

In the Classroom: Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy

By Joan G. Whitney, Ph.D.
Director, University Counseling Center
Villanova University

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.

If you prefer not to provide discussion time during class ~ 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, and Residence Life (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 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 University Counseling Center, Campus Ministry, and RA's.

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 the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings
<http://helping.apa.org/articles/article.php?id=15>