

When Tragedy Occurs in the Campus Community: Advice for Faculty and Staff

In a community as large and close-knit as ours, it's unavoidable that we will sometimes be touched by tragedy. Knowing that does not necessarily make it easier to bear when it happens. But there are things we can do in your role as an administrator, faculty, or staff member.

When something tragic happens and impacts the university community **it is best to do something**. In general, students report that "just about anything" is helpful, ranging from "asking for one minute of silence to incorporating the event into the topics for the course" (Huston & DiPietro, 2007, p. 216).

We hope this information about possible reactions to traumatic events and guidelines for emotional debriefing can provide helpful support for your work as well as your own well-being.

Reactions to Traumatic Event:

After a traumatic event, people may experience a range of responses, whether or not they have a direct connection to the traumatic event. Two individuals may react very differently, based on their own personalities, past life experiences and coping skills. Reactions may occur immediately or after some time has passed. Here are some common reactions:

Physical reactions:

- Aches and pains like headaches, backaches or stomachaches
- Sudden sweating or heart palpitation
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite
- Fatigue
- Easily startled
- More susceptible to colds or illness
- Increase alcohol or drug use

Emotional reactions:

- Shock, disbelief or denial
- Fear, anxiety or hyper-alertness
- Irritability, restlessness, or anger outbursts
- Feeling helpless, panic, or out of control
- Self-blame, guilt
- Emotional numbing or detachment
- Diminished interest in activities, social withdrawal

Cognitive reactions:

- Poor attention and concentration
- Ruminating thoughts and images related to the trauma
- Flashback or nightmares
- Feeling confused, disoriented, or distracted

Talking to Students:

We suggest that you make some time for students to talk. Taking the time will make classes run smoother because students should be able to concentrate better after sharing reactions. Here are some tips for leading the classroom discussion.

Think through supportive ways to introduce and close the session.

Ask the **class to establish ground rules** for the discussion. Some ideas to propose to students before they begin discussion include: Avoid blame and speculation: Respect each other's views and avoid inflammatory language.

Discussion can be brief. Consider proving a brief discussion at the beginning of the class/meeting.

Acknowledge the event. You might say, *"I am still (sad, shaken, upset) by the event. I wonder how you are (feeling, coping) with this?"* Share your own reactions help validate and empathize with students.

Emotional debriefing. Often the discussion starts with students asking questions about what actually happened and detain certain details. People are often more comfortable discussing facts than feelings.

So you may shift the discussion toward sharing personal and emotional reactions by saying, *"Often it is helpful to share your own feelings and hear how others are doing. It doesn't change the reality of what happened, but it may help you feel more connected and less lonely."*

Whatever students say can be answered with,

"I am glad you shared."

"I imagine you are not alone with that reaction."

"It must hurt to think about the event that way."

Allow everyone a chance to talk (when possible), but don't force students to participate. Ways to encourage participation include:

- Use a "round." Give each student a chance to speak in response to a guiding question. Following the round, open discussion for general response.
- Divide students into discussion partners or groups.
- Give students a chance to write before speaking.

If students begin debating the "right way" to react to a tragedy, it is important to point out that we will cope with stress and tragedy in different ways. There is no right way to react.

Be prepared for blaming. When we are upset, we often look for someone or something to blame, or feel that we could have done something different so the tragedies can be avoided. If the discussion is stuck in blaming, you may try to move the conversation by saying, *"We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and while that is a normal part of this process, it might be helpful to move on to other thoughts and feelings you may have."*

Facilitate a way to help those most affected by the tragedy, such as collecting money, donating goods, or volunteering to help at the crisis site. Such “problem-focused coping” is among the most helpful responses identified by students.

If Possible, explore links to the content of your class or discipline. Try to balance emotional and intellectual approaches.

Collaborate with other instructors:

- Join sections to have more than one discussion leader.
- In large classes, break students into small groups with instructors and/or graduate students as discussion leaders

Things to Avoid

If a student writes you an email and volunteers that s/he is finding recent events particularly hard to process, it’s okay to include in your reply a reminder that SJU’s counseling services are available to support grieving students. However, it is not recommended to send individual students unsolicited emails suggesting that they seek counseling. If you want to initiate a supportive dialogue with a student, it’s preferable to set up an appointment to talk in your office.

The classroom should not be a therapeutic setting for you. If the traumatic event raises powerful emotions in you, try to write about those feelings in private or express them to a trusted friend before you lead your class in discussion about the event.

Mind the Cognitive Load

Tragic events affect students’ cognitive load, as memory capacity can be reduced immediately following an acutely stressful experience. This awareness may lead you to be lenient with due dates or adapt your syllabus for the week following the crisis to accommodate a reduced workload, both in terms of introducing new concepts and expecting students to exercise typical study habits. Holding a review session for material covered during the crisis may also be helpful.

Connect Student to Resources:

If you prefer not to devote discussion time to the event during class/meeting, it is probably best to acknowledge the event. No mention of the event can result in students becoming more upset or angry. You can mention to students that there are resources on and off campus where they can obtain support:

- **Counseling and Consultation Center (CCC).** The CCC offers free and confidential mental health services to St. John’s University. Services are available on both the Queens and Staten Island Campus. Student who is having a difficult time dealing with a tragic event should be encouraged to call us

Queens Campus	Staten Island Campus
Marillac Hall, Room 130 Tel: 718-990-6384	Spellman Hall, Room 101 Tel: 718-390-4447

- **Health Services.** Health Services offers free and confidential medical services to all students on the Queens and Staten Island campuses. You can get treated for minor illnesses and injuries. If there is a need for any additional testing, such as X-rays or blood work, we will assist you in finding an off-campus local health provider.

Queens Campus	Staten Island Campus
DaSilva Hall Tel: 718-990-6360	Campus Center, Room B-17 Tel: 718-390-4447

- **Campus Ministry** – The office offers counseling, supportive services, and referral information to the university community.

Queens Campus	Staten Island Campus
Marillac Hall, Room 239 Tel: 718-990-6255	Tel: 718-390-4475

- **Dean of Students Office** – When tragic events impact students’ ability to manage school work, the Dean of Students Office can provide helpful assistance and support to students to make their best decisions concerning their academia.

Queens Campus	Staten Island Campus
Bent Hall, Garden Level, Room 17C, Tel: 718-990-6568	Campus Center, Room B11 Tel: 718-390-4345

- **Public Safety** – In the event of emergency, whether it is health related, psychological in nature, or someone is in danger, please contact public safety.

Queens Campus	Staten Island Campus
Tel: 718-990-5252	Tel: 718-390-4447

Taking Care of Yourself :

We understand that the traumatic event may raise powerful emotions in you. We hope you take good care of yourself while dealing with the traumatic event.

- Eat healthy, exercise, and rest as well as you can.
- Process your feelings with people you trust.
- Seek support and collaborate with colleagues who may be facing similar challenges in the classroom. Remember not to become the de facto counselor for everyone in the department who may be grieving.
- If you feel flooded or overwhelmed by events in the news, limit your intake of newspapers and television for a while.
- Recognize that your reactions are normal and your feelings will improve with time.

For faculty and staff, St. John's offers free and confidential support through its Employee Assistance Program. Professional counselors are available 24/7, and can be reached at 1(888)

References

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/crisis/>

http://www.towson.edu/psychology/documents/TipsforUniversityStudentDistress_001.pdf

Huston, T. A., & DiPietro, M. (2007). In the eye of the storm: Students' perceptions of helpful faculty actions following a collective tragedy. *To improve the academy*, 25, 207-224.