

What to Do in the Aftermath of a Tragedy in the Classroom (For Faculty)

When tragedy strikes, faculty often look for ways to talk to their students about the issue. Faculty members may find the following strategies helpful when discussing the subject in their classes.

Make time in class to talk as a group

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 to acknowledge that students may be reacting to a recent event, without pressuring them to speak. Introduce the opportunity by briefly acknowledging the tragic event and suggesting that it may be helpful for students to share personal reactions.

Have students discuss “facts” first, 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.

Offer students an opportunity to share emotional, personal responses

You might say something like: *“It can be helpful to share your own emotions about what you experienced and hear how others are responding. By doing so, it doesn’t change the reality, but it can lessen feelings of loneliness that sometime accompany stressful events.”*

Each person has a different way of dealing with a tragedy (can be very culturally influenced). Remember to respect these differences

Some will be more vocal or expressive than others with their feelings and thoughts. Everyone is affected differently and reacts differently.

Blaming as a way to cope

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, 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.”*

Looking for answers and asking “why” is normal for people. An explanation for why the tragedy occurred is part of the process.

By understanding, we seek to reassure ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future. It is very challenging to understand unthinkable events. By their very nature, tragedies are especially difficult to explain. Uncertainty is particularly distressing,

but sometimes inevitable. The faculty member should resist the temptation to make sense of the event. That is not one of your responsibilities, and would not be helpful.

Reach out to students who appear to be reacting in unhealthy ways

Some examples include isolating themselves too much, using alcohol excessively, or studying or working excessively in uncharacteristic ways.

If helpful and appropriate, find ways to memorialize the loss.

After the initial shock has worn off, it may be helpful to find a way of honoring and remembering the persons in a way that is tangible and meaningful to the group.

Make accommodations as needed, for you and for the students

Many who are directly affected by the tragedy may need temporary accommodations in their workload, in their living arrangements, in their own self-expectations. It is normal for people not to be able to function at their full capacity when trying to deal with an emotional situation. This is the time to be flexible.

Thank students for sharing their experiences, and remind them of available 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, you can encourage them to make use of campus resources such as Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

Give yourself time to reflect

Remember that you also have thoughts and feelings about what has and is occurring, and these should be taken seriously, not only for yourself, but also for the sake of the students with whom you may be working. Some people find it helpful to write down or talk out their thoughts and feelings.

Come back to the feelings as a group at a later time

It is important to acknowledge the adjustments people have made. Just because everything seems to be back to normal does not mean that everyone has finished having feelings about the tragedy.



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