. Another example of positive triggering having aspects of addictive behavior has to do with bad choices to sacrifice other values. An addict will make bad choices to sacrifice other values in order to fulfill his addiction (for example, he will break promises, he will neglect other responsibilities, he will use money and other resources that have already been designated for other uses, etc). Similarly, a person who is pursuing positive triggering will also make the same kind of bad choices to sacrifice other values in order to pursue his positive triggering.

In contrast, leading of the spirit will *not* have any of these aspects of addictive behavior. Pertaining to the same examples: 1) If you are sensing a leading of the Spirit regarding some choice/decision/activity, you will feel an energy, a desire, a sense of rightness, and even a pressure toward fulfilling the leading of the spirit, *but you will not* become irritable, frustrated, or unpleasant if some outside force, situation, or circumstance gets in the way of fulfilling or implementing the plan/choice/decision/activity that you feel led towards. 2) If you are sensing a leading of the Spirit regarding some choice/decision/activity, you will feel an energy, a desire, a sense of rightness, and even a pressure toward fulfilling the leading of the spirit, *but you will not* make bad choices to sacrifice other values in order to fulfill or implement the plan/choice/decision/activity that you feel led towards.<sup>5</sup>

2. Relational circuits: If anything gets in the way of an addict's access to his substance, he will immediately become very irritable, frustrated, and unpleasant, and it will be very clear that his relational circuits are very much offline. Similarly, if something gets in the way of fulfilling a positive trigger, the person will immediately become irritable, frustrated, and unpleasant, and it will be clear that his relational circuits are offline. *In contrast*, unless the person is also triggered for some other reason, hindrances to fulfilling his leading from the Spirit should not push him into non-relational mode. He will work diligently to resolve hindrances, but he will do so while still being relational.

Furthermore, when I carefully examine my own experiences with positive triggering, my perception is that my relational circuits are subtly offline even when the positive triggering is *not* being thwarted. For example, I have often experienced positive triggering in association with special nature outings, and when I think carefully about these experiences of positive triggering, all of the criteria outlined in *Outsmarting Yourself* indicate that my relational circuits are off.<sup>6</sup> I am excited about the nature venture, and I am experiencing pleasure, but even the pleasure has an odd, pressured quality. And I am not feeling connected to the people around me -- I am intensely focused on the goal of the nature venture, and I am feeling the

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<sup>5</sup> A leading of the Spirit will sometimes cause the person to make sacrifices, but with true leading of the Spirit, wise, mature observers will agree that the sacrifices were appropriate, necessary, and good. In contrast, with addictions and positive triggers, wise, mature observers will perceive the sacrifices to be inappropriate, unwise, unnecessary, and wrong.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the criteria that indicate whether our relational circuits are online or offline, see Karl D. Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching Your Past Invading the Present and What to Do About It*, second edition (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2014), pages 109-160.

odd, pressured pleasure in relation to the special nature experience, but I am not feeling connected to any people who might be on the venture with me, and I am not feeling any relational connection joy. Again, when I review the criteria from *Outsmarting Yourself*, they all indicate that my relational circuits are off in the middle of these experiences of positive triggering.

3. Other clues indicating triggering: Again, relational circuits are the best clue to watch, but occasionally one will notice some other clue to indicate that one is triggered. And just as with negative triggering, if you notice any indicators of triggering -- relational circuits offline or any other clues -- the principle with respect to guidance from the Spirit remains the same: *If you are triggered, assume that your supposed leading from the Spirit is triggering until proven otherwise.*

**C. Check your relational circuits:** As may be apparent from the above discussion, the single most valuable resource for discerning between triggering and guidance from the Holy Spirit is being aware of whether or not your relational circuits are online. So whenever you think you are receiving guidance from the Holy Spirit, check your relational circuits:

If your relational circuits are clearly online (you are clearly in relational mode), then you can safely assume that you are not triggered, and therefore also safely assume that any sense of leading from the spirit is not triggering.

If your relational circuits are offline, then use the interventions described in *Outsmarting Yourself* (deliberate appreciation, receiving attunement, and calming) to get them back online,<sup>7</sup> and then look at the discernment question again *when you are clearly in relational mode*. Also, pay close attention to what happens when you go back to discerning after getting your relational circuits back online. If your relational circuits go offline every time you start looking at the issue in question, then there is almost certainly<sup>8</sup> something about the specific issue that triggers you, and this is very important. Being triggered regarding the issue will impair your discernment in a variety of ways, only one of which is mistaking triggering for guidance from the Holy Spirit. Even just clearly identifying the triggers will help to clarify the situation.

**V. Neutralizing discernment impairment from triggering:** If you detect that either negative triggering or positive triggering is present, the ideal is to resolve the triggering and then revisit the question of whether or not you are receiving guidance from the Holy Spirit. If the perception of guidance from the Spirit is completely gone after triggering has been resolved, use the experience as a learning trial: “That’s what it feels like to think I was getting a check in the spirit when I was really just triggered.” And if there is any sense of leading from the Spirit that still remains, use that as a learning experience as well: notice and remember the difference between the component that was triggering and the component that was truly guidance from the Spirit.

If you cannot fully resolve the underlying trauma for the trigger that was being mistaken for

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<sup>7</sup> For careful description and explanation regarding these interventions for getting your relational circuits back online, see *Outsmarting Yourself*, pages 161-232.

<sup>8</sup> There is also a small chance that the discernment process itself is somehow triggering you.

guidance (for example, you are dealing with a thematic issue that is anchored in many memories, and cannot be resolved with a quick session or two), the next best plan is to make sure that your relational circuits are online as you are trying to discern regarding the issue in question, and especially as you are trying to discern between guidance from the Spirit and triggering.

Finally, if you identify that there is something about the issue that triggers you, then make sure to put extra effort into getting input from others. That is, when your discernment is impaired by triggering, you want to be especially deliberate about including your community in the discernment process.