

# NAVIGATING ACTIVATING **CONVERSATIONS** IN THE CLASSROOM

## **GOAL FOR EDUCATORS: CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT**

We want students to stay engaged when conversations are activating or triggering because this can be an important opportunity to learn how to self-regulate.

## **CONTENT WARNINGS VS. TRIGGER WARNINGS**

“Content warnings and trigger warnings are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them. On the contrary, warning students of challenging material can help their engagement by giving them the ability to take charge of their own health and learning” ([University of Michigan](#)).

**Content Warning:** verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.

**Trigger Warning:** a specific variety of content warnings that attempt to forewarn audiences of content that may cause intense physiological and psychological symptoms for people who have experienced trauma, those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or other anxiety disorders.

## **WHAT IS TRAUMA?**

Trauma is a term used to describe the **challenging emotional consequences that living through a distressing event can have for an individual**. Traumatic events can be difficult to define because the same event may be more traumatic for some people than for others” ([CAMH](#)).

“Trauma isn’t what happens to you;  
Trauma is what happens in you as  
a result of what happens to you”

**Gabor Maté**

💡 Trauma can be held in the body, long after it occurs.

## WHAT ARE TRIGGERS?

Triggers prompt a physiological (flight, flight, freeze, fawn) reaction from a previous traumatic experience. Typically, triggers are sensory (ex. Smelling burnt toast or hearing a particular song). Triggers transport the brain back to an experience of trauma and prompts the body to respond for physical survival.

## CAN WE AVOID THEM?

The short answer is no. **Triggers typically arise unexpectedly and are often moments or situations that we cannot anticipate.** Triggers are vast and can be anything from events, topics, someone else’s disclosure, activities to sensory experiences. We cannot possibly attempt to predict what might trigger students in our classrooms. The word trigger is often misused, as folks use it to describe when someone is activated.

## ACTIVATING VS. TRIGGERING

Activating	Triggering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A response to something that is challenging values or upsetting</li><li>• Feeling uncomfortable (this can include a lack of emotional safety)</li><li>• <b>Example:</b> Being challenged on your opinion in a lecture by someone who disagrees. This does not mean that you are triggered because you are not feeling a lack of safety to your physical survival in that moment.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trauma response</li><li>• Feeling a lack of safety for your physical survival</li><li>• <b>Example:</b> Smelling a familiar scent that takes you back to a moment where you experienced trauma. Your brain feels as if it is back in that unsafe situation. This can lead to feeling unsafe in the current moment regardless of whether the unsafe stimulant is present or not.</li></ul>

💡 We cannot create safe spaces or spaces free of triggers in our classrooms.

## WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN SOMEONE IS TRIGGERED?

Triggers result in emotional dysregulation and although it can be difficult to see someone experience this, **we cannot prevent this from happening.**

**Crying is not necessarily a sign of emotional dysregulation.** Research shows that crying increases oxytocin and activates our parasympathetic nervous system which promotes rest and relaxation. Therefore, crying can be a way that our body is naturally regulating our emotions.

Moreover, feeling lower levels of anxiety, discomfort, upset, sad or angry are also normal ways that folks can respond to difficult content.

## BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED IN THE CLASSROOM

**As educators, our intention should not be to avoid activating or triggering conversations.** In fact, sometimes trigger warnings can heighten the group and can be unnecessarily activating.

What we can aim for is to ensure folks can be prepared to self-regulate and ground themselves if needed.



If someone is triggered in your classroom, **it isn't your fault.** Triggers cannot be prevented, nor should they. As educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that students know where they can get support if they need it.

## BEFORE



- Content Warning included in syllabus.
- Example: “The content in this lecture will include discussions of sexual violence and trauma. This may be difficult for some folks to engage with, but please keep in mind that there are resources available if anyone would like to access them.”
- Additional content warning in the lecture the week before.
- Know where to direct students to resources.
  - [Mental Health Support](#), [GBSV Support](#)
  - Email [support@uwo.ca](mailto:support@uwo.ca)
  - These resources & more information can be found at [uwo.ca/health](http://uwo.ca/health)

## DURING



- Quick reminder to students about where they can access resources.
- Classroom conversations should remain appropriate:
  - Prioritize the truth of lived experiences
  - No denial of harm and lived experiences
  - No personal attacks
- If a student is triggered in during class, you do not need to do anything.**  
We can trust that our students are experts in their own regulation.

## AFTER




- Notice if any students' behaviour drastically changes following the difficult class:
  - Absent from class
  - Zero engagement
  - Classroom outbursts
- Be prepared for disclosures (see next page).

## HANDLING DISCLOSURES

You may receive a disclosure at any time in your classroom because some students may see you as a trusted person to talk to, but there can be an increased chance for you to receive a disclosure following difficult conversations in the classroom.

**A disclosure is when someone shares an experience of trauma and/or gender-based violence.** Survivors can disclose for a variety of reasons including: wanting someone to believe them, just wanting to talk about what happened, fearing the situation may escalate and/or seeking resources and support.

 A disclosure is NOT a formal report. The decision to disclose and to file a non-criminal complaint with Western are separate decisions to be made by a survivor.

## RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES USING THE A.R.C. MODEL

The A.R.C Model (developed by Possibility Seeds) is a survivor-centered approach to responding to disclosures of sexual violence and trauma.

A	R	C
<p><b>ACKNOWLEDGE</b> the disclosure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Recognize and acknowledge to yourself that what you are hearing is a disclosure.</li><li>You will need to <b>consider your responsibilities</b> (Western's Notification of Disclosure Protocol) and your limits to confidentiality.</li></ul>	<p><b>RESPOND</b> to the survivor.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Respond to the person who has disclosed to you with care, empathy and respect for the person's dignity.</li><li><b>Here are 3 quick tips:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Believe them</li><li>Don't judge their choices</li><li>Don't feel like you have to "fix" anything, you can just be there to listen</li></ul></li></ul>	<p><b>CONNECT</b> the survivor with supports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Connect the person with resources. These could be internal and/or external to Western.</li><li>Offer a <b>warm and caring referral</b> to connect them with support or provide the contact information for who they can reach out to.</li></ul> <p><a href="http://wellnessresources.uwo.ca">wellnessresources.uwo.ca</a></p>

## WESTERN'S NOTIFICATION OF DISCLOSURE PROTOCOL

Under [Western's Gender-Based and Sexual Violence Policy](#) and its [Procedures](#), staff, faculty, and student leaders who receive a disclosure of gender-based and sexual violence from a Western student **must** complete the Gender-based and Sexual Violence Disclosure Form.

1	Ask the survivor if they are feeling safe in the current moment. Direct the survivor to appropriate resources if they are not feeling safe.
2	Explain the referral process and your limits of confidentiality to the survivor. Ensure the survivor knows you will not include details of their disclosure on the form.
3	Inform the survivor that they will receive an automated email from the Gender-Based Violence Survivor Support Case Manager to offer support and resources. The survivor is not required to respond to this email.
4	Request the survivor's contact information (email address or telephone number). The survivor is welcome to provide a newly created email address, as they may be concerned about their personal emails being monitored.
5	Complete and submit the online referral form after receiving the disclosure. Remember that hearing a disclosure can be difficult and your well-being is important too.

Still have questions about navigating activating conversations in the classroom? Connect with the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Education Team: [gbsv.edu@uwo.ca](mailto:gbsv.edu@uwo.ca)