

Faculty – After a Campus Loss

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses. These events often leave many students, faculty, staff, and members of the college or university community impacted. When this happens, providing some time in a class setting for emotional debriefing can significantly aid and accelerate the healing process.

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 campus on Thursday. I'm glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?"

Give the students 30 seconds to a minute to say something. They may need a little time to get the courage to speak. The minor loss of instructional time will be insignificant 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."

If you are able to identify students who are most upset, a referral to the Counseling Service 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.

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. 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."

A future orientation is helpful. You might 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,

"You can 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."

It is also important to let students know that when events like this occur, our Counseling Service 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 Counseling Service as soon as possible. If you are worried about a particular student, approach them privately. If you are concerned about your own reactions to the situation, consider seeking help. The Employee Assistance Program is available to all faculty.

It is likely that some students will choose not to share their experiences in class. Remind them of your office hours, your e-mail address, and/or your willingness to meet one-on-one. Emphasize that talking about the loss is a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it will encourage them to talk. 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.

These suggestions were drawn from: Poland, S., & McCormick, J. S. (1999), *Coping with a crisis: A resources for schools, parents, and communities*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West and The University of Texas at Dallas website:
<http://www.utdallas.edu/counseling/crisis/>

NASP Resource:

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/neat_poland.aspx

Teachers' Role

- Provide accurate information to students
- Lead classroom discussions that focus on helping students to cope with the loss
- Dispel rumors
- Answer questions without providing unnecessary details
- Recognize the varying religious beliefs held by students
- Model an appropriate response
- Give permission for a range of emotions
- Identify students who need additional support and refer to campus resources
- Provide activities to reduce trauma, such as artwork, music and writing
- Set aside the curriculum as needed