

The Data Is In — Trigger Warnings Don't Work

A decade ago, there was little research on their effectiveness. Now we know.

By *Amna Khalid* and *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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The original proponents of trigger warnings on campus argued that they would empower students suffering from trauma to delve into difficult material. “The point is not to enable — let alone encourage — students to skip readings or our subsequent class discussion,” the philosopher Kate Manne [wrote](#) in *The New York Times*. “It’s about enabling everyone’s rational engagement.”

Now, about a decade after trigger warnings arrived on college campuses, it’s clear that an avoidance rationale is officially competing with the original lean-in logic.

A recent *Inside Higher Ed* [piece](#) by Michael Bugeja, an Iowa State journalism professor, is emblematic of this shift. In light of the tumultuous times (a “mental-health pandemic,” ongoing sexual violence and racism, the anxiety of returning to in-person instruction), Bugeja says that trigger warnings are needed now more than ever. All faculty members should follow his lead, he argues, and include detailed trigger warnings on their syllabi accompanied by the following note: “You don’t have to attend class if the content elicits an uncomfortable emotional response.”

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Bugeja’s article prompted us to review the latest research on the efficacy of trigger warnings. We found no evidence that trigger warnings improve students’ mental health. What’s more, we are now convinced that they push students and faculty

members alike to turn away from the study of vitally important topics that are seen as too “distressing.”

To clarify at the outset, a trigger warning is not the same thing as a *general* content advisory like the “explicit content” label for music albums or the film-rating system (G, PG, R, etc.). Trigger warnings identify *specific* content and themes. Here’s an [example](#) for Toni Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*:

- *Alcohol abuse*
- *Child abuse*
- *Death (including infant)*
- *Incest*
- *Racism (including structured)*
- *Sexual assault*
- *Toxic parents*

The origins of trigger warnings date to the 1970s, when post-traumatic stress disorder was codified as a psychiatric condition, the symptoms of which include flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and social withdrawal. The term “trigger” signified any stimulus that set off a post-traumatic stress reaction, from particular sights, sounds, and smells to certain foods, faces, and calendar dates.

When debates about trigger warnings first erupted, there was little-to-no research on their effectiveness. Today we have an emerging body of peer-reviewed research to consult.

The consensus, based on 17 studies using a range of media, including literature passages, photographs, and film clips: Trigger warnings do not alleviate emotional distress. They do not significantly reduce negative affect or minimize intrusive thoughts, two hallmarks of PTSD. Notably, these findings hold for individuals with and without a history of trauma. (For a review of the relevant research, see the 2020

Clinical Psychological Science [article](#) “Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories” by Payton J. Jones, Benjamin W. Bellet, and Richard J. McNally.)

We are not aware of a single experimental study that has found significant benefits of using trigger warnings. Looking specifically at trauma survivors, including those with a diagnosis of PTSD, the Jones et al. study found that trigger warnings “were not helpful even when they warned about content that closely matched survivors’ traumas.”

What’s more, they found that trigger warnings actually increased the anxiety of individuals with the most severe PTSD, prompting them to “view trauma as more central to their life narrative.” “Trigger warnings,” they concluded, “may be most harmful to the very individuals they were designed to protect.”

An estimated [3.5 percent of the U.S. adult population](#) has PTSD. (Note that trauma rarely results in PTSD.) For the small proportion of our students suffering from PTSD, colleges have an obligation to help them succeed academically. In other words, access to treatment is what is needed.

On campus the definition of what constitutes a trigger has expanded dramatically from stimuli that induce symptoms of PTSD to any material that might elicit [“difficult emotional responses.”](#) Refracted through the prism of social justice, trigger-worthy topics proliferated to include the likes of racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and other [“issues of privilege and oppression.”](#)

For Bugeja, any topic that evokes an intense negative emotion is a potential trigger. To identify “where warnings may be warranted” when he starts a new class, Bugeja uses a “trigger-word game” to compile information on the words and phrases that elicit the most powerful emotions for his students. Here are some of the topics that made the “Top 10 Trigger List” from his spring 2021 media-ethics course: Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, Trump, #MeToo, and George Floyd.

Note that Bugeja's syllabus already includes a host of trigger warnings. For this particular [course](#), the following topics, among others, are flagged with a trigger warning: "Nazi symbols," "alcohol and sexual misconduct," "profanity and slurs," and the "Emancipation Proclamation, Civil War aftermath, transformation of Lincoln," and other "sensitive issues associated with race." According to the syllabus, if students decide to miss class or forego a particular assignment, they just need to email. (Bugeja provides a study guide for key concepts in the event that students opt out.)

With all due respect to Bugeja, who is obviously a thoughtful and dedicated teacher, it seems unavoidable that policies like these would impede meaningful engagement with difficult topics and reinforce the idea that students are inherently fragile. Indeed, embracing trigger warnings may drive some students to be on high alert for any content that might possibly upset or offend.



CHRONICLE ILLUSTRATIONS

Alas, the content that is most likely to raise hackles is often of the utmost importance. As the Harvard law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen [reported](#) in 2014, about a dozen of her colleagues at multiple institutions had dropped rape law from their criminal-law courses because students were complaining the material was “triggering.” Consider the consequences: Not only will students not learn the material, but there will be fewer

lawyers with the expertise to fight for rape victims. Since then, the fear that some material is just too distressing for students has only intensified. Based on published accounts as well as our conversations with colleagues across the country, books, articles, and films are quietly being dropped, along with lectures, discussion activities, and assignments. (On the suppression of controversial ideas within academe, including self-censorship, see Sean T. Stevens, Lee Jussim, and Nathan Honeycutt's 2020 *Societies* journal [article](#), "Scholarship Suppression: Theoretical Perspectives and Emerging Trends.")

We were gobsmacked several years ago when a colleague informed us that a student had requested a trigger warning for a reading about the Holocaust. This same student also asked for an alternative text to read because the original reading was "too disturbing."

Two quick observations:

First, if you read about the Holocaust and are not disturbed, you should really look into the possibility that you're a sociopath.

Second, there is no alternative to learning about the Holocaust.

At the college level, we don't believe the Holocaust, slavery, genocide, and other harrowing topics should come in two different versions: "regular" and "lite."

As it happens, the distribution of trigger warnings by topic often seems arbitrary. Suicide, sexual assault, and eating disorders typically make the cut. Warfare, cancer, and starving children do not. We don't think we have the expertise or moral authority to make decisions about what kind of pain — not to mention whose pain — matters most. Indeed we're skeptical that anyone does.

In any event, when a classroom conversation is in full swing, it's impossible to predict the direction it will take. Every contribution is a potential "trigger."

Why are we so afraid to acknowledge the power of academic study to provoke, destabilize, and disturb? Conflict, pain, and suffering are central elements of any serious study of the human experience. In U.S. history courses, for example, it isn't possible to teach an accurate portrait of past events without covering horrifying material, from the genocide of Native peoples to the tragedy of 9/11. If we truly want to understand and reckon with past and present atrocities, we must be willing to face difficult, even excruciating, moments.

To be clear, we are not in favor of a shock-and-awe approach of springing distressing content on students without advance notice. Instead, effective teaching practices naturally address many of the issues that trigger warnings are meant to tackle. The syllabus is key: Clear course descriptions, including topics to be covered, are essential.

Context too is crucial. For instance, there are dozens of trigger warnings that could precede a screening of Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, from xenophobia and alcohol addiction to racial slurs and police violence. But that runs the risk of reducing a complex work of art to a litany of problematic topics, not to mention eliminating the element of surprise that can shock us into a ["higher consciousness."](#)

When Jeffrey shows *Do the Right Thing*, he invites students to share what they know about Spike Lee films before they watch it. This ensures that everyone is aware that intense examinations of race and racism are likely to figure. *Do the Right Thing* in particular, he notes, depicts the volatility of a multiethnic Brooklyn neighborhood in the late 1980s. This little bit of background knowledge prepares students to fully engage with the film without giving away plot points, identifying key themes, or telling them how to interpret particular scenes.

There is a world of difference between [warning and informing](#). Simply using the phrase “trigger warning” raises the stakes, squeezing course content into a [narrow frame](#) defined by trauma and suffering.

We appreciate that advocates of trigger warnings have drawn attention to the fact that students’ mental health affects their learning. And we share their commitment to treating students with compassion. As a result, we think it’s imperative to acknowledge that the best evidence to date finds that trigger warnings do not minimize anxiety and emotional distress, and might even do the opposite. Furthermore, applying trigger warnings to any material that elicits an “uncomfortable emotional response” makes a mockery of the real challenges faced by those suffering from PTSD. As the Harvard study we cited earlier concluded, trigger warnings are “unvetted interventions” and their use is “irresponsible to victims of trauma.” In our view, the problems with trigger warnings extend well beyond mental-health concerns. By contributing to a misguided safety-and-security model of education, trigger warnings ultimately deprive all students of the most powerful learning opportunities.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

OPINION

[Amna Khalid](#)

Amna Khalid is an associate professor of history at Carleton College and host of the podcast Banished.

[Jeffrey Aaron Snyder](#)

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is an associate professor in the department of educational studies at Carleton College.