

When Tragedy Occurs in the Campus Community- For Parents

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 you can do in your roles as parents and family to help students address the feelings they may be experiencing. We hope this information about possible reactions to traumatic events or tragic news will provide helpful support for your work as well as your own emotional life.

Responses to Traumatic Events

Upon hearing tragic news, people may experience a range of reactions, whether or not they have a direct connection to the traumatic event. Two individuals may react very differently, based on their own personalities and past life experiences, but there is no right or wrong reaction. Responses may occur immediately or after some time has passed.

Responses to traumatic events may include the following:

- Physical reactions: fatigue, dizziness, rapid heart rate, sweating, difficulty breathing, weakness, nausea.
- Cognitive reactions: confusion, nightmares, hypervigilance, blaming, poor attention/concentration, suspiciousness, intrusive thoughts.
- Emotional reactions: fear, guilt, panic, agitation, irritability, anger, shock, anxiety, denial, and grief.
- Behavioral reactions: withdrawal, alcohol consumption, strong emotional reactions, change in appetite, change in activity, change in sexual functioning, inability to rest.

Managing the Situation

A child who is upset can produce a form of emotional contagion.

To counter this, family must:

- Present a calm, reassuring demeanor
- Clarify for other family members that the child is upset
- If possible indicate why the child is upset
- State what can and will be done to help your child

Mobilizing Support

Your child will need support and guidance.

Ways in which family can help are to:

- Try to engage your child in a problem-solving dialogue
 - Normalize the reaction as much as possible
 - Facilitate emotional expression (e.g., through use of empathy, warmth, and genuineness)
 - Facilitate cognitive understanding by providing information
 - Facilitate personal action by your child (e.g., help the student do something to reduce the emotional upset and minimize threats to competence, self-determination, and relatedness)
- Encouraging your child's siblings to provide social support
- Refer your child to the Center of Counseling and Consultation if necessary

Following-Up

Over the following days (sometimes longer), it is important to check on how things are progressing.

- Has your child gotten the necessary support and guidance?
- Does your child need help in connecting with a referral resource?
- Is your child feeling better? If not, what additional support is needed?

Tips for Parents

The following chart shows some possible reactions your child may go through after a crisis and advice for how you can respond.

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things to say and do
Detachment, shame, and guilt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a safe time to discuss with your child the events and their feelings. • Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done. 	<p>“Many young adults—and adults—feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they could have done more. You’re not at fault. Remember even the firefighters said there was nothing more we could have done.”</p>
Self-consciousness: About their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help your child understand that these feelings are common. • Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period. 	<p>“I was feeling the same thing. Scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside.”</p>
Acting out behavior: Using alcohol or drugs, sexually acting out, accident-prone behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help your child understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. • If possible limit access to alcohol and drugs. • Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. • On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where they are going and what they are planning to do, if possible. 	<p>“Many young adults—and some adults—feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It’s very normal to feel that way—but it’s not a good idea to act on it.”</p> <p>“It’s important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you.”</p> <p>Assure them that this extra checking-in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.</p>
Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. • Explain to your child that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again. 	<p>“When you’re reminded, you might try saying to yourself, ‘I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because there is no hurricane and I am safe.’”</p> <p>Suggest, “Watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. How about turning it off now?”</p>
Premature entrance into adulthood: (wanting to leave school, get married).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to make the teens feel more in control. 	<p>“I know you’re thinking about quitting school and getting a job to help out. But it’s important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis time is not a great time to make major changes.”</p>
Concern for other survivors and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not let them burden themselves with undue responsibility. 	<p>Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).</p>