

CLEMSON

COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

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FOLLOWING A CRISIS: TIPS FOR FACULTY-LED DISCUSSIONS

In the aftermath of a tragedy, faculty members often desire to assist students in dealing effectively with their reactions. Students react very differently to tragedy and trauma. While some students will remain untouched, others will be highly affected. Some will have immediate reactions while others will take days, or weeks, to react. If you wish to lead in-class discussions, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) has drafted a list of suggestions. Should you need further information or consultation with a counselor, please call CAPS at 656-2451. Although the topic about the tragedy is likely to be discussed for a long time, in-class discussion will be optimal within 1-2 weeks following the occurrence of the tragedy.

If you prefer not to address the tragedy during class, it is suggested that you at least acknowledge the event and that students may have reactions. Failure to mention the event may be considered by some students as the professor's insensitivity to what happened. Common responses to tragedy will include: problems with concentration/memory, irritability, heightened startle response, sense of detachment/apathy, anxiety, and intrusive/repetitive thoughts related to the tragedy. In addition, students may experience disruptions in appetite, sleep and decreased energy.

If you wish to provide an opportunity for discussion, here are some ideas to consider.

1. Integrate the discussion into your usual class routine as much as possible. We tend to find comfort in predictability. As close to the beginning of the class period and prior to beginning your lecture, consider giving students an opportunity for discussion. A brief discussion can be more helpful than devoting an entire class period. This will also serve the needs of students that may choose to avoid references to the tragedy.
2. Introduce the opportunity for discussion by briefly acknowledging the tragic event and stimulate discussion about their reactions.
3. Chances are the students will focus on discussion of the facts that they may have heard in the media. This is very normal, but to facilitate healing, shift the discussion to emotions.
4. Invite students to share emotional, personal responses. What are the students feeling? What is their personal reaction? As students address their feelings, they may find that

others are feeling similarly. Talking about feelings does not change facts but allow students to find support and validation that they are not alone in their reactions.

5. Some students may find “talking about this” as an intrusion into their class time. Validate their opinion as correct for him/her but suggest that part of becoming educated involves responding to the needs of others and that there is no “right way” to react to a tragedy.

6. Some students will have a need to seek an explanation for what happened. Some may focus on blaming and finding fault with what was done or what wasn’t done. This is often an expression of anger that can be a way of coping. Accept it as part of the discussion and shift the discussion to address fears that a student may have under the anger. Continuing in the blaming may keep one from accepting their vulnerability.

7. As you wrap up the discussion, bring attention to what each student can do, on a day to day basis, to keep themselves safe. Simple things like locking doors, walking in well light areas... Some feelings of loss of safety that comes with living in our current world.

8. Thank students for sharing. If professors are willing to talk one-on-one about the tragedy, remind students of office hours, e-mail address, and phone... It is O.K. not to volunteer to do such. The faculty members have their own reaction to deal with. Be gentle with yourself as well.

Remind students of campus resources:

Redfern Health Center. Appointment Line: (864) 656-1541. Visit <http://www.clemson.edu/redfern/>

Counseling and Psychological Services. (864) 656-2451. Visit <http://www.clemson.edu/redfern/caps/> This site has other resources that would be helpful for faculty, students and parents.

Clemson Campus Ministers Association.
Pastor Chris Heavener, President. (864) 654-4232

Some useful links:

Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings <http://helping.apa.org/articles/article.php?id=151> A document from the American Psychological Association.

Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=22> A document from the American Psychological Association.

Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Traumatic Stress <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=122> A document from the American Psychological Association.