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# Preventing Pilot Lights

Dealing with PTSD After Cancer (or any other trauma)

## What Are Pilot Lights (Triggers)?

I got the idea to call triggers of PTSD Pilot Lights from our home furnace system. Each time our thermostat recognized that our house temperature was not “just right” either the air conditioning or the heating system kicked in. I saw my feelings as the thermostat to what was going on in my mind. What I didn’t understand for many years is that I could use a drill down process within my mind to find out what had caused such a disregularity within my system.

On the next page, you’ll find an example of what questions I ask myself in order to uncover the trigger, as well as how to put coping strategies in place in order to prevent and manage when triggers happy, as well as why it is important to know our triggers and how to manage them.



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# The Drill Down (and Up) Method



**Step One:** Ask what am I feeling?

**Step Two:** Ask, “What caused me to feel...?”

**Feeling chart and what the feelings usually mean:**

fear	Not knowing what will happen as a result of...
guilt	Wanting to hide because of...or Feeling bad for not being able to...
Insecurity	Someone said or did something that made you not feel your best.
anger	A boundary was broken or a feeling of things being “unfair.”
withdrawn	Feel the need to protect self from hurt due to being judged, not feeling supported, or understood. Trust may have been broken.
confused	Not being able to see a situation clearly in the moment or know what to do next.

Example: I felt withdrawn and angry. I felt a boundary was being broken. Specifically, I didn't feel like being touched.



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**Step Three:** Ask why don't I like to be touched?

Example: When I was little most of the touch I got was from doctors and nurses and it hurt, so I associate touch with pain.

**Step Four:** Ask why didn't that person know?

Example: That person didn't know because I never told them that I just need my space right now, and please ask before you assume you can touch or hug me.

**Step Five:** How can I communicate what I need?

Example: Verbally in person, or through a text. Keep it as simple and as objective as possible.

Example: I am sorry I got angry and withdrew when you touched me. When I was little most of the touch I got was from doctors and nurses and it hurt, so I associate touch with pain. I just need my space right now, and before you touch or hug me, please ask. Thank you.

**Step Six:** Why is it important to communicate what I need?

Answer: So that I can prevent pilot lights from occurring and leave the trauma and drama behind me.

**Step Five:** Use the process backwards to be proactive as much as possible. Communicate what you need as much as possible.

**Step Four:** Share stories that others may need to know. You don't have to share all the intimate details, just the generals.

Example: Hey, just so you know, I'm not a big hugger or someone who likes to be touched much.

**Step Three:** Know your triggers. There is probably more than one. And, unfortunately, you may not know what they are until they happen. That's okay! Keep a list on your phone as you discover them and walk through this process.

**Step Two:** Be self reflective. As soon as you start feeling a negative emotion, it is best to start walking through this process as soon as possible. This is similar to taking medication for pain BEFORE it gets too bad. The process is easier to control and get through the sooner it is dealt with rather than later.

**Step One:** Just as there are many triggers for negative feelings, there are many positive precautions we can put in place to set ourselves up for stability and success: positive routines, good music, art, faithful friends and family etc. Keep track of what makes you feel happy and safe so that you can have those in place as much as possible as well.



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**A note about co-regulation:** Coregulation is where one person who is NOT regulated (not in control of their emotions) is paired up with someone who is regulated (is in control of their emotions).

**Stop and Think:** Who in your life is usually calm and steady? Ask if they would be willing to be your coregulator when you are going through times of distress.

I have found, in my own experience, that people will calm down more quickly and with less stress when they have access to a trusted co-regulator who can go through this problem-solving process with them.

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