

Guidance on Trigger Warnings for Suicide and Emotionally Charged Content

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Introduction

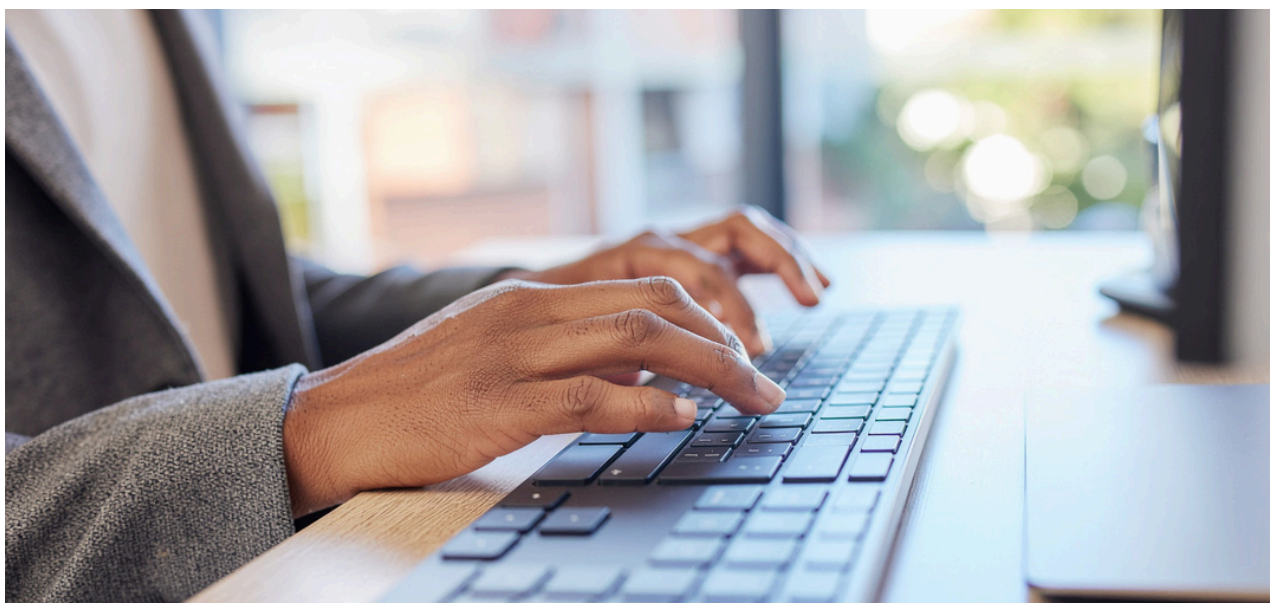
Trigger warnings (also called content warnings) are often used with suicide-related content, as well as on other potentially upsetting content that can have a negative impact on those at risk of suicide. In fact, the use of trigger warnings has dramatically increased and become commonplace, potentially creating confusion about their use and value. Considering the use and impact of trigger warnings, the Special Interest Group for Suicide and the Media of the International Association for Suicide Prevention has provided the following guidance for all communicators on how and when to use trigger warnings for suicide-related content. In fact, current evidence does not suggest that trigger warnings are effective in mitigating the mental health risks of portraying suicide or self-harm. Trigger warnings should never replace careful and responsible crafting of messages of self-harm. We provide this guidance because it is often an expectation to prepare audiences for media content that is sensitive or troublesome, such as self-harm and suicide.



Brief Historical Background

Trauma-related symptoms have existed for as far back as written records exist. Following global conflict and wars, trauma symptoms were recognised in soldiers with concerns that certain stimuli could elicit or “trigger” responses. “Trigger Warnings were introduced into our public consciousness initially around the year 1960. This was in conjunction with a growing understanding on the complexities of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and when our cultural understanding of PTSD stemmed mainly from the experiences of mentally ill war veterans, who returned from combat experiencing dissociation, “shell-shock”, flashbacks, as well as severe depression and anxiety.” (Revanche, 2016). When PTSD was first included in the DSM-III in 1980, this guidance included a reference to stimuli that could cause or exacerbate the symptoms of PTSD.

More psychosocial references to trigger warnings began when trigger warnings gained in popularity and use “in the late 1990s on feminist internet message boards, where they referred to site-sponsored cautions to readers regarding the presence of graphic depictions of rape in certain posts. Reading such material, it was argued, could trigger panic attacks and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in victims of sexual violence. Soon the term and the practice were applied to other discussions in the interest of protecting the sufferers and victims of a wide range of disorders, conditions, and traumas, including eating disorders, self-mutilation, suicidal tendencies, and domestic abuse.” (Duignan, 2025).



Brief review of the research on trigger warnings

The available evidence of effects of trigger warnings on mental health suggests that they often do not result in the intended protection of mental health: trigger warnings are not helpful when it comes to protecting someone’s mental health. A meta-analysis of 12 studies including overall 142 effect estimates on response affect, avoidance, anticipatory affect, including increased anxiety and educational outcomes (Bridgland, 2023), did not identify any effect on affective (emotional) responses to negative material or on educational outcomes. Warnings reliably increased anticipatory affect, but findings on avoidance were mixed, suggesting either that warnings had no effect on engagement with material or that they increased engagement with negative material under specific circumstances.

Most of the included studies also included trauma survivors in the sample, who constitute a particularly relevant target group. For this group, another smaller study also raised serious concerns that trigger warnings counter-therapeutically reinforce survivors’ view of their trauma as central to their identity (Jones et al., 2020). Overall, the available evidence, although limited due to the relatively low number of studies that have been conducted so far, does not support that trigger warnings might be effective in protecting against harmful effects of story content on mental health, or even produce protective effects.

Current use and issues

During television news broadcasts, in newspaper and magazine articles, on television shows and in social media, trigger warnings are commonplace in today's culture. On the news, one can often hear: "We want to warn you, some of the images you are about to see contain graphic content." On social media sites, a warning message appears over an image alerting the user of what might be behind a blurred image. One might also be at a presentation (professional more often than community) and hear a speaker include a slide that says: "Trigger Warning. The contents of what I am talking about today might be disturbing for some in the audience." Given that research largely does not support a benefit of using trigger warnings, how does the public best understand if and when a trigger warning might be used? Further, many have reported seeing trigger warnings used as a way to avoid responsibility for the harm caused by sharing disturbing content, under the premise that if they included a warning, it is ok to share the content. In fact, some have argued that the protection of the warnings seems to be more for the creator or those who share than for the consumers of the material.



General recommendations

While the research suggests that trigger warnings are not helpful, and at times might be potentially harmful to some, they continue to be used in many forms of communication and messaging. Many today expect trigger warnings to be given and are upset when they are not, again, despite there being no strong evidence to support that they are helpful. That being said, because trigger warnings will continue to be used, it is important to provide guidance on their use to help the public's understanding and value them when they are used. In all use cases, trigger warnings should provide a resource for reliable information on the content rather than overly sensationalising or emphasising that it is disturbing.

When communicating or sharing content that might be difficult, hard, painful or even hurtful to others, it is important to think first. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the reason I am sharing this content?
- What do I hope I and/or others will get out of me sharing this content?
- Is the content appropriate for all age groups to see or hear?
- Could the content hurt someone who has a connection to the content that I am sharing? (keeping in mind that different people can often react differently to the same content)

Tips for safely sharing content and using trigger warnings

- Care about the content much more than about any trigger warning.
 - Avoid using potentially harmful language, images or content that is shocking or graphic. Do not assume or believe that trigger warnings reduce or prevent harm. Research clearly suggests they don't.



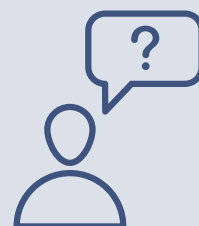
- Check with others (more than one person) who might have insights or knowledge and are willing to be honest with you about the content before you share potentially sensitive content.
 - Focus the discussion on whether or not it is appropriate to share the content at all and, if it is appropriate, if there are ways that it could be made safer. Ask them if they feel the final content is appropriate for different audiences and if they feel a warning is useful.



- Use the recommended language below for your trigger warnings. Overly sensational language or use of large fonts can have the unintended consequence of creating curiosity and/or sensationalising the content. Consider your audience (e.g. professional conference presentation vs. social media post).
 - We recommend using “Content Warning” or “Sensitive Content” language over “Trigger Warning”. [Potential callout box: “This guidance uses “content warning” rather than “trigger warning” due to the increased preference for more inclusive and neutral language. While “trigger warning” originated in trauma-related contexts, “content warning” now broadly signals that material may be distressing for various reasons, including but not limited to trauma histories and has less pathologizing tone”.] Avoid using “TW” or “CW” as not everyone will know what that stands for.



- Be mindful of when you use trigger warnings. Before sharing a story publicly, in writing, or in other applications, be consistent and use warnings for the same type of content that you are sharing.
 - Warnings should always be placed before or at the beginning of the content, not after the audience/viewer has been exposed to the content.



- Avoid overusing trigger warnings. Use them when you and others have a concern about the content to be shared, rather than repeatedly within the same content, with most or all content or in situations when doing so might appear frivolous or diminish the importance of a warning.
 - The goal is to ensure trigger warnings are used thoughtfully and strategically, not in such a way that the public becomes desensitised to seeing them regularly.



Tips for professional and community presentations

- **When (the timing of when) you share the warning is important. Ideally, the warning should occur just at the beginning of a presentation and immediately before sharing the content.**
 - This avoids the problem of a large delay between warning and content, which may be jarring to the audience when the content eventually appears. If the potentially harmful content occurs later in your presentation, consider presenting the trigger warning just before sharing the content. In all situations, even when using a trigger warning, when graphic or detailed information is shared, it is best practice to avoid showing images, methods of suicide and/or self-harm.



- **If you have multiple pieces of content that could be harmful, give a trigger warning at the beginning of your talk and let the audience know that there will be more than one or multiple instances of sharing potentially harmful content.**
 - This is recommended so that the audience is prepared for what to expect.



- **When sharing a trigger warning, do so slowly and genuinely. The goal is to ensure the audience not only knows that there might be graphic content shared in your presentation, but also that you sincerely want them to be prepared for that.**
 - Use person-centred and non-stigmatising language (e.g. always say “died by suicide” rather than committed suicide).
 - If the content might be experienced as distressing, suggest alternatives, such as for audience members to step out during or leave your presentation before you begin and do so, letting the audience know that you understand the content might be difficult to hear or see and encouraging the audience to take care of themselves as a priority over staying and being exposed to some content.
 - If mental health experts are on site and available for audience members who are impacted by the content of your presentation, inform the audience where to find them and how to access them.
 - Warnings can also be helpful around testimonials included when sharing them in newsletters, reports, etc. Here is sample language you can use to introduce the text. Testimonials reflect personal and sometimes intense experiences that can resonate differently for everyone. Continue reading and know that there might be details or content included that could be hard to read.



Tips for social media users

- Almost everyone uses social media today, so it is important to know each social media platform's policies and community guidelines on content that can be shared so that your profile is not restricted or removed.
 - That being said, it is critical to use a warning even if the content that you want to share may be blocked or restricted. It is better to be safe and protect others than to risk harming others by sharing content that might be uncomfortable for them to see and/or that might violate a content policy.



- Avoid using large font sizes and other text that sensationalise the trigger warning or increase the interest around the content to be shared.
 - Hashtags can also increase the risk of trolls and increased exposure to others who might be distressed or use the content harmfully.



- Where possible, if a trigger warning is used, include it both in the caption section and over the content.



- Always include helpful resources at the end of your story such as a national crisis or support line, as well as local resources.



Tips for print pieces

- If you think a trigger warning is necessary, use italics or bold font to help the reader understand the importance of the warning/text that you have included and to separate it out visually from the rest of the text in your story.



- Always include helpful resources at the end of your story such as a national crisis or support line.



Other tips for media (news, entertainment and social media)

- Consult with a media and suicide prevention expert regarding use, placement, language and policies.



- Use recommended language and display content found in this guidance: “Advisory: Some of the content in this (news) report/(TV) episode/film may be upsetting and difficult to watch.”



- Always include a trigger warning at the beginning of the story as well as helpful resources at the end of your report/story such as a national crisis or support line.



- Warnings around content or depictions should be included in movies, television and other streaming media for all types of content (non-fiction, fiction, anime, etc.)



Final thoughts

The growth and use of trigger warnings in many settings and contexts has become so profound that it is difficult to know their real value any longer, and research to date has not found them to reduce the impact of harm caused by content people are exposed to. We hope to have this guidance document serve as a source for general information on the use of warnings in all settings, to increase consistency and form for their use. We hope this provides the audience and those exposed to any potentially harmful content a clear understanding of their risk so that they can make the best decision for themselves, whether to proceed or not. In general, we advise all who communicate in any form and format on suicide and self-harm to be kind, be ethical, and place yourself in the story as you decide what is shared.

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