Triggers, Cravings & the Trauma Response

Recognising what happens before the urge

This guide looks at stress, trauma, addiction and substance misuse through a compassionate, trauma-informed lens. It is not about excusing harmful behaviour. It is about understanding what may be driving the pattern, reducing shame, increasing safety and helping both the individual and the family find appropriate support.

External and internal triggers

Triggers can be places, people, conflict, anniversaries, sensory experiences, memories, shame, loneliness or physical sensations. The aim is not to eliminate every trigger but to recognise the sequence earlier and introduce a pause: grounding, changing environment, contacting someone, eating, resting or using a recovery plan.

Body memories and emotional triggers

After frightening, overwhelming or prolonged stress, the nervous system may stay on alert or move quickly into shutdown. Alcohol, drugs or compulsive behaviours can temporarily alter that state. This can make the behaviour feel less like a simple choice and more like a rapid route to relief, even when it later creates additional harm.

The urge-action gap

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Grounding before decision-making

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Creating a personal trigger plan

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A gentle reflection

What feels most stressful at the moment? What is within my control? What am I trying to manage for somebody else? Who could support me, not just the person who is struggling?

Turning to family without making family carry everything

Family connection can be protective, but family members can also be exhausted or traumatised by what has happened. Helpful support is shared, realistic and safe.

Ask before unloading

Try: “Do you have space to talk for ten minutes?” This gives the other person choice and helps prevent every contact becoming a crisis conversation.

Say what kind of help you need

You may need listening, company, transport to an appointment, help making a phone call or practical support. Being specific is often easier for everyone.

Do not make one relative the whole safety plan

Spread support where possible across professionals, peer groups, trusted relatives and services. Family members need rest and boundaries too.

Repair after difficult moments

Trauma and substance use can create conflict. When safe, acknowledge hurt, take responsibility for behaviour and agree what needs to change rather than relying only on promises.

Family members should get their own support

NHS and Adfam guidance both recognise the impact on parents, partners, children and carers. Getting help for yourself can reduce isolation and improve your ability to make clear decisions.

Books & further understanding

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

Gabor Maté
A compassionate exploration of addiction, pain and connection; useful as one perspective alongside mainstream clinical guidance.

Trauma and Recovery

Judith Herman
A foundational book on trauma, safety, remembrance and reconnection.

Changing for Good

James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross & Carlo C. DiClemente
Explains stages of change and why motivation and recovery are often non-linear.

Places for support and help

NHS / GP	A GP can discuss substance use, mental health and trauma symptoms and can signpost or refer to appropriate local services. Adults can also self-refer to NHS Talking Therapies in many areas for PTSD and related difficulties.
FRANK	Confidential drug information and a local service finder. Helpline: 0300 123 6600. FRANK advises calling 999 if urgent help is needed after drugs or alcohol.
Adfam	Family-focused support for people affected by another person's drinking, drug use or gambling. Its family guidance covers stress, anxiety, trauma, boundaries and getting help for yourself.
Addiction Family Support	Phone and email support for people affected by somebody else's drug or alcohol misuse. Helpline: 0300 888 3853.
SMART Recovery Family & Friends	Meetings and practical tools focused on coping, communication, boundaries and wellbeing for family and friends.
NHS PTSD / Talking Therapies	NHS guidance lists trauma-focused CBT and EMDR among treatments for PTSD. Adults can often self-refer to NHS Talking Therapies.
Emergency Help	Call 999 for immediate physical danger, suspected overdose, collapse, seizure, severe breathing difficulty or another life-threatening emergency.

Safety

If there is immediate physical danger, suspected overdose, collapse, seizure, severe breathing difficulty or another life-threatening emergency, call 999. If alcohol, benzodiazepine or other physical dependence may be present, seek medical advice before an abrupt unsupported stop.

Educational Support Hub resource - not a replacement for individual medical, psychological, safeguarding or emergency care.