

## Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy in the Classroom

Following the recent tragedies at Virginia Tech University and Northern Illinois University, the UO Counseling and Testing Center wants to offer some tips to help when working with students.

### **Take time to talk as a group or class.**

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

### **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.

### **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.”

### **Respect each person's dealing with the loss.**

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

### **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, 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.”

### **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.

### **Make contact with those students who appear to be reacting in unhealthy ways.**

Some examples include isolating themselves too much, using alcohol excessively, throwing themselves into academics or busy work in ways not characteristic of them, etc.

### **Find ways of memorializing the loss, if appropriate.**

After the initial shock has worn off, it may be helpful to find a way of honoring and remembering the person 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, 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 can encourage them to make use of campus and community resources. These include residence hall staff, spiritual and religious leaders, and Counseling and Testing Center staff (located on the Health, Counseling, and Testing Center building 2<sup>nd</sup> floor; 541-346-3227; <http://counseling.uoregon.edu/>).

**Give yourself time to reflect.**

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

**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 loss.

Special Thanks to Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center and Northern Illinois University's Counseling and Student Development Center for this material.