

The students, faculty, staff, and families of the OU community are in the midst of a struggle to deal with the loss of Eric Downes. We feel the emotional pain and turmoil of this traumatic event and are besieged by questions for which there may never be any satisfactory answers.

When a tragedy like the one we are confronting occurs on a college campus, faculty and staff are often challenged to balance somewhat conflicting desires to both help and support their students and cope with the powerful emotional impact that the crisis event has had on them personally. The stress that faculty and staff feel may be increased by the understandable tendency for students to look to them (the “adults” on campus) to provide a sense of leadership, safety, and meaning in a time of great uncertainty and confusion.

There are a number of important principles that may guide OU faculty and staff efforts to help themselves and their students to cope with the current crisis.

- Intense emotions are normal and healthy in the face of such shockingly violent acts. Powerful feelings of anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, disbelief, numbness, etc. will be a part of our emotional landscape for some time. If they are appropriately expressed and directed, such feelings will provide us with the passion and energy necessary to effectively cope with the tragedy.
- Spend time with people you care about. While you might not feel like being around anyone, the resulting sense of loneliness typically makes people feel worse.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so alone. People are often surprised to realize how much support is available through their immediate relationships (friends, families, partners, classmates, etc.).
- Pace yourself. Remember to take rest breaks while you’re at work and, as much as possible, to remove yourself from work-related thoughts and activities when you are at home. Let others in your household carry more weight for a while.
- Consider co-workers’ assessment of your well-being. Others close to you in your department may be the first to recognize problems that you may have coping with this tragedy. Listen to their concerns and be open to the support they offer.
- Remember that people deal with grief and loss differently. There is no formula for healing these kinds of emotional wounds. Some people may become overwhelmed with emotions, while others appear quieter and more reserved. Avoid comparing your reactions to the tragedy to those of others.
- Refrain from judging others’ responses and demanding that everyone think, feel, or act the same way. Recognize whether you solve problems by distancing (solving problems by yourself) or merging (solving problems with others). Distancers and mergers often choose one another for intimate relationships. It is important to respect others’

perspectives and to provide support at a level and in the manner that they desire. Ask others about how you can be helpful and what the limits are.

- Be aware that you may feel particularly fearful for members of your family. You may find yourself especially concerned about those who are in situations or who remind you of the victims related to this tragedy. While these feelings will normally abate with time, it is important to make an effort to resist becoming obsessed and over-controlling with family members, as this will only serve to increase your anxiety and their's.
- Be a good listener. Simply giving people the opportunity to vent and “get something off their chest” is tremendously helpful and healing to them. Saying the “right thing” isn't nearly as important as feeling connected to and supportive of others.
- Take action. The desire to “do something” is life-affirming and healthy, and it should be encouraged. Suggestions include political action, attending memorial services and/or setting up your own observances, and spiritual/religious practice.
- Take good care of yourself. Feeling threatened can make you feel more impulsive. Take care of your body by watching what/how much you eat; your use of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and medicine; and by practicing safe sex. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day.
- Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others. A day must come when it is ok to smile and laugh again. Humor relieves stress, produces body chemicals that improve mood, and helps us to gain a more balanced perspective. Do not postpone joy and laughter should they come your way.
- Remind yourself that some things are out of our control. After a tragedy when hindsight is 20/20, people often torment themselves with things they “should have” done. Resist letting this kind of guilt take over your life. It is also important to recognize and accept what you cannot change (e.g., the chain of command, organizational structure, waiting, equipment failures, etc.).
- Turn off the TV news programs and be judicious in the websites that you visit. While keeping informed of developments is important, the 24/7 media machine typically ignores stories of heroism, resilience, and sacrifice and instead focuses on the most horrific images and troubling accounts. Constant exposure to these will only increase the sense of trauma.
- Seek balance in your life. When a tragedy occurs, it is easy to become obsessed, overwhelmed, and pessimistic. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.