

KAITLYNNE NICOLE SEMINSKY, MADISON NICOLELLA, CLAY YINGLING, MEGAN MCDONALD, DEBRA HULL, & JOHN HULL, Psychology Department at Bethany College. Pandemic, trigger words, and the classroom

Our research concerns trigger words that elicit negative emotional responses in some circumstances, such as words with racist, sexist, or elitist associations. The focus of the present study was on words and phrases used to describe the Covid-19 pandemic, and how undergraduate students react to them in person or on-line interactions. Participants were 86 undergraduate volunteers, who individually read 14 words or phrases associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, masking, "Six feet apart!", and quarantine, rating them on 1-5 scales assessing negative-positive emotional response, and comfort in hearing them in a virtual class, in a face-to-face class, and using them in private conversation. Single-sample *t* tests showed that eight of the words and phrases: Covid-19, anti-vaxxer, "It's just like the flu!", Zoom, "Six feet apart!", lockdown, sneeze/cough, quarantine – produced statistically significant negative emotional responses, while none produced a significantly positive emotional response. Related-samples *t* tests showed only one item – sneeze/cough – produced higher ratings of comfort in a virtual than in a face-to-face setting. Words that produced more positive emotional responses also produced higher ratings of comfort when used in private conversation. Our study shows that most pandemic-related trigger words produce negative emotional responses, but that those responses are similar in face-to-face and virtual settings. Future studies will examine other factors that may mediate response to Covid-19 trigger words, such as political affiliation, age, and race.