

Tips for Helping Students Cope with Trauma

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses and produce a range of emotional reactions that impact students and faculty in the classroom. Most students will recover without adverse effect. However, as a staff or faculty member, you may want to know how to help those experiencing normal reactions as well as those who are particularly distressed.

It is typical for an individual to experience many emotions following a traumatic event and for different people to respond in different ways. Reactions may be stronger in a specific classroom if students were in that class at the time of the incident. Students' feelings can include shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, or grief. It may be more difficult to concentrate, sleep, and remember details. Rumination or replaying the events repeatedly in their imagination is common. For most people, these reactions will pass with time. For more information on common reactions and ways to increase resiliency, see the American Psychological Association Web site at <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/mass-shooting.aspx>.

Mental Health Counseling and Consulting Resources at The University of Texas at Austin

- The primary resource for students is the **Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC)**, located in the Student Services Building (SSB). Phone: (512) 471-3515; Web site: <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>; 24-hour crisis telephone counseling: 512-471-2255.
- Assistance for faculty and staff is available through the **HealthPoint Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**, a unit of Human Resources. The EAP's experienced counselors provide free, confidential phone counseling, faculty and manager consultations, individual appointments in the North Office A Building, and group meetings within departments. Phone: (512) 471-3366; website: <https://hr.utexas.edu/eap/counseling-services>; after-hours crisis telephone counseling: 512-471-3399.
- The **Behavior Concerns Advice Line** or **BCAL**, 512-232-5050, is available 24 hours a day to provide guidance to anyone concerned about someone else's behavior on campus.

In the Classroom.

- **Impacts on Academics:** Recognize that a student's academic performance may be affected by emotional responses. Especially in the days following a crisis, there may be impaired reading comprehension, recall, and memorization; increased absenteeism; inconsistency in academic performance; impaired problem-solving and planning; and increased feelings of frustration, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. For most students, these reactions should pass quickly. However, some individuals may be more strongly affected if they have other significant stressors or if they have experienced a trauma in their past.
- Consider altering teaching strategies temporarily. Help students by clearly prioritizing goals for course work and by communicating essential information in writing so students can refer to it if they have difficulty concentrating. You might also re-evaluate deadlines for assignments due very soon after the crisis.
- **Acknowledging the Event:** If you prefer not to discuss, it is typically best to at least acknowledge the event, especially if the class has been directly impacted by the event (for example, the class was interrupted by the event or a member of the class was involved in the event). At least mention to students that tragedies stir up many emotions and give contact information for resources on campus.
- If you do wish to provide an opportunity for discussion in class, here are some ideas to consider:
 1. Keep discussion brief. 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. Allow discussion of the "facts." Often the discussion starts with questions about what actually happened, and "debating" some details.
 3. Some students may share feelings. It is best to acknowledge emotions simply and directly, but not dwell on them. You are not a counselor nor expected to be one. Intense sharing of feelings that goes beyond a brief expression of normal shock, fear, or other initial distress is not recommended in this group setting. Instead, remind all students of counseling resources on campus.

4. Encourage acceptance of all individual reactions. 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.
5. It is normal for people to seek an "explanation". By understanding "why" a tragedy occurred, we seek to reassure ourselves that a similar event can be prevented in the future. Uncertainty is often distressing but sometimes is inevitable. It is best to resist the temptation to search for the "meaning" of the event.
6. Thank students for sharing and remind them again of campus counseling resources.
7. Contact EAP if you would like support in coping with your own reactions or to consult about your role in the classroom during this time.

Concerns about a Specific Student

- Some traumatic experiences occur once in a lifetime, but others are chronic. For some students, the current trauma may trigger strong memories and feelings related to previous trauma. The incident may also have a stronger than expected impact on students with existing medical or mental health conditions or on students who are experiencing other major stressors in their lives. These students may have additional difficulties in the classroom.
- To discuss concerns about a specific student, contact CMHC at 512-471-3515 or refer to CMHC materials on-line at <http://www.cmhc.utexas.edu/facultyandstaff.html> and <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/traumaevents.html>.

This guide was adapted from one written for faculty at Texas A&M University following the Bonfire tragedy in November 1999, by Joan Whitney, Ph.D., "In the Classroom: Dealing with the Aftermath of a Tragedy"; and a similar guide at Northern Illinois University by Toni Tollerud, Ph.D. and Lee Shumow, Ph.D.