

The Aurora Center for Advocacy & Education

# Trigger, Triggered, Triggering... What?

Information for Faculty to Help Establish a Safe and Respectful Environment for Survivors of Trauma

## Common Questions

- **What is a Trigger?**
  - A **trigger** is a stimulus that sets off a memory or flashback causing the person to vividly re-experience her/his trauma. A person's triggers are generally activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.
- **What are Common Reactions to a Triggering Event or When Someone "Feels Triggered"?**
  - People often experience triggers differently. Some types of common reactions: anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, avoidance/denial, resurgence of unhealthy behaviors or coping mechanisms. Some examples: experiencing a panic attack, crying uncontrollably, dissociating, and engaging in self-harm.
- **What are Common Examples of Triggering Material?**
  - Graphic descriptions, depictions of or extensive discussion of:
    - abuse, especially sexual abuse or torture
    - self-harming behavior such as suicide, self-inflicted injuries or disordered eating
    - the mental state of someone suffering abuse or engaging in self-harming behavior
    - violence and/or realistic scenes of war
    - consensual sexual activity
    - discriminatory or oppressive attitudes or actions (ex. sexism or racism)

## Common Types of Triggers Based on the Five Senses:

### Hearing:

- Anything that sounds like anger
- Anything that sounds like pain or fear
- Any sounds that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (ie. sirens, foghorns, music, crickets, chirping, car door closing).
- Any sounds that resembles sounds that the abuser made (ie. whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice).
- Words of abuse (ie. cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used).

### Seeing:

- Someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits or objects (ie. clothing, hair color, distinctive walk).
- The object that was used to abuse
- The objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place
- Any place or situation where the abuse took place (ie. specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings).

### Smell:

- Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (ie. tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume).
- Any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (ie. food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol).

## Touch:

- Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (ie. certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you).

## Taste:

- Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (ie. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco).

## Best Practices for How to Inform Participants and Create a Safer, More Informed Space for All

1. Give trigger warnings when necessary, but not excessively. Although everything has the possibility to be a trigger, trigger warnings are reserved for events like or similar to the following:
  - Before showing a movie that has graphic descriptions, depictions of or extensive discussion of commonly triggering material (ex. a rape scene)
  - Before having a speaker who is going to speak on trauma/abuse/etc.,
  - Before asking the class to engage in an activity that is supposed to get the class to understand what it's like to go through a traumatic experience.
2. It may be common to say "trigger warning," but this may not be helpful or informative for participants. It is best to generally describe the course and perhaps, the intent of the program. For example:
  - The semester we will be viewing the film *The Accused*, which contains a graphic rape scene. We will then be discussing the film in class.
  - Next class we will be discussing the human rights abuses and torture of individuals in World War II. The course material will also include graphic pictures and descriptions of the horrors of the Holocaust.
  - A speaker will be coming to talk about her journey with anorexia nervosa, including the state of mind of someone with the eating disorder, cultural influences and the current state of eating disorders in the United States.

*Notice that some material that is commonly triggering may also cause extreme and/or unnecessary distress in participants that are not survivors of trauma. Giving these warnings can benefit all students and ensure a safer, more informed environment for participants.*
3. If someone tries to leave the room, do not attempt to prevent them or call them out for trying to leave.
4. If someone does leave the room, do not draw attention to them when they return. Progress as if they did not leave.
5. Give early enough warning, so individuals can choose to not attend or participate without calling attention to the idea that they may be experiencing or will experience a trigger. A beneficial policy for University of Minnesota classes would be to inform students one class period ahead of time if the following class period contains graphic descriptions, depictions of or extensive discussion of commonly triggering material. This allows students to speak to instructors during office hours or over email in order to arrange for an alternate assignment, accommodations or best access to the material covered.

*Handout Includes Information Adapted from Resources at the University of Alberta, Sexual Assault Centre.*



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