

## **A Faculty Guide: Suggestions for Facilitating Classroom Discussions and Normal Reactions to Tragedy**

In the wake of a crisis, it is often helpful to provide students with a structured opportunity to discuss their experience of it. Allowing students to talk about tragedy with a trusted faculty member is one of the best ways to reestablish a sense of security and to help students to cope with their stress and grief. Here are some suggestions to achieve those goals:

- You may want to set aside time in class to discuss the incident and the students' thoughts and feelings. Doing so will normally help students to be better able to return to the academic work at hand. Opportunities for this supportive processing of the event should happen as soon as possible after it occurs.
- Let students know that each person will have an opportunity to talk but that no one will be required to participate. If students choose not speak, remind them of your office hours, e-mail address, and/or willingness to meet one-on-one.
- Ask that the students speak only for themselves, as no one can possibly speak about how someone else is reacting. Remind them that everyone has a unique perspective on what has happened and that the focus will be on support, not judgment.
- Emphasize that talking about the trauma is a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it may encourage students to talk. You might say: *"I'm still (sad, shaken, upset) by the tragedy that occurred in Costa Rica. I'm glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?"*
- Another way to initiate the discussion is to ask students to share one word that best describes their reactions to the tragedy. Write these words on the board to create a cumulative "picture" of the impact the incident.
- Remember that the class discussion is not about establishing the facts of the incident. It is about the expression of thoughts and feelings. Faculty may respond to students' statements with reflective comments such as:
  - "It must be terrible to think about that."*
  - "It must hurt a lot to remember it that way."*
  - "It is apparent how (angry, sad, scared) you feel as you talk about this tragedy."*
- After a traumatic event, students often question themselves for feeling the way they do. They will need reassurance that their feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Finding out that their fellow students are having some of the same reactions can also be a great relief.
- Let students know that the Counseling Center has made special arrangements to provide support to students. To take advantage of these services, students should contact the Counseling Center (Leanne Miller, 404-364-8456) as soon as possible.

- When the students finish talking, a moment of silence might be helpful. If you are worried about a particular student, approach her/him privately.

### **Important Points to Remember**

- It is common for people to experience intense aftershocks following a horrible event. It is important for you to know that these reactions:
  - Are ***normal*** and do not imply craziness or weakness; in fact, their absence is more of a cause for concern.
  - Sometimes occur during or immediately after the event; sometimes they occur days later; other times weeks or months may pass before they appear.
  - May last a few days, a few weeks, a few months, or occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event.
  - May be triggered at some later point in your life by something that reminds you of the event
  - May be made worse by insensitive reactions of others (e.g., friends and family who “say the wrong thing,” media reports which may appear blaming and callous, etc.).
- Basic assumptions about the world are likely to be challenged. When a tragedy shakes or shatters these beliefs, a person may lose hope and see the world and life as filled with danger, uncertainty, and suffering. The rebuilding of a more balanced and positive belief system is an important task for individuals who have experienced a traumatic event.
- Some questions may never have satisfactory answers. In their efforts to understand and give meaning to a tragedy, survivors often struggle with questions like:
  - Why did this happen?
  - Could it have been anticipated or predicted?
  - Could it have been stopped or changed through human action?
  - What could I have done differently?

While many opinions may be expressed in response to these questions, answers to these questions will typically be ambiguous and illusive.

- Most people are extraordinarily resilient and able to “bounce back” after experiencing a tragedy. Following a crisis, people often feel overwhelmed and distressed, but these responses are normally transitory in nature and rarely suggest a serious mental disturbance or illness. Experiencing a tragic event can uncover an individual’s previously hidden strengths and untapped abilities. In fact, some people integrate the tragedy into their lives in such a way that they become more confident and self-reliant, clarify their priorities, grow closer to others, and appreciate life more fully.