

Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy in the Classroom

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 brief discussion of the “facts,” and 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.

4. Invite students to share emotional, personal responses

You might lead off by saying something like: “Often it is helpful to share your own emotional responses, and hear how others are responding. It doesn’t change the reality, but it takes away the sense of loneliness that sometimes accompanies stressful events. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share.”

5. 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.

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.” 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.”

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

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. That is not one of your responsibilities, and would not be helpful.

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. These include the Campus Ministers, RA’s and the Cook Counseling Center, 240 McComas Hall, 231-6557, www.ucc.vt.edu

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