

Tips for Faculty and Staff: Helping Students Cope with Trauma

In the Classroom:

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses and these events often traumatize members of the campus community. Providing some time in a class setting for emotional debriefing can significantly aid and accelerate the healing process. The following guide to emotional debriefing in class was adapted from a similar guide written for the faculty at Texas A&M University following the Bonfire tragedy in November 1999, and from Joan Whitney, Ph.D. "In the Classroom: Dealing with the Aftermath of a Tragedy" http://www.pratt.edu/newsite/backgroundOpt/health/1176900268_In%20the%20Classroom.pdf Also, special thanks to Counseling and Mental Health Services at Tufts University for this information.

General Considerations

- Consider providing time during class to discuss the incident and the student's feelings about it. The students should be encouraged to express feelings in as supportive an atmosphere as possible.
- If you prefer not to provide discussion time during class - it is typically best to acknowledge the event. A national or local tragedy can result in students having difficulty concentrating. Failure to mention the event can result in a perception of insensitivity involving the event. If you choose not to devote discussion time to the event, you might mention to students that tragedies stir up many emotions, and remind the students that there are resources on campus where they might consider seeking support.
- On our campus, those resources include the Counseling and Wellness Services- 966-3658, Campus Health Services- 966-2281 and Dean of Students Office- 966-4042. We also want to reach out to those of you who live off campus, and invite you to call and let us know how we can help.
- Resident advisors in campus housing and Granville Towers are also available to be of assistance and support.

If you do wish to provide an opportunity for discussion, here are some ideas to consider.

1. **Acknowledge the event**
Briefly acknowledge the tragic event, and suggest that it might be helpful to share personal reactions students may have.
2. **Discussion can be brief**
Consider providing an opportunity at the beginning of a class period. Often, a short time period is more effective than a whole class period. This serves the purpose of acknowledging that students may be reacting to a recent event, without pressuring students to speak.
3. **Allow brief discussion of the "facts," and then shift to emotions**
Often the discussion starts with students asking questions about what actually happened, and "debating" some details. People are more comfortable discussing "facts," than feelings, so it's best to allow this exchange for a brief period of time. After facts have been exchanged, you can try to shift the discussion toward sharing personal and emotional reactions.
4. **Invite students to share emotional, personal responses**
You might lead off by saying something like: "Often it is helpful to share your own emotional responses, and hear how others are responding. It doesn't change the reality, but it takes away the sense of loneliness that sometimes accompanies stressful events. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share."
5. **Encourage acceptance of all types of feelings**
If students begin "debating" the "right way" to react to a tragedy, it is useful to comment that each person copes with stress in a unique way, and there is no "right way" to react.
6. **Be prepared for blaming**
When people are upset, they often look for someone to blame. Essentially, this is a displacement of anger. It is a way of coping. The idea is that if someone did something wrong, then future tragedies can be avoided by doing things "right." If the discussion gets "stuck" with blaming, it might be useful to say "We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and that's not unusual. It might

be useful to talk about our fears."

7. It is normal for people to seek an "explanation"

By understanding "why" a tragedy occurred; we seek to reassure ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future. You might comment that, as intellectual beings: We always seek to understand, and it is very challenging to understand "unthinkable" events. By their very natures, tragedies are especially difficult to explain. Uncertainty is certainly distressing, but sometimes is inevitable. It is best to resist the temptation to make 'meaning of the event. That is not one of your responsibilities, and would not be helpful.

8. Thank students for sharing, and remind them of resources on campus

In ending the discussion, it is useful to comment that people cope in a variety of ways. If a student would benefit from a one-on-one discussion, encourage them to make use of campus resources.

Concerns about a Specific Student:

If you would like to discuss concerns about a specific student, contact The Dean of Students Office at 966-4042, or call the Counseling and Wellness Services at 966-3658.

Caring for yourself:

You, as a faculty or staff member, may also have strong personal reactions to this recent tragic event. Talking about what you are going through in the wake of this awful tragedy is the most important thing you can do to take care of yourselves and each other. If you would like to discuss your own reactions with a counselor, contact Counseling and Wellness Services 966-3658 or the University of North Carolina Employee Assistance Program (EAP) 929-2362 . This is a confidential, short term counseling and referral service provided to employees without charge by The University of North Carolina.