



In the Classroom Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy

The University is committed to caring for our students' intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. When a national or world tragedy occurs, faculty members often express the wish to help their students effectively deal with the aftermath. There is no single correct time for these discussions. It is probably best to consider a discussion within a week of the occurrence of the tragedy. Be aware that for many students, they have not yet been faced with many of the existential issues raised by major tragedies. Developmentally they may not yet have developed the resources that older individuals may have had the chance to develop resources around coping with grief, loss, and horror at such "senseless" events.

Even if you do not wish to lead an in-classroom discussion, it is probably 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 students becoming angry at what they label as a "professor's insensitivity to what happened." If you choose not to devote discussion time to the event, you might mention to students that tragedies stir up many emotions, and that you want to remind the students that there are resources on campus where they might consider seeking support. On our campus, those resources include the University Counseling Center, Campus Ministry, Mental Health Unit and Residence Life (RD's & RA's).

If you wish to provide an opportunity for discussion, how do we discuss something so distressing? Here are some ideas to consider.

1. 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.

2. Acknowledge the event

Introduce the opportunity by briefly acknowledging the tragic event, and suggesting that it might be helpful to share personal reactions students may have.

3. Allow for a discussion of the "facts"

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.

4. Dealing with emotional responses

It is common for people to share emotions as they discuss such intense experiences. You can expect a range of reactions: angry, sad, numb, afraid, disillusioned, apathetic, as well as many other emotions. Some people joke, some people may have little reaction. It is important to normalize the full range of feelings people have to such experiences, none of them are wrong. Validating these emotions and thanking students for taking the risk to share can be very reassuring. Some students may be uncomfortable sharing emotions or hearing others in a classroom setting. Be respectful of all class members' experiences.

5. No right way to react

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. It is important to remind students to respect each other’s different reactions and coping behaviors.

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.”

7. It is normal for people to seek an “explanation” of why the tragedy occurred.

As human beings we want to understand why things happen. By understanding, 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
- It is very challenging to understand “unthinkable” events
- By their very natures, tragedies are especially difficult to explain
- Uncertainty is particularly distressing, but sometimes is inevitable

The faculty member is better off resisting the temptation to make meaning of the event. Where appropriate you might direct students attention to ideas within your own discipline, not to provide the answer, but to assist students in beginning to develop frameworks for making sense of a tragedy or responding to it.

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, you encourage them to make use of campus resources. They are mentioned above.

9. If you’re feeling overwhelmed, you may benefit by consulting with colleagues, friends or the Faculty Staff Assistance Program on campus. The FSAP provides free, strictly confidential assistance by phone or in person for faculty and staff and their immediate family members. Call x48170 or x48099 to schedule an appointment.

Some useful links:

The American Psychological Association provides an excellent on-line pamphlet entitled Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=22>

For information on the impact of traumatic stress, the American Psychological Association provides the online brochure: Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Traumatic Stress <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=122>

For University students a good resource provided by the American Psychological Association specifically for the Virginia Tech disaster is: Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in <http://helping.apa.org/articles/articl.php?id=151>

This information is adapted from Joan G. Whitney Ph.D. (Director, Counseling Center, Villanova University)