

In the Classroom: Dealing with the Aftermath of a Tragedy

Staff psychologists at Fordham's Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) are available to consult when a tragedy occurs.

Take time to talk as a group or class.

As much as it can be difficult to broach the subject of a mass trauma or loss in the classroom, it is usually best to acknowledge the event. Some faculty find it useful and important to lead an in-class discussion about the tragedy, while others prefer to simply acknowledge that it happened and let students know about the resources on campus available to them. In the aftermath of trauma, it can be difficult to decide the best way to approach the situation with students. If you want to talk through the issue or would like a staff psychologist from Fordham's Counseling Center (CPS) to facilitate a discussion with you, please call us at LC at 212.636.6225 and at RH at 718.817.3725. *If you think that a student's situation is life threatening, immediately call the Dean of Students at LC, Keith Eldredge, at 212.636.6250 or the Dean of Students at RH, Christopher Rodgers, at (718) 817-4755. After hours or on the weekend, please call Campus Security at LC at 212.636.6075 or at RH at (718) 817-2222.*

If you are interested in leading an in-class discussion about the tragedy or loss, here are some helpful tips.

Discussion can be brief.

Sometimes a brief discussion is sufficient and more containing than devoting the entire class to the issue. That said, it's best to follow your instinct as you are leading the discussion; pay attention to students' cues including the more reticent students to see whether the discussion is becoming too intense or prolonged, or additional time is needed for someone to speak. It's also a good idea to address the topic at the beginning of the class period.

Allow discussion of "facts" before shifting to emotions.

Often the discussion starts with students asking questions about what happened. People are often more comfortable discussing "facts" than feelings, so it's best to allow this exchange first. You may then suggest a shift toward sharing personal and emotional reactions. While creating the space for students to share their experiences can be helpful, it's important not to pressure anyone to speak.

Invite students to share emotional, personal responses.

You might lead off by saying, "It's often helpful to share one's own emotional experiences following a tragedy, and to hear from your peers. My hope is that this exchange will reduce a sense of alienation that sometimes accompanies a terrible loss. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share."

Respect each student's unique way of dealing with the situation.

Everyone is affected differently and reacts differently. Some will be more vocal or expressive than others, and some will feel more than others. Acknowledging the full range of possible emotional and behavioral reactions can help to normalize the situation and help students realize that they are not alone.

Be prepared for blaming.

When people are upset and feel out of control, they often look for someone to blame. Finding blame can initially increase one's sense of agency or mastery over a situation in which they probably had no control. 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. However, it's helpful to remember that sometimes anger comes from fear, which is also an understandable feeling reaction to an unthinkable event."

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. People also find comfort in finding meaning in something that is otherwise horrific or confusing. While meaning-making can be part of healing, it is also important to leave room for feelings of uncertainty or confusion. It can be helpful to say that having a sense of uncertainty or confusion following a tragedy is normal despite the wish to understand it. At times of uncertainty, students can be reminded to call upon friends or family members who they trust, to maintain their daily routine as much as possible and to do things that comfort them.

Make contact with students who you think are experiencing more significant distress.

While some students may need time alone to grieve, some students who are isolating themselves may need support from others. It's always best to ask the student what would be helpful for them. Other signs of unhealthy coping or 'complicated grief' include substance abuse, submersion in academics or busy work in ways that are uncharacteristic of the student, disruption of sleeping or eating patterns, or prolonged or intense feelings of guilt, depression or anxiety. If a student is suffering intensely, or their reactions are impacting them socially or academically, we encourage you to talk to them about counseling. If the student is not interested and you remain concerned, please discuss the situation with the Dean of Students or staff psychologist at CPS to see what/if any additional outreach may be needed.

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 or event in a way that is tangible and meaningful to the group.

Make accommodations as needed, for you and for the students.

Students or staff directly impacted may need temporary accommodations in their workload, in their living arrangements, or in their self-expectations. It is normal for people not to function at full capacity when dealing with the aftermath of trauma. This is the time to be flexible.

Thank students for sharing, and remind them of resources on campus.

In ending the discussion, let students know that there are many ways of grieving and of coping. If a student would benefit from additional support, please talk to them about the resources on campus. If a student would prefer resources off-campus, the CPS staff can assist you or the student in finding them.

Give yourself time to reflect.

Remember that you also have feelings about what occurred, and they should be taken seriously. Your ability to take care of yourself now will serve as a good model for students. You are also welcome to call CPS and ask to speak with a psychologist for support and to debrief the situation, or to find out about other resources.

Come back to the feelings as a group at a later time.

Students may be grieving for months following a tragedy. It may help to acknowledge this to the group, and to reiterate your interest in speaking with any student who is struggling, or who simply wants to talk about it.

(This information is adapted from Virginia Tech, UMD and NIU Counseling Center articles 2008).