
Emotion *on demand*

An Actor's Workbook for Mastering
Emotional Triggers

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INTRODUCTION

Out of your vulnerabilities will come your strength.

- Sigmund Freud

An actor without a connection to his or her emotional life is an actor who is limited. In my early twenties, I worked very hard to perfect my craft. I sought all the best teachers and went to class religiously. In the beginning, I paid the bills by doing commercials and parking cars on weekends. After a year or so, I started booking small roles and even got some notice from the head of Paramount, who encouraged me with some kind words and called a top agent on my behalf. The agent signed me, and the auditions and parts got bigger and better. I wasn't rich but I was on the path to the career and life I wanted.

After a few years of working steadily in supporting roles, I booked a challenging lead in a film with a wonderful cast, which included one of my favorite actors. It was a dream come true. I trained with my coach, applied all of the technique I had learned in order to break down the script, and arrived on set ready to give it my all.

A few weeks into the shoot, the producers came to me and said, "We've added a scene to the ending. We'll send you the changes tonight and shoot it tomorrow." When I received the revisions that night, I couldn't believe my eyes. In the original version, my father in the script died at the end and there was no reaction from my character. The new material featured a police officer coming to my character's house and telling him that his father was just found dead. The stage direction called for me to burst into tears. An

actor's dream, right? A terrific scene in an exciting movie and the last moment was mine. That night I did all the work I knew how to do.

When we shot the scene the next day, there were ten or more people on the set, all of whom were staring at me; a make-up and hair person in my face before and after every take; and crew people making conversation almost as if they were *trying* to distract me. As much as I had prepared the night before, when the camera rolled, the depth of emotion wasn't there. I tried everything I knew, and after several mediocre takes, the director told me very kindly that they'd gotten what they wanted and needed to move on. But I knew they hadn't gotten it. I hadn't given it to them. Needless to say, they cut the scene and used the original ending. This experience was painful for me and made me realize that I had to learn how to bring up emotion on demand no matter what the circumstances.

Of the many new students I meet each week as a coach, I am continually surprised at how often actors feel blocked emotionally, saying things such as, "Tears are so hard for me," "I'm not emotional," or, "I never cry." What these people need is simple: either a technique for getting to emotions, or more practice with it. Just like when a baseball player's batting average is falling, it's likely that he needs to work on his technique. It would be ludicrous to assume that he could improve his batting average *without* that work. Commitment is the key. If you're committed, you'll find yourself going places you never thought possible.

Seeing actors struggle with their emotions has compelled me to expand, modify, and write about the techniques that helped me open up. This workbook will give you the opportunity to sit down for a set amount of time each day to work on triggers, expanding your imagination and your connection to your own emotional life. As you move closer to your own depth of emotional and personal experience, you will improve in your ability to communicate the writer's intentions by syncing up *your* emotions with your *character's* emotions. Although it is true some people move forward more quickly with the technique than others, I have never seen anyone fully committed to the process *not* improve with time.

How does all this transfer to getting jobs and going on auditions? Casting directors, producers, and directors may see hundreds or even thousands of actors as they make the difficult choice to find the right person for a particular part. How do you stand out so that you will be the one picked? The answer is fairly simple. Charisma and being right for the part are certainly important factors, but beyond that, these people sit and wait for someone to move them by bringing his or her own passionate truth to the role. *The secret is to find a way to be connected to a script in such a deep way that they can't take their eyes off of you.* You still may not get the job because you don't have the look they want or because of politics, but if you connect to your material in a meaningful and visceral way, audition after audition, people will remember you and you'll eventually book roles. The right one just needs to come along, and a smart actor will be ready for it.

Being ready means doing the work. There's no way around it. In the many years I've been in this business, I've seen people come and go. Of all the qualities people have that help them become successful, there is one that almost all share: work ethic. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you can be *the one* who can do it without hard work. It rarely

happens, and when it does, it doesn't last. No genius ever became great without practicing and perfecting his or her craft. One of my students used to be a professional ballerina. During performance season, she and the other dancers in her company would practice up to ten hours a day, six days a week. You can't be a surgeon without going to med school, and you can't be a world-class athlete without training everyday.

Of course, realizing the importance of work ethic is only part of it. You must also steer clear of the countless traps that can sabotage the work. Being lazy, doing drugs, drinking too much alcohol, watching too much TV, overeating, and overspending are just a few. These are ways of medicating pain or fear and they keep us from moving forward. Indulging in destructive habits – or chasing fame, attention or money – will never make you happy! Go out, create, study, and find the joy in your own growth as a person and an artist.

Please note that this book addresses a very small portion of the full technique that I teach. Getting connected to the emotional moments of any material is just the beginning. You must also fully build your character's relationships, intentions, back-story, and so on (see page 189 for additional info). If you want to move forward in your craft, I highly recommend that you commit to a challenging class, play, or series of private coachings with someone you trust in order to strengthen the other aspects of your technique.

Be aware: there is a danger that this book could be used incorrectly and cause people to become emotionally self-indulgent in their acting. All the exercises and ideas on the following pages were written to help you understand emotional moments so that you can be connected and alive enough to illuminate the text and go after a need fully. A clear, personalized need, such as "I'm going to get you to trust me," is just as important as your emotional connection to the material. Just because water comes out of your eyes doesn't mean that your audience is going to feel for your character.

Some people may see this work as unhealthy, but when did expressing yourself become unhealthy? *Not* expressing yourself is unhealthy. People who bottle up their feelings often become destructive towards themselves or others. Babies cry, become enraged and laugh gleefully all within a span of a minute, but we would never think of such behavior as harmful. Safely expressing ourselves is not only good for us, it frees us up in our bodies and in our minds. Have you ever had the experience of feeling better after crying about something that you've been holding in? We, as human beings, have an innate need to express our thoughts, ideas and emotions. Unfortunately, society often teaches us that being cool, indifferent, or always in control is ideal.

My hope is that you use this book like a journal of sorts... a personal piece of art with uncensored thoughts, feelings and memories. Feel free to write anywhere there is open space. Many accomplished actors are known to treat their scripts this way. I was once on the set of a movie starring Anthony Hopkins and discovered that his personal script was not only filled with meticulous notes, but also doodles and cartoon characters. It was as multi-layered as his performance and a perfect balance of work and play.

No matter how challenging this book can be, don't take your self *too* seriously. Dedicate yourself to learning the techniques set out in the following pages and, over time,

you will find yourself improving your skills as an actor and delivering consistent, emotionally-connected performances. Be brave and enjoy the ride.

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WHAT IS A TRIGGER?

*You have to care, you have to trigger, you have to know yourself,
you have to be interested, curious, passionate.*

- Larry Moss

As an actor, consider how you feel when you get material with lines like this:

Chris falls to the ground in desperation.

CHRIS
(sobbing)
Please don't go.

In film, television and plays, the material often demands that you reach a specific emotional place. What separates great actors from mediocre actors is that mediocre actors don't bring up real emotion, but instead fake it in their voices or try to indicate it with their faces. Other times they simply push the perceived emotion in the hopes that we won't notice, or just pass over the moment entirely. Great actors personalize these moments. They make them specific with something real or imagined in order to bring the moment to life.

Trigger (trig'•r) n.

an event or thing that causes something to happen.

The Oxford Dictionary of Current English

In the acting world, triggers are the mental movies, images, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations or anything else that causes you to become filled with an emotion. At first, the words on the page may have little meaning for you, but as you do your homework and make choices, the words begin to live, breathe and become illuminated.

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EMOTIONAL PREP VS. MID-SCENE TRIGGERS

Emotional prep is the term given to a trigger that begins a scene. It is important to note that the emotional prep can be anything; it does not have to relate to the circumstances of the script as long as it produces the feeling. Triggers, however, are used to access emotions during a scene and are most affective when they relate to the material. If you build a mid-scene trigger that has nothing to do with what's written, you run the risk of being distracted from the scene or becoming self-indulgent.

Oftentimes you'll find stage direction telling you to cry at a specific point. When that happens, you must work as deeply as you can on the moment in advance, and then trust that the homework you've done will deliver the emotion needed. It may not come exactly where it's expected or with the intensity you had in mind, but who knows, maybe it will turn out to be even more interesting. Try not to put pressure on yourself. What's important is to give yourself the most powerful choice you can and then let your objective lead the way.

Sometimes, however, you'll find one character addressing another character's tears in the dialogue. In such instances, the emotion does need to come up where it's specified, though not necessarily at the level specified. There's a scene from Patrick Marber's play *Closer* in which Dan fails to regain the love that was taken from him by Larry. Halfway through the scene, Larry says, "Don't cry on me." If you're playing Dan, you obviously need to be connected to something powerful for that moment, but you don't necessarily need to stand there with tears dropping onto the floor. The audience simply needs to see that Dan is becoming emotional.

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DOES ALL MATERIAL NEED TRIGGERING?

I often hear this question. I believe the answer is yes. The next consideration is the amount of triggering that is needed, and the way to figure it out is to ask yourself, "Am I emotionally connected to this piece?" If the answer is "no," sit down, start building, and

get connected. If the answer is “yes,” you likely won’t need to over think your triggerwork, although it is beneficial to have strong choices in place so that if your instinct goes dry, you’ll have a safety net. Whatever your answer, you must keep asking yourself the question over and over again as long as you’re working on that particular piece. If the answer ever becomes “no,” or “I don’t know,” sit down, build new triggers, and get connected again. That being said, sometimes you’ll get material that seems very light and simple, and all you’ll need is to know exactly how you feel about the person to whom you’re talking. Make sure, however, that you apply the other aspects of the technique (see page 189) and explore your material as fully as you can. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had clients walk in to get coached and tell me the material they’re working on is simple, only to find they’ve missed something important and challenging.

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TRUST THE WORK

Once you’ve achieved an effective emotional level in rehearsal, you can trust yourself and be fully present in the scene, focusing on the actors(s) in front of you and the circumstances at hand. It’s the same with musicians. Concert violinists learn the notes, dynamics, and tempos in rehearsal and then, when it comes time to perform, they no longer think about the mechanics of the song; they just play the music.

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