

Dealing with Tragedies: A Guide for Faculty and Staff

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on all college campuses at some time. Students die in accidents, sometimes commit suicide, or are victims of violence. These events can have a powerful impact on students, and on faculty, staff, and other members of the college or university community. When this happens, providing some time in a class setting for emotional debriefing can significantly aid and accelerate the healing process. Listed below are some guidelines for helping students deal with tragedies when they occur. This guide was adapted from a similar guide written for the faculty at Texas A&M University following the Bonfire tragedy in November 1999.

Specific Steps That You Can Take Following A Crisis:

- Provide time during class to discuss the incident and the students' feelings about it. The students should be encouraged to express feelings in a supportive atmosphere as soon as possible. The professor might say, "I'm still (sad, shaken, upset) by the tragedy that happened on Monday. I'm glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?"
- Don't rush. Give the students 30 seconds to a minute to say something. They may need a little time to get the courage to speak. If students do not speak, remind them of your office hours, your e-mail address, and/or your willingness to meet one-on-one. Emphasize that talking about the trauma is a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it will encourage them to talk. Although you may worry about the loss of instructional time, giving students a chance to talk about what happened might actually help, because if they are having serious emotional reactions their learning will be compromised.
- Remember that everyone's story is valid. Not everyone has to speak.
- Emotional debriefing is not about establishing facts of the incident. It is about expression of feelings. Whatever students say can be answered with: "It must be terrible to think about that." Or "It must hurt a lot to remember it that way."
- It is also important to let them know that when tragic events occur, the Student Counseling Services (SCS) makes special arrangements to provide support to students who are affected by the situation. If they would like help or support, they should contact the SCS as soon as possible. If you are able to identify students who are most upset, a referral to the SCS would be helpful.

- *When speaking to students try to do so in a calm relaxed way and don't worry if you cry in front of them. That's okay. When the students finish talking, you can offer them a moment of silence. Suggest that they close their eyes and breathe slowly and deeply three or four times. If you are worried about a particular student, approach her/him privately. If you are concerned about your own reactions to the situation, consider seeking help. Give us a call and we can chat with you about whether you should think about seeking help.*
- *Some students who have had close involvement with the crisis may have very vivid perceptions or memories of the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the event. It's not uncommon for them to feel something is wrong with them because the memories of these sensory perceptions are so strong. You can reassure them that such feelings are not uncommon after a tragedy. You might say: "Others have reported similar perceptions and thoughts after such a tragedy." Or, "It must have been so upsetting to (see, hear, feel, smell, taste) that."*
- *Some students feel very guilty. They may have been close enough to the situation or victims that they believe there is something they should have done to prevent the tragedy or harm to some of the victims. They may believe that they should have been there to help some of the victims. To address this, you might say: "After a tragedy, people often second guess themselves, and they are not sure they did everything they could. That's a natural feeling of wanting to help others. It does not reflect what was really possible."*
- *Focusing on the present and immediate future can be helpful. For example, ask "What are you worried about right now?"*
- *When they speak about future concerns, you might be able to alleviate some of their worries with facts or other ideas and thoughts. Giving students a chance to share their worries reduces anxiety. You can say, "It's really too early to know all the facts about what is going to happen. But there are things you can do to help yourself to deal with this tragedy. Many people find that talking with others, spending time with family, connecting with ministers, rabbis, or priests can hasten the healing process."*
- *After class, if students come to your office to speak in private, remember they are looking for someone who will validate their grief, not talk them out of it. Sitting quietly with them and letting them talk may be all that is needed. Share your own feelings about the tragedy. You might even tell them about other losses you've experienced if you're comfortable with that. If you do talk about past losses, it is helpful to end by saying that for you there was a gradual improvement in hopefulness and mood as time passed. You can simply say that you hope they have the same experience of healing.*

- *Finally, you, as a faculty or staff member, may also have either strong personal reactions to these recent tragic events or a need to discuss the response from your students. 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.*

Adapted from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.