

THE TRIGGER'S BROOM EFFECT

When so much about you has changed, but you are still you

Same essence. Different parts. Still you.

The idea behind the broom

There is something wonderfully ordinary about the image of a broom that has been repaired again and again. A handle wears out and is replaced. Later, the head needs replacing too. Over the years more pieces change, until eventually someone asks a deceptively simple question: if none of the original pieces remain, is it still the same broom? The familiar Trigger's broom joke gives us a playful way into a much older philosophical question about identity and continuity. But away from philosophy, it can also describe something deeply human. We live for decades, and during that time our bodies change, our circumstances change, our relationships change and our understanding of ourselves can change completely. We may replace old beliefs, learn new ways of coping, leave roles that once defined us and build a life that looks very different from the one we imagined. Yet there can still be a powerful sense that a thread runs through all of it: this is still my life, my history and my experience.

We are constantly replacing parts of ourselves

Human beings are not fixed objects. We learn, adapt, protect ourselves, recover, make mistakes, change direction and begin again. Some changes are chosen and others arrive without permission. A relationship may end. A career may change. Grief may divide life into a before and an after. Therapy may help us recognise patterns we have carried for years. A diagnosis may give new language to experiences we previously misunderstood. Recovery can mean letting go of behaviours that once helped us survive. Ageing can alter what our bodies can do, what matters to us and how we use our time. None of these changes happen in isolation. One change often affects another, and eventually we can look back at an earlier version of ourselves and wonder how that person and the person we are now can possibly be the same.

The coping strategies that once formed the handle

Many of our coping strategies develop for a reason. Avoiding conflict may once have kept us safe. Masking may have helped us fit into environments that did not understand us. People-pleasing may have reduced the risk of rejection. Working constantly may have created a sense of worth or control. Shutting feelings down may have been the only way to get through something overwhelming. These responses can become so familiar that they feel like personality rather than protection. When we begin changing them, it can feel surprisingly unsettling. If I stop being the person who always says yes, who am I? If I no longer hide how overwhelmed I am, will people still accept me? If I do not use the coping mechanism I have relied on for twenty years, what replaces it? Sometimes healing feels less like adding something new and more like changing the handle we have been gripping for a very long time.

Diagnosis and the question of identity

Receiving a diagnosis later in life can create its own Trigger's Broom moment. The past has not changed, but the explanation for it may have. Memories can suddenly be viewed through a different lens. Experiences previously labelled as laziness, oversensitivity, awkwardness, failure or lack of effort may begin to make sense in the context of neurodivergence, trauma, mental health or another condition. This can bring relief, but it can also bring grief, anger and uncertainty. A person may wonder which parts of themselves are genuinely theirs and which parts developed through years of adapting to expectations. The aim does not have to be to discover one perfectly 'authentic' version underneath everything. Identity can contain all of those experiences: the person who coped before understanding, the person learning now and the person still becoming.

Trauma, grief and the parts we did not choose to replace

Some of life's biggest changes are not improvements we carefully selected. Trauma, bereavement, illness, separation, redundancy, caring responsibilities and other major disruptions can alter how we experience ourselves and the world. People sometimes describe wanting to 'get back to the old me', particularly after something life-changing. That longing makes sense, but it can become painful when the old version of life cannot simply be restored. The Trigger's Broom idea offers another possibility: perhaps continuity does not require returning every part to its original state. We can acknowledge that something has changed us without deciding that everything we were before has disappeared. We may carry scars, different priorities, new boundaries and a different understanding of safety while still carrying memories, humour, values, relationships and parts of ourselves that existed long before the event.

Recovery is not becoming your old self again

Recovery is often described as getting back to normal, but that can create an impossible target. After depression, addiction, burnout, an eating disorder, anxiety, trauma or prolonged stress, a person may not want to return to exactly the life that existed before. Some of the old structures may have contributed to becoming unwell. Recovery can instead involve rebuilding: changing routines, asking for help sooner, recognising warning signs, setting limits, resting differently, choosing relationships more carefully and learning to respond to the body rather than constantly overriding it. The rebuilt life may look unfamiliar at first. That does not make it less real. A repaired broom is not a failed version of the original broom. Its history is visible in the fact that it has needed maintenance, adaptation and replacement in order to keep going.

What remains when so much changes?

Identity is rarely one single characteristic. It can be understood as a continuing relationship between our history, memories, values, connections, choices and sense of meaning. Some of those things remain relatively stable while others shift repeatedly. You may have changed your work, your appearance, your relationships, your coping strategies and your understanding of yourself, yet still recognise the same humour, curiosity, protectiveness, creativity, determination or need for connection running through your life. Equally, you may discover that qualities you once believed were permanent were actually responses to circumstances. There is no requirement to prove that you are exactly the same person you were ten or thirty years ago. Continuity and change can exist together.

You are allowed to outgrow parts of yourself

We can become loyal to versions of ourselves simply because they are familiar. We may keep an old role long after it has stopped fitting: the strong one, the quiet one, the responsible one, the rescuer, the achiever, the person who never needs anything. Letting go of those identities can feel like betrayal, particularly when other people benefited from them. But growth often requires replacing parts that are worn out. A boundary may replace automatic compliance. Self-understanding may replace self-criticism. Rest may replace constant productivity. Asking for support may replace struggling alone. None of this erases the person who used the old strategies. That earlier version deserves understanding for getting you this far, even when you decide not to carry every strategy forward.

A personal check-in: my own broom

Think of this as a reflection rather than a test. You do not need to produce a neat answer about who you are. Begin by noticing the parts of your life that have been replaced, repaired or adapted. Consider beliefs you no longer hold, coping strategies you have stopped using, relationships that changed you, roles you have left behind, boundaries you have learned to create and ways of understanding yourself that are different now. Then consider what has travelled with you. What values keep appearing? What qualities have survived difficult periods? What matters to you now that also mattered years ago? What parts are still being repaired? And which parts are you ready to stop forcing yourself to keep simply because they have always been there?

You might also notice that some replacements were made because other people told you the original part was wrong. Perhaps you learned to hide enthusiasm, suppress emotion, mask neurodivergent traits, minimise your needs or become easier for other people to manage. Those adaptations deserve curiosity rather than immediate judgement. Ask whether each one still serves you. Some may remain useful. Some may need modifying. Others may be ready to go. The purpose is not to strip everything away in search of a perfect original self. It is to understand the life you have built and to make conscious choices about what you want to carry into the next part of it.

Five questions to sit with

What parts of me have changed because I genuinely grew?

What parts changed because I was trying to survive, belong or stay safe?

What have I repaired rather than replaced?

What has remained recognisably mine through different stages of my life?

What am I ready to change next without believing that changing it means losing myself?

A message to take with you

There may be moments when you look at your life and feel as though too much has changed. Perhaps you no longer respond the way you once did, want the things you once wanted or recognise the person you were expected to become. That does not automatically mean you have lost yourself. Sometimes it means you have lived. You have gathered information, survived experiences, changed your mind, discovered needs, made mistakes, learned boundaries and adapted to circumstances that an earlier version of you could not have predicted. The changes themselves become part of your history.

You do not have to keep a worn-out part simply to prove continuity. You can replace a belief that hurts you. You can change a relationship with work. You can learn a different way to cope. You can understand your brain differently after diagnosis. You can rebuild after grief. You can become softer in some places and firmer in others. You can decide that something which protected you once is no longer what you need. And through all of those changes, you are allowed to recognise a continuing self - not because every piece stayed untouched, but because you have been present through the replacing, repairing, learning and rebuilding.

Same essence. Different parts. Still you.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Support Hub resource - reflective information, not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health care.