

### Trigger Warnings: Understanding the Argument

By Kayla M. Kaufman, Portland Stage *PlayNotes* – reprinted with permission

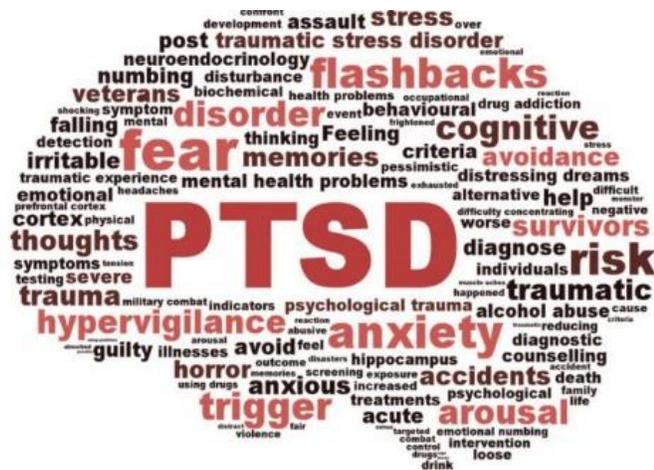
**ZOE: They are trying to avoid emotional trauma -**

**JANINE: Trauma? I am not torturing anyone, I am not a war zone. Your whole generation, you have this cult of fragility, with your - your trigger warnings and your safe spaces -**

**ZOE: It's not being fragile it's being like – aware -**

**JANINE: I may be behaving sub-optimally. I may be insensitive. Which is bad. But when you throw around words like survive and trauma you invite people to belittle your cause.**

In *The Niceties*, the conversations between Janine and Zoe include a debate about the use of what have come to be known as “trigger warnings” and their place in a society. A trigger warning refers to a memory of an experience that can provoke, or trigger, strong reactions that cause a person to re-experience a traumatic event to varying extents. Though triggers are most commonly associated with individuals who have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), people who have experienced any kind of trauma often still have stressful reactions related to previous events. A trigger warning is a notice put in place for audiences to read before experiencing content of some sort, whether artistic or academic, which allows them to judge if the content might be triggering for them. The concept underpinning trigger warnings is to allow people who have experienced trauma-related stress the opportunity to be aware of, or the option to avoid, reminders of their experiences.



Some warnings are already a standard part of many shared experiences – think of signs posted in theatres to alert patrons that a play contains strobe lighting (which may cause seizures for people with epilepsy), or fog and smoke - which may irritate people with asthma or allergies. More serious triggers may arise from the sound of gunshots or fireworks - which could impact people with PTSD. Triggers may also arise from memories associated with traumatic experiences including sexual assault or abuse, natural disasters, or other harrowing events. Yet, arguments have been made questioning the need for trigger warnings. Below are some of the more common ones.

In the play Janine intimates that people who ask for trigger warnings are too fragile, and that society coddles **oversensitive individuals**. Trigger warnings are not about accommodating “fragile” or “sensitive” people. Trigger warnings are for accommodating people who have been through severe trauma and are still dealing with the effects of that trauma.

There are no trigger warnings for life. People should experience art and academia as they experience life: things should be able to shock and upset. While it is true that there are no trigger warnings for life, if an

organization can create a more welcoming environment for individuals who frequent those respective spaces, is that not a worthwhile thing to attempt? If there is a possibility to allow a person to prepare themselves, or take precautions against reliving traumatic experiences, a trigger warning may be worth considering.

**Trigger warnings are like censorship: they suggest some topics are too provocative or explicit to be discussed. They allow people to check out of the discussion and not engage.** It is true that some individuals may not be comfortable with the topics of certain discussions. On the other hand, some people may have an interest in engaging with more challenging content. Ultimately, an organization or event must consider the possibility of potentially triggering those who have experienced trauma, and then decide which is more important – the discussion, or a person’s choice to decide when or how they engage.

**We can never list everything that might be a trigger; a smell, a song, or a hairstyle could be a trigger. If you start, how can you know where to stop? There are no universal guidelines.** It is true that triggers can be small details associated with a traumatic incident, and that not everyone is aware of those particulars. We can’t assume to know what will trigger any given person, but by taking the time to understand common causes of PTSD, an awareness of potential triggers shows respect for people who may need advance notice of the material about to be shown or discussed.

**Offering trigger warnings gives those affected an easy way out, and does not allow them to address their triggers and get help. They should be exposed to these things in order to sort out what they need to deal with.** For some people with trauma, exposure therapy is important. But not everyone has the access to such assistance, or wants to re-experience reminders of their trauma. It may even be more harmful or dangerous for some individuals. Regardless, the choice of how to cope with a mental health issue should be a matter of personal choice. For those who cannot yet cope with their triggers, a warning allows them to make an informed decision about their comfort level with potentially traumatic material.

Roxanne Gay, a feminist author who has wrestled with PTSD-related issues, does not believe in the use of trigger warnings in regards to her own distress, but is supportive of those who do find comfort in them. Gay says that she recognizes that “in some spaces, we have to err on the side of safety or the illusion thereof. Trigger warnings aren’t meant for those of us who don’t believe in them, just like the Bible wasn’t written for atheists. Trigger warnings are designed for the people who need them, who need that safety. Those of us who do not believe should have little say in the matter. We can neither presume nor judge what others might feel the need to be protected from.”