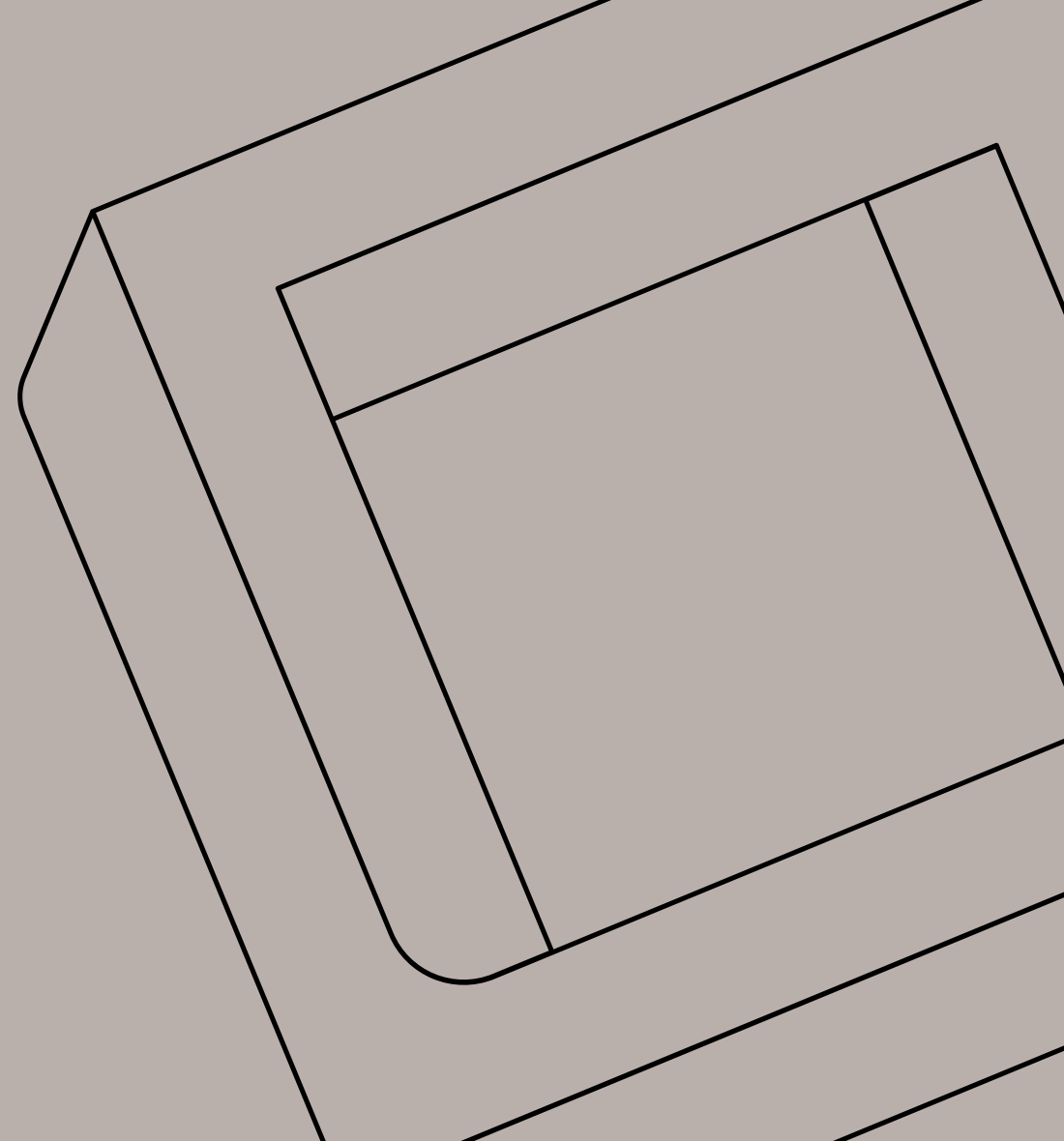


Trigger warnings – do they just trigger people more?

Australian Evaluation Society conference

Dr Kizzy Gandy

September 2024



Agenda

1. A bit about Verian
2. What are trigger warnings?
3. Intention and popularity of trigger warnings.
4. What impact do they have?
5. Where to from here?

A bit about Verian



Research, evaluation, evidence, and communications

For the public sector

In November 2023, Kantar Public rebranded as Verian.

Our **evaluation team** can tell you whether your program or service is:

- **Appropriate** to the needs of beneficiaries
- **Implemented** effectively and efficiently
- Achieving its intended **outcomes**
- Generating a financial and/or social **return on investment**

We are a national team with offices in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra and globally



verian  Powering decisions
that shape the world.

What are trigger warnings?

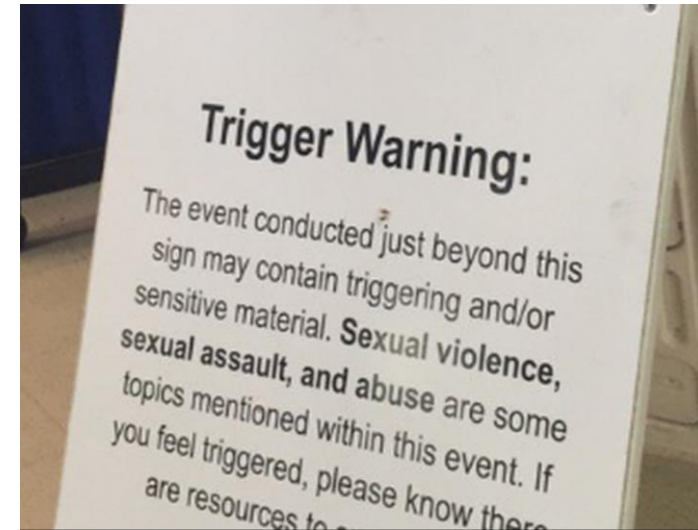


Definition and origin

Definition: Any statement that intends to help individuals prepare for or avoid content likely to trigger memories or emotions relevant to past experience.

The term *trigger warning* originated in the late 1990s on feminist internet message boards which included posts about rape. They have since spread to other topics and settings.

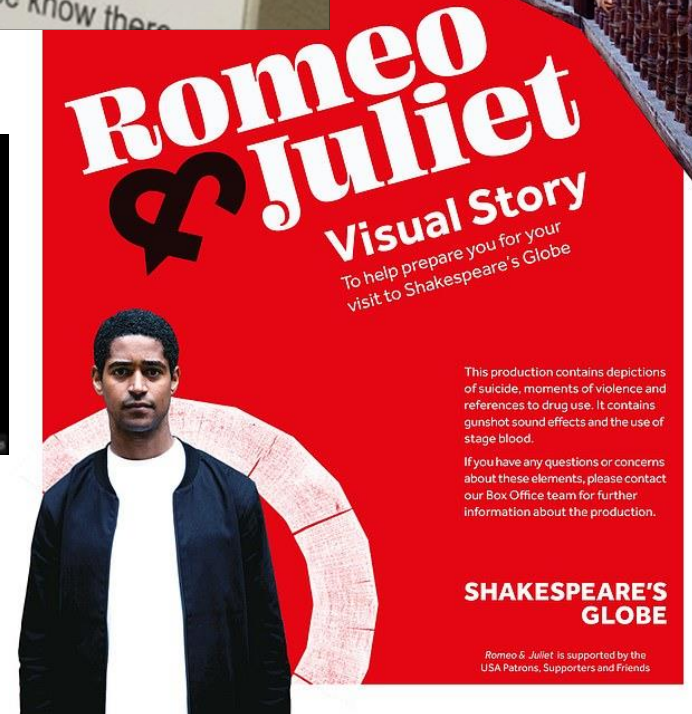
Examples



Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus: "discussion of sexual violence, sexual assault"

	19/10/17	Violence Control and consequence; when do we laugh at violence, and why?; credulity and sympathy. Focussing particularly on Shakespeare, <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> and <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , and Sarah Kane, <i>Blasted</i> . nb. discussion of sexual violence, sexual assault.	⚠
	26/10/17	Double Takes Likeness and mimicry, repetition; what these techniques say about [lack of] origin and/or identity. Focussing particularly on Shakespeare, <i>The Winter's Tale</i> and <i>Hamlet</i> , alongside Samuel Beckett, <i>Rockaby</i> and <i>What Where</i> .	
Seminars:	02/11/17	Inhabiting the Body Presentations of wholeness, dismemberment and transformation; fatness, looking ridiculous. Prior Reading: Euripides, <i>Hippolytus</i> , <i>The Bacchae</i> and Sarah Kane, <i>Phaedra's Love</i> nb. discussion of sexually explicit scenes, scenes of sexual assault	⚠

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-41678937>



Use in government meetings, research and evaluation

If today's discussion brings up any concerns or distress for you, please reach out for support:

- Lifeline - **13 11 14** or Webchat
(<https://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat/>)
- Beyond Blue - **1300 22 4636** or Webchat
(<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/support-service/chat>)

Intention and popularity of trigger warnings



Forewarned is forearmed?

The rationale for trigger warnings is that if people are forewarned about distressing stimulus, they can either choose to **avoid it** or **mobilise coping strategies** to experience less distress.

A 2022 UK survey found **86% of undergraduate students support trigger warnings** (up from 68% in 2016).
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/06/23/you-cant-say-that-new-polling-shows-students-want-more-controls-on-free-expression/>

75% of Australian adults have experienced a traumatic event at some point in their life.
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health/stress-and-trauma>

What impact do trigger warnings have?



Recent research in different fields has converged on emotions being constructed

Cross-cultural research has found that different cultures organise emotions in different ways. For example, some cultures, such as the Utku Inuit of Canada, don't have a concept that corresponds to anger.

Neuroscience finds that we aren't born with a set of emotions. Instead, we experience arousal. Arousal simply ranges from pleasantness to unpleasantness. The term for this is "affect".

We attach emotional labels to arousal. Whether we call arousal anger or disappointment or another emotional category is a function of our culture. These categories can't be distinguished by an objective state in the body.

A new theory has taken hold in **neuroscience** that our brain is not for thinking – it's for making predictions to keep us alive. Predictions are more efficient (energy saving) than reactions.

Our brain makes predictions about the world based on sensory input and then constructs emotions in the moment to get us to act in line with those predictions.

Recent research in different fields has converged on emotions being constructed

Psychological research on the impact of trigger warnings on our emotional state started emerging around 2018.

Most studies found trigger warnings neither reduce negative emotions nor help people cope, but some studies found they increase distress.

There are now a couple of meta analyses on trigger warnings. These studies avoid cherry picking results by aggregating effects across studies.

Four areas of research on trigger warnings

Do they reduce the risk of trauma and re-traumatisation?

Avoidance of content

Opt-out of viewing.

Anticipatory effect

Momentary changes in affect after the warning but before stimulus.

Subjective rating of stress and psychophysical measures such as heart rate, respiration, skin conductance.

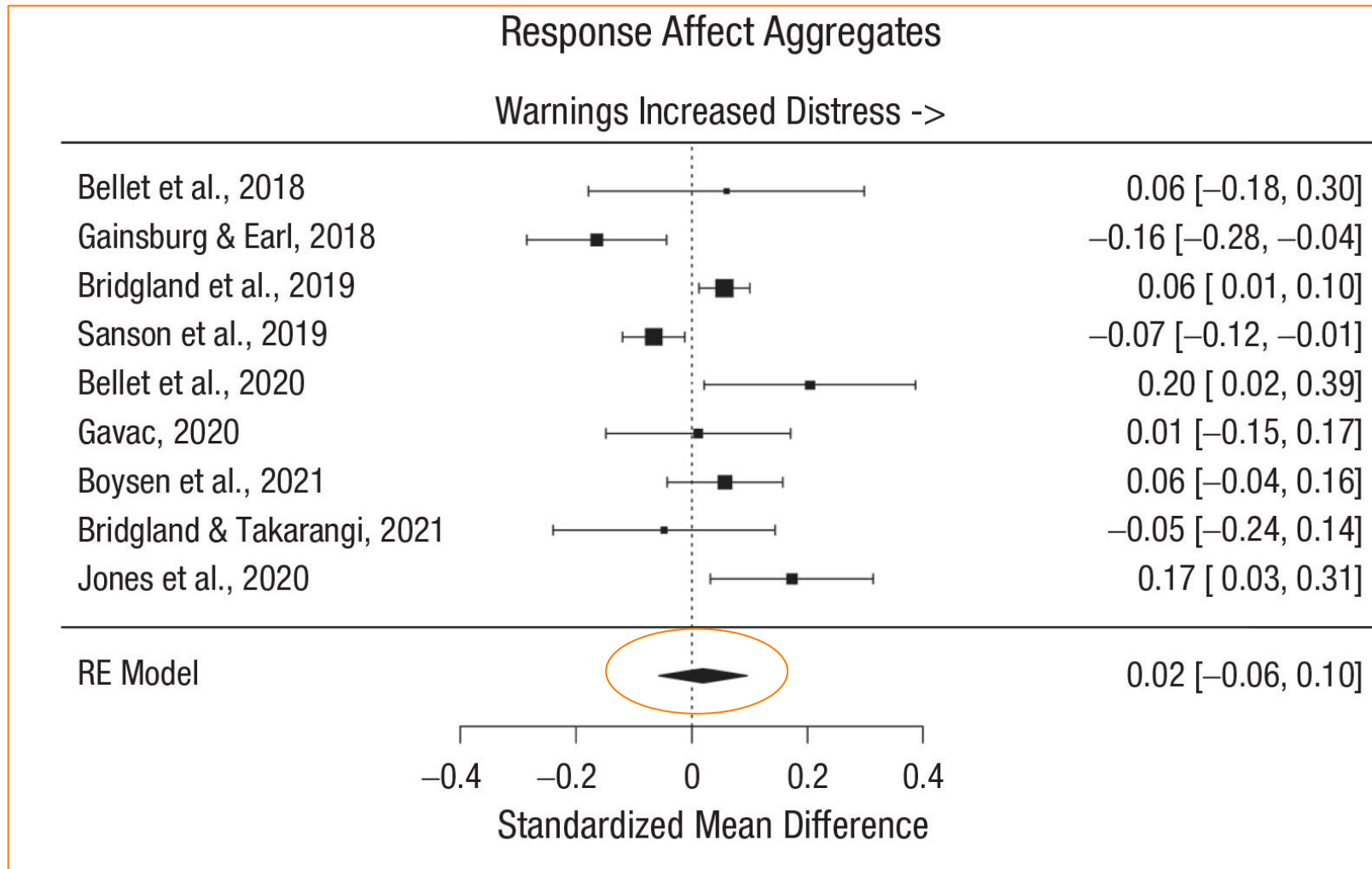
Response affect

Negative emotion (anxiety/ distress / fear) for those with or without past experience of trauma.

Ability to comprehend content presented

Scores on a test for factual content.

Meta analysis method



Meta analysis findings

12 papers, some included multiple studies, met inclusion criteria

Avoidance of content

Trivial effect, not statistically significant

d=0.06

95% CI -0.09-0.21

Given the choice to avoid, only 6% do.

Interpreting Cohen's d effect sizes:
small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$),
and large ($d = 0.8$)

Bridgland, V. M., Jones, P. J., & Bellet, B. W. (2022). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of trigger warnings, content warnings, and content notes. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 21677026231186625.

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Both subjective and physical measures of stress increased.

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Trigger warnings don't create a safe space for enhanced learning.

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What could be driving the backfire effects in some studies?

Avoidance of content

“Forbidden fruit effect”: The tendency to want something more if it is off-limits. In some circumstances trigger warnings make content more attractive.

Anticipatory effect

Uncertainty causes anxiety because our brains are prediction machines, so we deal with uncertainty as a **threat**. When people hear warnings, they brace for the content but after exposure to the content/stimulus they have complete information so the effect goes away.

Response affect

“Nocebo effect”: Setting up expectations of negative physical symptoms (e.g., pain, itch, side effects) can cause or exacerbate those outcomes.

Trigger warnings may increase trauma survivors' tendency to see their trauma as central to their **identity**, which has been linked to increased PTSD symptoms.

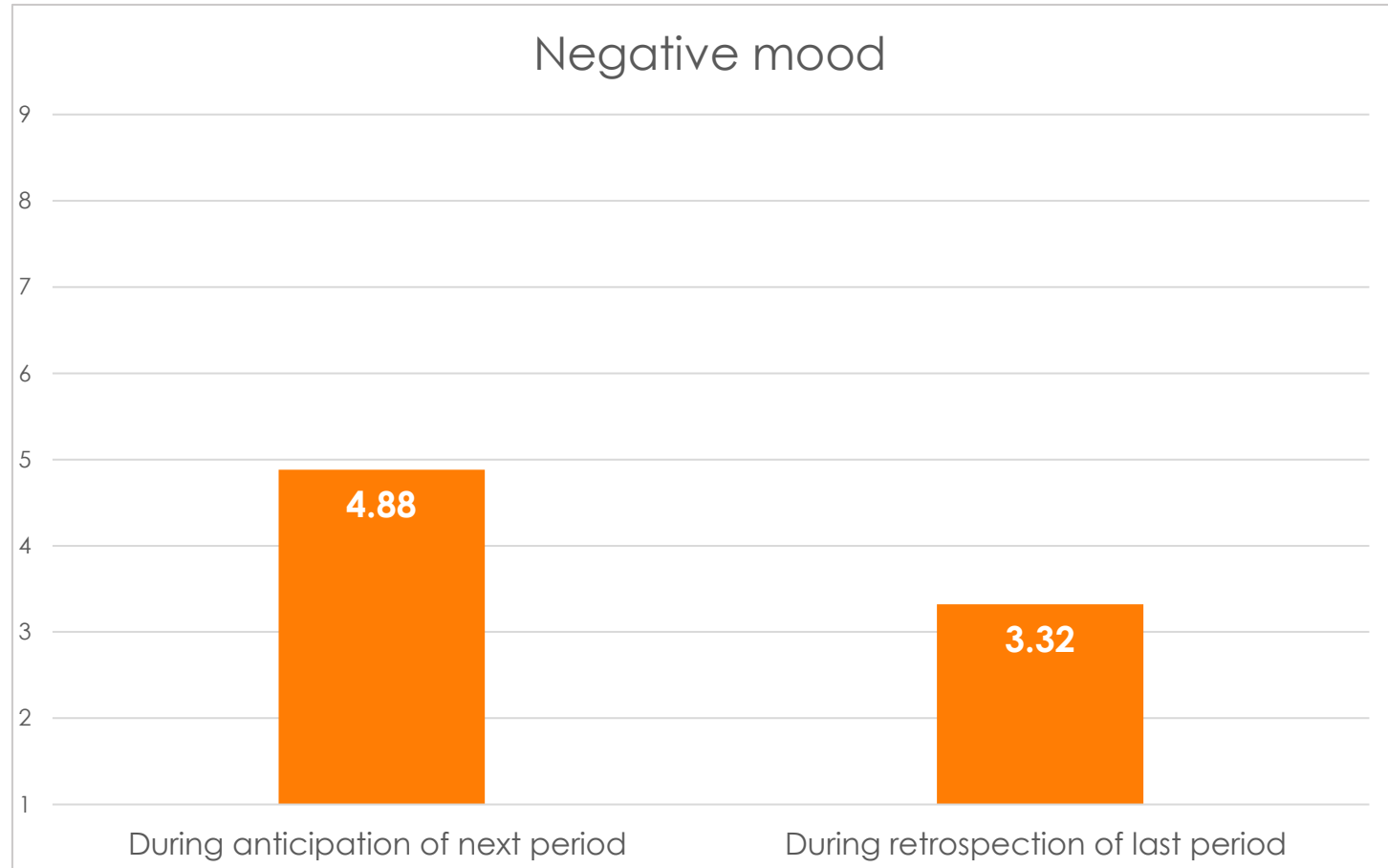
Warnings do not explain HOW to reduce distress. Research confirms people don't employ **strategies** to reduce perceived stress when exposed to a warning, such as reappraising or self-distancing.

Dicker, E. E., Jones, J. S., & Denny, B. T. (2022). Psychological distancing usage uniquely predicts reduced perceived stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 838507.
Arbel, R., Szpiro, S. F., Sagi, J., Khuri, M., Berkovits, L., & Cohen, N. (2022). Reappraising negative emotions reduces distress during the COVID-19 outbreak. *Current Psychology*, 1-10.

Negative mood and emotion are worse during anticipation than retrospection.

Van Boven, L., & Ashworth, L. (2007). Looking forward, looking back: anticipation is more evocative than retrospection. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 136(2), 289.

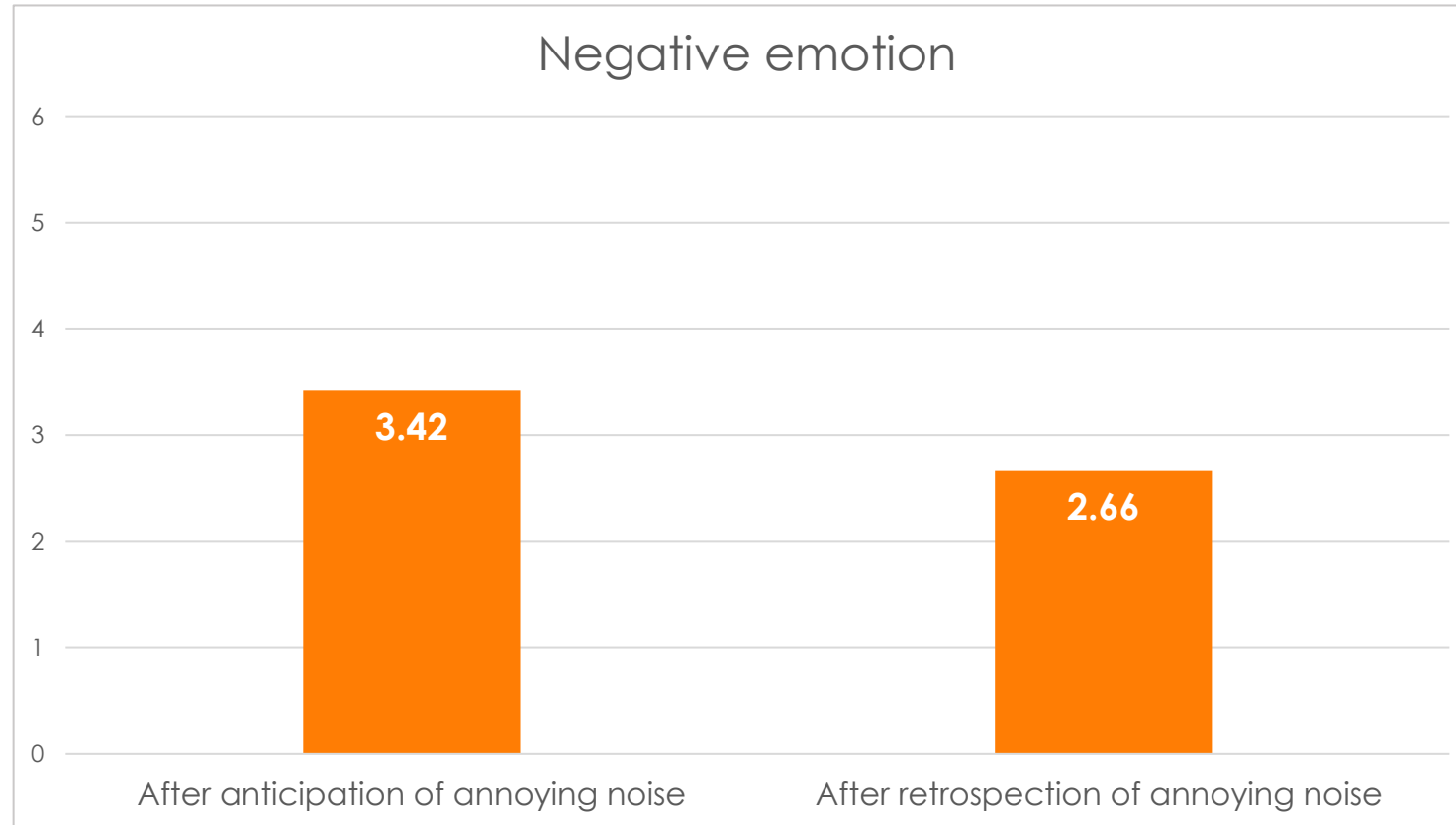
Female participants' reactions to anticipation and retrospection about their menstrual periods



n=49, p=0.027

Participants were asked, "When you think about your period, how does it make you feel right now? That is, how does the act of thinking about your period influence your current mood?" (on a 9-point scale; 1=has no effect, 9=substantially worsens current mood)

Participants' reactions to anticipation and retrospection about listening to an annoying noise



n=61, p=0.001

Participants were asked to report (on a 6-point scale; 1=not at all,6=a great deal) how much they were currently experiencing each of 15 emotions: agitated, angry, annoyed, comfortable, delighted, glad, happy, irritated, negative, nervous, positive, sad, uncomfortable, unfortunate, and unhappy. Negative emotions were reverse scored so that higher numbers indicated more negative emotion. The 15 ratings were averaged into a composite measure of negative emotion.

Where to from here?



Summary

Trigger warnings neither reduce negative emotions nor help people cope. But they increase anticipatory anxiety.

Some people argue that trigger warnings are important – even if they have no impact on reducing negative reactions – because they function as a signal of compassion.

The choice to send such a signal is of course part of the evaluator's freedom. But it is important to undertake it with the understanding that this particular type of signaling may be at cross purposes with the other goal evaluators have to empower participants.

How people talk and think about their emotions can influence social interactions and relationships, the success of therapeutic or medical treatment and the outcomes of institutional justice processes.

What is our role as evaluators?

Trauma informed approach to research and evaluation

Do no harm

Promotes resilience and recovery through skills-based approaches to coping (e.g., reappraising or self-distancing) and by improving understanding of the science

Empowerment

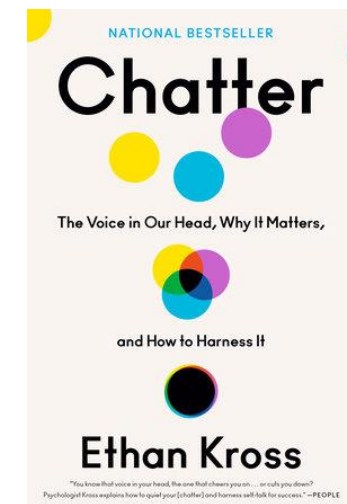
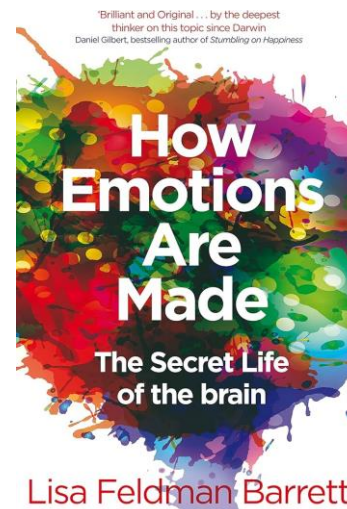
What could empowerment look like

Promotes resilience and recovery

Skills-based approaches to coping:

1. Reappraising
2. Self-distancing

Many people try to understand their feelings when they are upset, under the assumption that doing so will lead them to feel better. Research shows that to improve the way people feel about a negative event, it is necessary to change the way they think about it.



Reappraising

- Recent research from neuroscience shows that emotions are just your brain's guesses about what's happening in the outside world. Your brain creates emotions to get you to take action.
- However, the emotional categories it creates are simply generalised from your past experience and can be changed or nuanced if those categories are not helpful for the current situation.
- If you understand that “fear” is a cultural concept, a way of overlaying meaning on to high arousal and high unpleasantness, then it's possible to experience it differently, e.g., high arousal before a test can be anxiety or determination

“Get your butterflies flying in formation” – Lisa Feldman Barrett

- People who can distinguish more granular emotional categories (e.g., content, joyful, prideful, adoring, grateful instead of just happy), and master their emotions, have better health and life outcomes.

Self-distancing

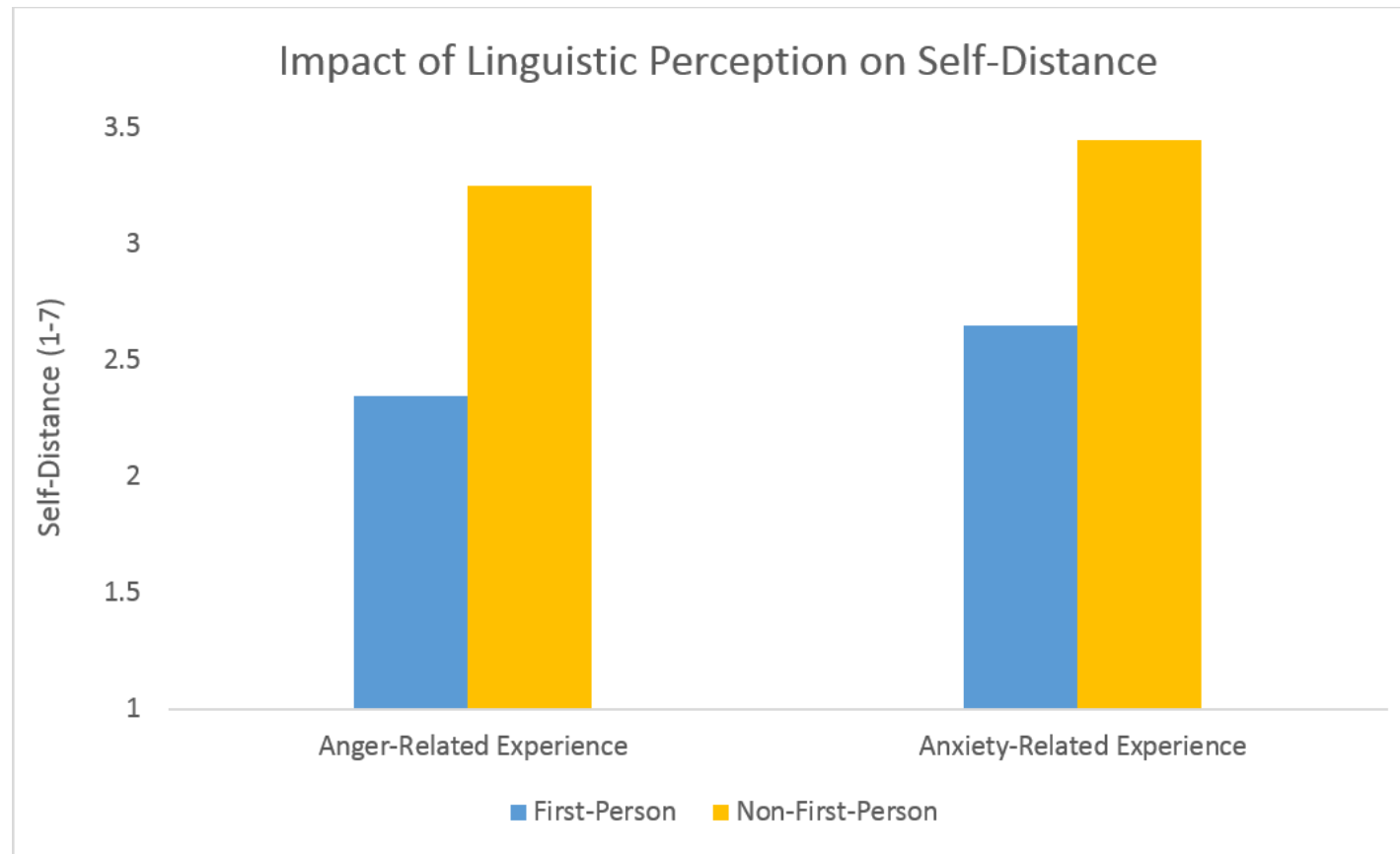
- Self-distancing involves zooming out from a problem or taking a step back from the experience to work-through it more effectively. Techniques involve using third person language, mental time travel, and feeling awe.
- Research shows that small shifts in the language people use to refer to the self during introspection influence their ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour under social stress, even for vulnerable individuals.

“I didn’t want to make an emotional decision. I wanted to do what was best for LeBron James and what would make him happy.”

— Basketball player LeBron James describing his decision to leave his old team.

Self-talk using your own name

“why did I feel this way?” vs. “why did Jane feel this way?”



Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., Shablack, H., ... & Ayduk, O. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 106(2), 304.

Self-distancing

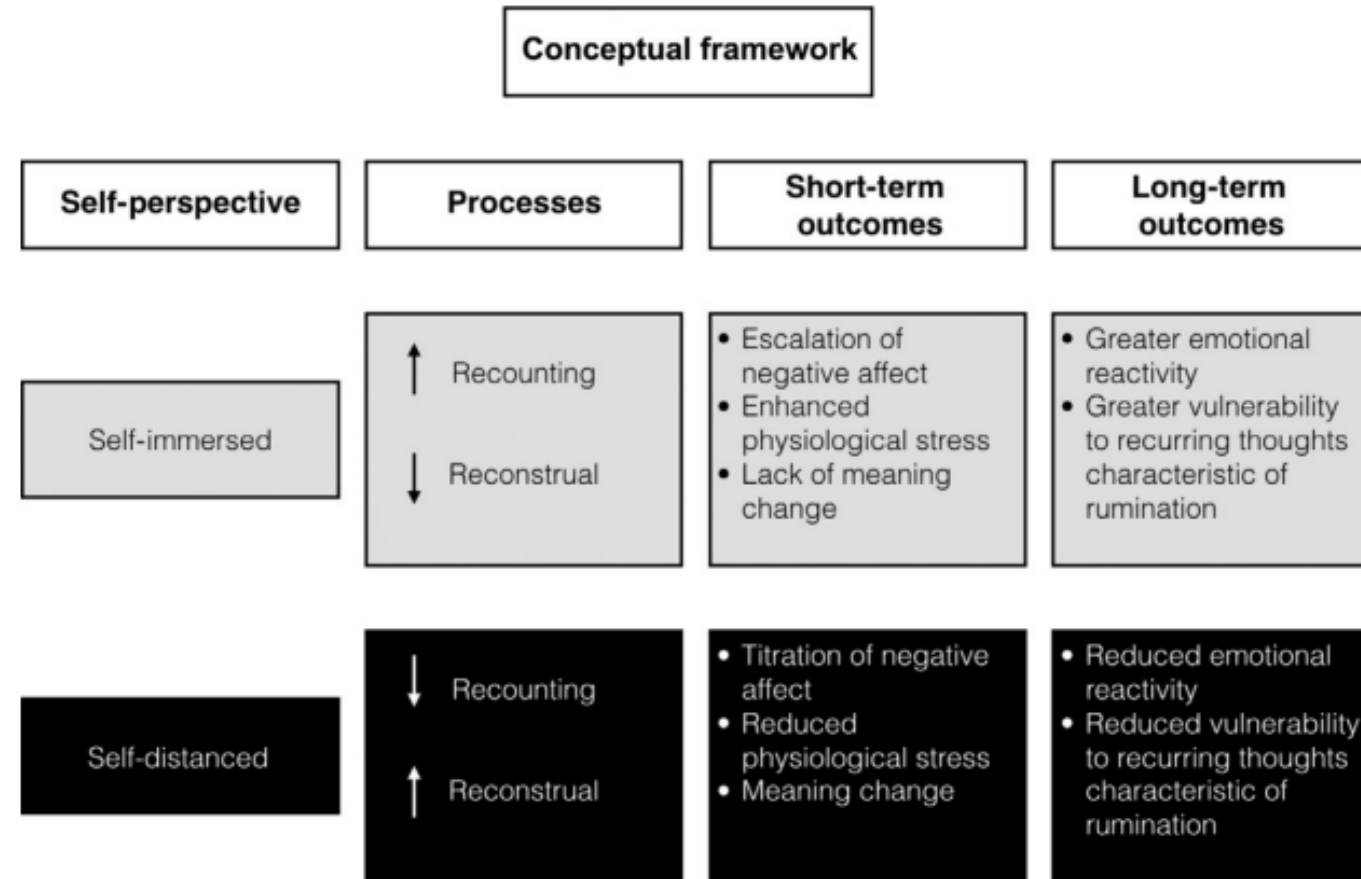


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework.

Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2017). Self-distancing: Theory, research, and current directions. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 55, pp. 81-136). Academic Press.

Your ideas?

Thank you

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