

Ithaca College Counseling and Psychological Services

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<http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/counseling/>

Following a Crisis

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses. These events often leave many students, faculty, staff, and members of the college or university community severely traumatized. When this happens, providing some time in a class setting for emotional debriefing can significantly aid and accelerate the healing process. The following guide to emotional debriefing in class was adapted from a similar guide written for the faculty at Texas A&M University following the Bonfire tragedy in November 1999. This guide was kindly shared by Professor Stan Carpenter from the Educational Administration Department at Texas A&M.

Provide time during class to discuss the incident and the students' feelings about it. The students should be encouraged to express feelings in a supportive atmosphere as soon as possible. The professor might say,

“ I’m still (sad, shaken, upset) by the tragedy that happened on campus on Thursday. I’m glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?”

Give the students 30 seconds to a minute to say something. They may need a little time to get the courage to speak. If students do not speak, remind them of your office hours, your e-mail address, and/or your willingness to meet one-on-one. Emphasize that talking about the trauma is a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it will encourage them to talk. The minor loss of instructional time will be insignificant because if they are having serious emotional reactions their learning will be compromised.

It is also important to let them know that when events like this occur; our Counseling Center makes special arrangements to provide support to students who are affected by the situation. If they would like help or support, they should contact that Center as soon as possible.

Remember that everyone's story is valid. Not everyone has to speak.

Emotional debriefing is not about establishing facts of the incident. It is about expression of feelings. Whatever students say can be answered with:

“It must be terrible to think about that.” Or “It must hurt a lot to remember it that way.”

If you are able to identify students who are most upset, a referral to the Counseling Center would be helpful. When speaking to students, try to do so in a calm relaxed way and don't worry if you cry in front of them. That's okay. When the students finish talking, you can offer them a moment of silence. Suggest that they close their eyes and

breathe slowly and deeply three or four times. If you are worried about a particular student, approach her/him privately. If you are concerned about your own reactions to the situation, consider seeking help. Give us a call and we can chat with you about whether you should think about seeking help.

Some students who have had close involvement with the crisis may have very vivid perceptions regarding the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the event. It's not uncommon for them to feel something is wrong with them because the memories of these sensory perceptions are so strong. You can reassure them that such feelings are not uncommon after a tragedy. You might ask:

"Others have reported similar perceptions and thoughts after such a tragedy." Or, "It must have been so upsetting to (see, hear, feel, smell, taste) that."

Some students feel very guilty. They may have been close enough to the situation or victims that they believe there is something they should have done to prevent the tragedy or harm to some of the victims. They may believe that they should have been there to help some of the victims. To address this, you might say:

"After a tragedy, people often second guess themselves, and they are not sure they did everything they could. That's a natural feeling of wanting to help others. It does not reflect what was really possible."

A future orientation is helpful. You might ask:

"What are you worried about right now?"

When they speak about future concerns, you might be able to alleviate some of their worries with facts or other ideas and thoughts. Giving students a chance to share their worries reduces anxiety. You can say,

"It's really too early to know all the facts about what is going to happen. But you help yourself to deal with this tragedy. Many people find that talking with others, spending time with family, connecting with ministers, rabbis, or priests can hasten the healing process."

After class, if students come to your office to speak in private, remember they are looking for someone who will validate their grief, not talk them out of it. Sitting quietly with them and letting them talk may be all that is needed. Share your own feelings about the tragedy. You might even tell them about other losses you've experienced if you're comfortable with that. If you do talk about past losses, it is helpful to end by saying that for you there was a gradual improvement in hopefulness and mood as time passed. You can simply say that you hope they have the same experience of healing.

Adapted from: Poland, S., & McCormick, J. S. (1999), *Coping with a crisis: A resources for schools, parents, and communities*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.