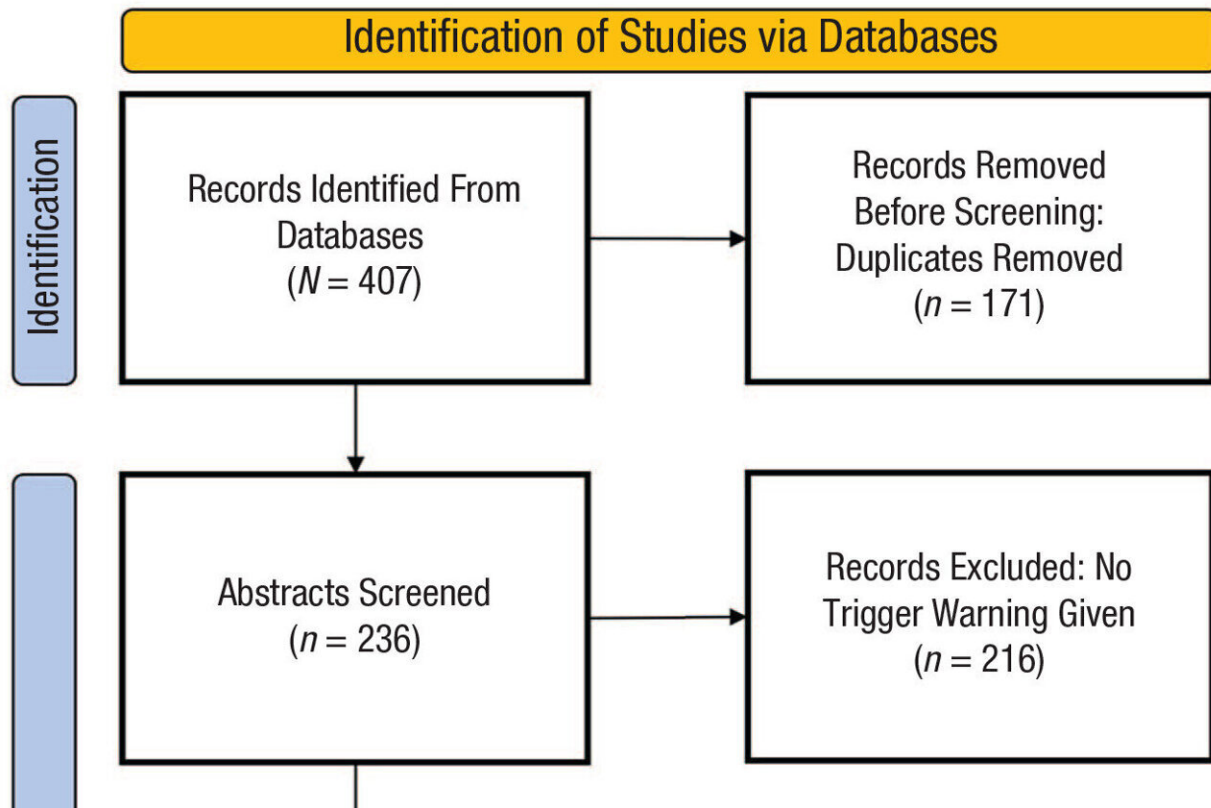


Caution: Content warnings do not reduce stress, study shows

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Identification, screening, and inclusion process for the meta-analysis. Credit: *Clinical Psychological Science* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/21677026231186625

Advocates for the use of trigger warnings suggest that they can help people avoid or emotionally prepare for encountering content related to a

past trauma. But trigger warnings may not fulfill either of these functions, according to an [analysis](#) published in *Clinical Psychological Science*.

Instead, warnings appear to heighten the anticipatory anxiety a person may feel prior to viewing [sensitive material](#) while making them no less likely to consume that content, wrote Victoria M. E. Bridgland of Flinders University, and Payton J. Jones and Benjamin W. Bellet of Harvard University. Additionally, participants' distress levels after viewing potentially triggering material were the same regardless of whether or not they received a warning.

"When people see trigger warnings it makes them feel anxious, but that anxiety doesn't seem to be any sort of helpful emotional preparation," Bridgland said. "We need more strategies to give people versus just putting a warning on something and assuming that is going to give them a toolkit for mental health."

Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet reached their conclusions by comparing the results of 12 studies about the effects of content warnings on participants' negative [emotional reactions](#), avoidance behavior, and comprehension. The majority of these studies included a mix of participants who were trauma survivors and people who did not report a history of traumatic experiences. The researchers' analysis resulted in four findings:

- Warnings increase anticipatory anxiety. Across five studies, participants who read content warnings were more anxious prior to viewing potentially triggering material than those who did not.
- Warnings did not influence emotional reactions to content. Across nine studies, content warnings did not affect participants' feelings of distress, fear, or anxiety after viewing sensitive content.

- Warnings do not increase avoidance. Across five studies, participants viewed troubling content at about the same rate regardless of whether or not they received a trigger [warning](#).
- Warnings do not impact comprehension. Across three studies, content warnings did not affect participants' understanding of written material.

"Existing published research almost unanimously suggests that trigger warnings do not mitigate distress," Bridgland and colleagues wrote. "Indeed, trigger warnings (including those used in the current studies) typically warn people about the distressing reactions they may have but do not explain how to reduce these reactions."

These findings also suggest that people do not use content warnings to avoid viewing triggering content, even when they have the option to do so, the researchers noted. This may be due to a "forbidden fruit" effect, which could make potentially aversive material more tempting to viewers.

Given that many people do not use content warnings to avoid troubling material, Bridgland's ongoing research suggests that emotional-regulation training could help people use these warnings to better prepare themselves beforehand.

More information: Victoria M. E. Bridgland et al, A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/21677026231186625](https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026231186625)

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