

# The Data Is In — Trigger Warnings Don't Work

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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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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.)

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