Trigger and Trauma in Marginalized Communities

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Why do you get so offended easily?

That's the question I see in many comments defending the fraternity in Old Dominion University that posted sexually suggestive and demeaning banners in front of their house. The banners caused an uproar especially from survivors of sexual assault. Signs such as those bring back trauma, triggers, into many people's lives despite what the conveyed intention – excuse – is.

Unfortunately, this doesn't only happen in fraternity houses. This happens close to home. Just recently, I heard about a themed party thrown by people I knew. The theme was called "trigger-themed" and from what I heard, there were signs posted on the wall of triggering words such as "faggot" and "anchor babies". The intent may have been to make fun of their socially conscious peers or the culture that has challenged them to think before they speak. But while the intent was targeted towards a small group of people, the impact is bigger. By posting up signs with triggering words even if they were meant to be jokes, they've made the space and their relationships with people unsafe. And no, it's not because of "hurt feelings" and "being offensive" or "being politically incorrect" that makes this disheartening – that's not what feeling unsafe of feeling triggered is. It's because of the overwhelming trauma and energy that comes back to each individual affected by those words based on their experiences associated with the specific word.

Why do you get so offended easily?

There is a huge but unclear difference between being offended because a person was insulted, and being triggered because of trauma that a word, a sight, or an experience literally triggers back into one's mind and body. For example, a person can be ignorant enough to insult somebody for their LGBTQ identity with the term "faggot" and while the receiver may be insulted, they may not be triggered by it. However, if they have faced long-term bullying, assault, and mental duress in their life connected to that word, then you've just triggered all those memories and trauma back into them. Triggers usually root from traumatic experiences dealing with the reality of oppression people face: racism, queerphobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and so much more. People of color especially queer folks are the most vulnerable when it comes to triggers.

With that said, we will never certainly know what a person's certain triggers are. Not all insults are triggering. Not all things that challenge you or make you slightly uncomfortable are triggering. Being triggered is heavier and darker — usually debilitating, causing panic and branching to serious mental health issues which at times lead to death. That's why respect and knowledge of different communities' experiences matter. That's why mental health matters. Why trivialize that?

So, why do you get so offended easily?

It's because people don't actually know what trigger means or how it feels even in the light of mental health awareness campaigns. Some have used the concept of trigger actions loosely. For other people, these are merely words that they've learned to avoid saying. But for many of us, our traumatic experiences and the things associated with them are not funny and should not be trivialized. Shame on the Sigma Nu fraternity at Old Dominion University. Shame on the trigger-themed party even if it was just intended to be a joke. Most especially, shame on the party attendees who call themselves issue advocates and allies but stood complicit in participating in the continued oppression of people by doing and saying nothing at the party. You don't get

to be socially conscious only when it's convenient. Don't just learn what identity or issue allyship means; practice it. Because frankly, it hurts.