

What's a behavioral trigger?

A trigger refers to something that affects one's emotional state, by overwhelming the individual or causing extreme distress. A trigger may bring up specific thought patterns or influence behavior. Depending on the clients you serve examples of behavioral triggers may include the inability to inform you of pain, illness, wants, or needs, as well as feelings of betrayal, boredom, or confusion.

Why should you know your clients' behavioral triggers?

Triggers may produce very uncomfortable emotional or psychiatric symptoms, such as anxiety, panic, discouragement, despair, and aggression. A client reacting to triggers is normal, but as a caregiver if you don't recognize and respond to them appropriately, it may cause a downward spiral, making the situation worse. When behavioral triggers aren't recognized, it can lead to a situation where you or your client become injured. The key to preventing a behavioral incident is to not place your clients in situations that expose them to things that may trigger adverse behavior.

Consider the following scenario.

Jennifer, a residential aide working for a group home, has just returned to work after having the weekend off. She learns from a few co-workers that a new client was admitted during her absence. Jennifer is told he's a tall man, in his late 40s, who is mostly pleasant, but at times can become agitated to the point of throwing things and yelling at staff. Jennifer is slightly alarmed as she waits for the morning meeting to begin so she could learn more about her new client.

Use these questions as you discuss the scenario with your staff and determine what should be communicated during the meeting so Jennifer can work safely with her new client.

What are the triggers to avoid that escalate the behavior of the client?

Identify common triggers.

What should staff do if the client's behavior is already escalated?

Identify commonly used de-escalation techniques and discuss what staff should do if they fail.

Where are triggers documented (e.g., behavioral care plan, daily client notes, etc.) and how are they communicated to all staff?

All clients need to be discussed and changes communicated daily.

How will staff be informed of changes or updates to clients' behavioral care plans?

Identify your policy and procedures to inform staff of changes to plans.