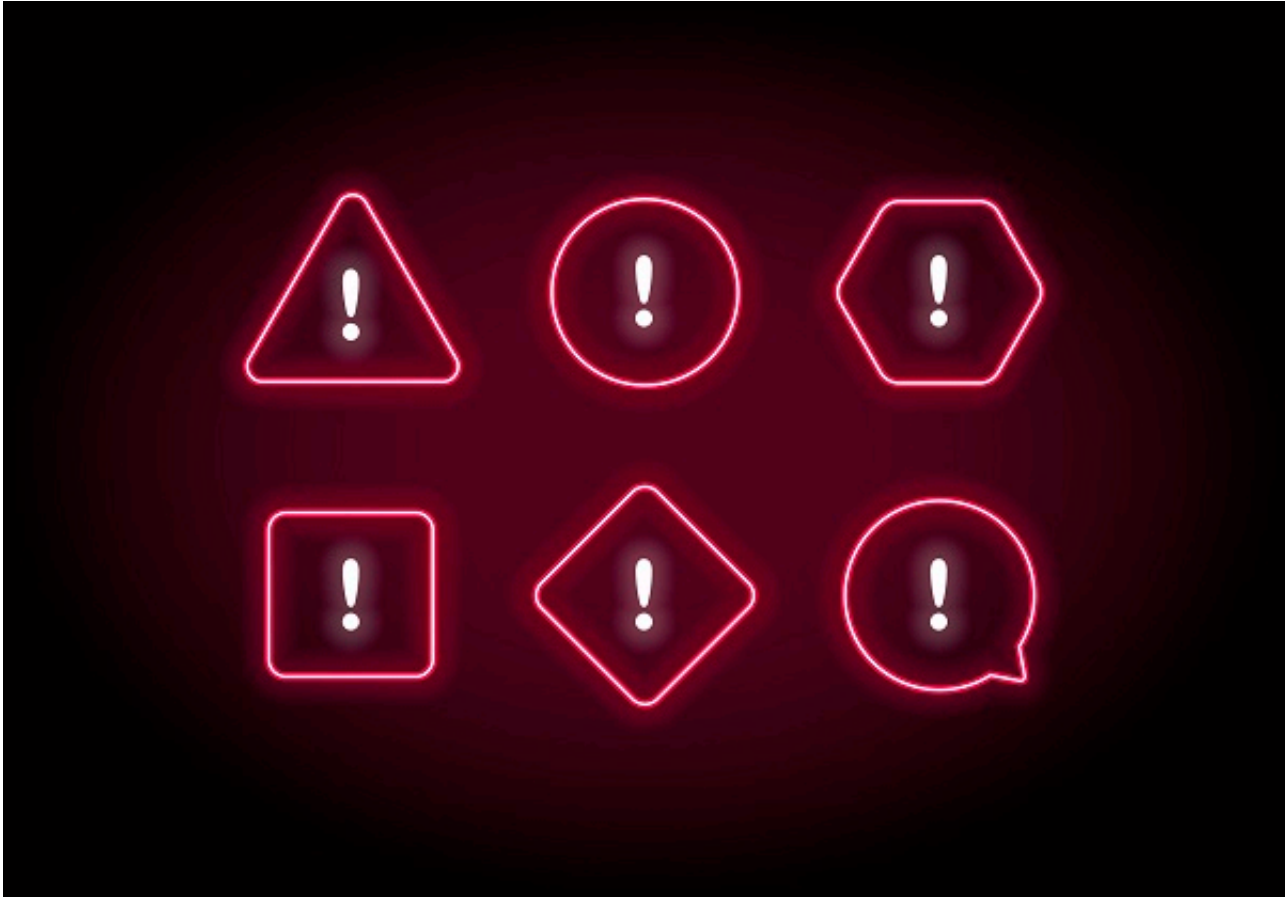


The Following News Release Contains Potentially Disturbing Content: Trigger Warnings Fail to Help and May Even Harm

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Summary: New research suggests that trigger warnings have little or no benefit in cushioning the blow of potentially disturbing content and, in some cases, may make things worse.

For some, traumatic events leave deep psychological scars that can resurface many years later as renewed emotional pain or unwanted memories. In an effort to spare survivors reminders of past trauma, some institutions and individuals provide so-called trigger warnings, alerts that an upcoming program or text may contain unsettling content. Recently, however, a growing body of research has called into question the effectiveness of trigger warnings.

A new study published in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science* shines additional light on this ongoing debate and finds that trigger warnings offer little to no help in avoiding painful memories and perhaps are even harmful for the survivors of past emotional trauma.

“Specifically, we found that trigger warnings did not help trauma survivors brace themselves to face potentially upsetting content,” said Payton Jones, a researcher at Harvard University and lead author on the study. “In some cases, they made things worse.”

Worryingly, the researchers discovered that trigger warnings seem to increase the extent to which people see trauma as central to their identity, which can worsen the impact of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run.

In academic settings, a trigger warning is typically an alert given by a teacher or professor that upcoming content or course materials may be distressing to individuals who have experienced certain traumatic life events. Such warnings are intended to give students the opportunity to step outside of the lecture hall or to overlook certain passages in reading assignments. According to a 2016 survey conducted by National Public Radio, about half of professors said they have used a trigger warning in advance of introducing potentially difficult material.

“Over the past decade, there has been extensive debate on the appropriateness of trigger warnings, particularly in academic environments, where they have been accused of promoting censorship,” Jones said. “Other critics have suggested the trigger warnings may create an unrealistic bubble, free from negative thoughts, which would not prepare students for life beyond academia.”

Until recently, much of this debate was based on conjecture with little scientific research to back up claims either way.

To improve the body of research on this topic, Jones and his colleagues conducted a randomized experiment among two groups of people who had experienced a serious trauma in the past.

Both groups read a series of literature passages. One group received trigger warnings prior to distressing passages while the other did not. Participants rated their emotions after reading each passage and also completed a series of questionnaires at the end.

Overall, the researchers found little statistical differences in the reactions of both groups. Neither seemed to be spared the emotional impact of reading the text. Whether trigger warnings are explicitly harmful was less clear, though Jones and his colleagues did find evidence that trigger warnings increased the belief that their trauma is an essential part of a survivor’s life story, which research has shown is countertherapeutic.

“I was surprised that something so small—a few trigger warnings in a short experiment—could influence the way someone views their trauma,” noted Jones. “In our culture, I think we overemphasize how important trauma should be in a person’s life. Trigger warnings are one example of this.”

The debate about trigger warnings has raged over the past decade, yet until very recently there was no science or research to inform the practice. “Science is perhaps the most powerful tool we have available for finding the truth. Why did no one think to use it earlier?” Jones concluded.

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of the field through our journals and conventions; promoting the integration of scientific perspectives within psychological science and with related disciplines; fostering global connections among our members; engaging the public with our research to promote broader understanding and awareness of psychological science; and advocating for increased support for psychological science in the public policy arena.

Clinical Psychological Science publishes advances in clinical science and provides a venue for cutting-edge research across a wide range of conceptual views, approaches, and topics. For a copy of this article, “Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories,” and access to other research in Psychological Science, contact news@psychologicalscience.org. Jones, P. J., et al. (2020) Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories. *Clinical Psychological Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620921341>