Trigger warnings generate a 'pandora effect,' finds meta-analysis

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Credit: Openclipart

The first meta-analysis of all experiments investigating trigger and content warnings has found they may be increasing our anxiety and enhancing our curiosity about the distressing content in some cases.

In line with current debates, the Flinders University research found trigger and content warnings are doing little to inform our decisions to view or listen, let alone cope with what we find after encountering potentially distressing or "triggering" content.

Lead author of "A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes," published in *Clinical Psychological Science*, Dr. Victoria Bridgland, says the analysis has instead identified the warning messages are more likely to be increasing views.

"What we have also identified which is important for future public policy and therapeutic considerations is that the trigger warnings are not helping people make the decision not to view. Across all the studies investigating avoidance behavior toward material presented with or without warnings, we actually found that warnings either make no difference or sometimes make people more likely to engage with the content which is the complete opposite to the intent.

"Advocates of trigger warnings assume these messages help people control or cope with potential negative emotional reactions to upcoming material or avoid it completely," she explains.

"On the other hand, the critics say warnings might exacerbate negative reactions towards content.

"Looking across all the research, we found no evidence that trigger warnings help people mentally prepare themselves to cope with negative content. Likely because trigger warning do not help people bring any

helpful coping strategies to mind.

"Trigger warnings therefore do not help people mitigate any negative emotional reactions towards content—instead however we found that just seeing a trigger warning leads to small increases in anticipatory anxiety.

"This is known as 'the pandora effect' where people have a general tendency to approach rather than avoid stimuli that has been marked as unknown and possibly aversive.

"Trigger warnings therefore appear ineffective in preventing vulnerable populations, such as people with mental health concerns, from engaging with distressing stimuli."

Provided by Flinders University