

Guidance for Professors/Instructors Following a Crisis

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses. These events often leave many students, faculty, staff, and members of the college or university community severely traumatized. When this happens, 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. This guide was kindly shared by Professor Stan Carpenter from the Educational Administration Department at Texas A&M.

TIPS and Considerations

- Provide time during class to discuss the incident and the students' feelings about it. However, do not encourage speculation about the facts of the tragedy. Focus should be on listening and offering resources.
- 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. 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.
- It is also important to let them know that when events like this occur the 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.
- 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 empathic statements, such as:
"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 direct referral to the Counseling Service would be helpful. 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 options and resources for you.
- Some students who have had close involvement with the crisis may have very vivid perceptions regarding the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the event. It is 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.

- 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.”
- A future orientation is helpful. You might ask: “What are you most worried about right now?” “Who is in your support system?”
- 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 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.”
- 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 if you are comfortable doing so.

These suggestions were adapted from: Poland, S., & McCormick, J. S. (1999), Coping with a crisis: A resources for schools, parents, and communities. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

For additional information, assistance and resources, please contact the Curry Health Center Counseling Service: 243-4711

— CURRY —
HEALTH CENTER
counseling