In the Classroom: Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy

The University of South Carolina takes special pride in our commitment to caring for our students’ intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Faculty members often play a crucial role in supporting our students. There is no single correct time for these discussions. When a crisis occurs, students can struggle with concentration, motivation, and can often be more in tune with the constant information and chatter of technology.

It is probably best to consider a discussion within a week of the occurrence of the tragedy. Even if you do not wish to lead an in classroom discussion, it is likely best to acknowledge the event. 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. If you would like assistance or consultation in discussing tragedy in your classroom you can speak with a counselor at the Counseling and Human Development Center at 803-777-5223.

On campus resources include:

- Counseling and Human Development Center, 7th Floor Byrnes Building 803-777-5223
- Student Health Services, Thomson Student Health Center 803-777-3175
- University Law Enforcement and Safety 803-777-4215
- Housing and Residence Life 803-777-4283
- Student Ombudsperson 803-777-4172
- Graduate Ombudsperson 803-777-8237
- Behavioral Intervention Team 803-777-4333

Guidelines for Discussion:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 only 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.
- Encourage self-care strategies
- Assist students in connecting to each other, processing, and healing as a community
Coping with Death, Loss, and Grief

The death of a close friend, peer, or cherished professor and mentor can be very difficult to cope with and process. The sense of loss and grief that follows is both a natural and an important part of life. It is a healthy and appropriate response, a tribute to a cherished one and lost to death, not a sign of weakness. Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither leads to healing. Below we discuss, paths to healing. We encourage our University community to heal together.

Common Reactions to Loss

Reactions to grief are can be both different and similar. No two people react exactly alike to a loss and there are very significant cultural differences. For many, however, the most immediate response to the death of a loved one is shock, numbness, confusion, and a sense of disbelief. Physical reactions such as heart palpitations, tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, sweating and dizziness are common. At other times, you may experience an upset stomach, sleep and appetite changes, or a lack of motivation and energy. Emotional reactions may include feelings of guilt, despair, hostility, apathy, doubt, emptiness, and preoccupation with the image of the deceased. Depressed mood, anger, a lack of concentration, and extreme sadness may occur. Bereavement may contribute to some changes in your family and other relationships and may cause you to be at least temporarily more closed off from others.

Things that May Help You in Resolving Your Grief

It is important to think of going through your grief, instead of getting over the loss. By seeing the process through, you can develop personal strengths to cope with other types of loss and difficulties that may come up later in life. Acceptance of the loss means gaining a perspective - a new sense of self, understanding of others and the world, and what you can do with your life. You may find the following helpful:

- Keep doing the basics (eating, sleeping, going to classes).
- Be as open as you can be in expressing your feelings; cry if you need to. Express any anger or sense of unfairness if you feel it.
- Journal or write a letter expressing your grief.
- Play out in your mind the unfinished business in the relationship and try to come to a resolution; say good-bye.
- Talk about it. Tell someone you trust the story of your loss.
- Try to focus on what you were able to do for the deceased, instead of what you “should have done” or could have done.
- Allow yourself to have fun also.

Things That May Interfere with Resolving Your Grief

- Avoiding your emotions
- Over-activity to the point of exhaustion
- Using alcohol or other drugs to mask the grief
- Unrealistic promises made to the deceased
- Unresolved grief from a previous loss
- Judgmental relationships
- Acting resentful to those who try to help

Where Can You Turn for Help?

Friends, family, and faculty and staff can often be helpful. If you feel comfortable and trusting of someone close, there is a good chance it would help to talk with them. Members of the clergy may also be helpful. Mental health and counseling agencies such as the Counseling and Human Development Center, as well as private professional therapists and counselors, are important resources.

Being Helpful To Others

Social support for the bereaved is very important. Others can provide a safe space and a comforting presence to allow the person an opportunity to tell the story of the loss and to share how he or she is feeling. You can't take away their pain but you can let them know they are not alone. If you are concerned for someone who appears to be having a difficult time managing alone, you may want to suggest seeking professional assistance. You can also call the Counseling and Human Development Center at 803-777-5223 to seek consultation about how to help a friend.
Responding to Tragedy and Crisis
“Where do I go From Here? What do I do?”

1. Keep busy. Focus, best you can, on your projects and classroom assignments. Research indicates keeping focused on day to day required tasks or routines helps mitigate the effects of stress.
2. Seek out persons who care for and support you. Share your reactions, thoughts and how the experience impacted you.
3. Know that the reactions to trauma described are normal responses to a very abnormal experience. They occur in varying degrees of severity and type for each person.
4. Limit the amount of time that you watch details about the tragedy on TV, look at on social media, and online.
5. Spoil yourself – eat well, get your sleep, and do nurturing things.
6. Express your feelings with your art. Drawings, writing, poetry etc. are all healthy ways to manage the feelings related to trauma.
7. Consider writing a journal of your experience or feelings.
8. Seek to gain perspective on the experience. This is often helped by participation in counseling. Other aids may include meditation, reading, spiritual refection or involvement in support groups.
9. Consider sending cards, emails of support.
10. Helping others often is the healthiest way to manage our own feelings of powerlessness.

We are here for you.

If you need to talk to someone, please call the Counseling and Human Development Center at 803-777-5223 or walk-in to the 7th Floor of the Byrnes Building during our open hours, typically 8 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday.

You may experience some of the reactions outlined below. This is normal.

1. Shock: often the initial reaction to events like this. Shock is a person's emotional protection from being too overwhelmed by the event. You may feel stunned, numb, or in disbelief concerning the event.
2. Suffering: this is the long period of grief during which the person gradually comes to terms with the reality of the event or loss. Feelings that life is overwhelming, chaotic and disorganized are common.
3. Sadness: The most common feeling found following traumatic events like this. It may become quite intense and be experienced as emptiness or despair.
4. Anger: Can be one of the most confusing feelings for the grieving person. Anger is a response to feeling powerless, uncertain, unsafe, frustrated, or even abandoned.
5. Anxiety: Can range from mild insecurity to strong panic attacks. Often a person can become anxious about their ability to take care of themselves or fear an event like this will happen to them or a loved one.

It's good to talk about it! We are here for you.