

What to Say After a Student Dies



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Catherine Shea Sanger | OCTOBER 24, 2017

Too many campuses this year will experience a student's death. Most often it will be accidental (including alcohol-related) or suicide. At a large university, a student's death may devastate particular subgroups on the campus, while at a small college, the impact may be palpable and widespread.

For the last three years I served as a vice rector overseeing residential life and academic advising at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, where I also teach in the global-affairs program. When we had a student death on campus last year, faculty members

approached me asking, with some desperation: "What should I do?"

As an academic, my first instinct was to search the relevant journals to find some applicable resources. Much of the literature on this subject, however, is aimed at helping administrators and student-affairs staff members to develop an appropriate institutional response. In these moments of grief and bewilderment, faculty members are left wondering how to proceed on a more intimate scale: What should I say in class today? Should I acknowledge what happened? Should I give everyone an extension? Should I cancel class?

Knowing what to say — and what not to say — is something for which few academics feel adequately prepared. There are no perfect words, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. I used the literature on crisis response, as well as consultations with mental-health experts and my own experiences, to develop the following list as a guide for faculty members who want to know how to help during a campus crisis and how to avoid inflicting more harm.

The "best" thing to do will depend on institutional and cultural context, faculty personality, and students' needs. The suggestions below are therefore not "best practices." Instead, they are simply factors to consider as you navigate these terrible and confusing situations.

Not so fast. Wait for official communication from the institution before notifying students in your courses about what has happened. You certainly do not want to contribute to gossip by prematurely using the language of suicide. While all student death is painful, a campus suicide brings with it distinctive community trauma (according to recent studies, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students, following accidental deaths). For that reason, and to respect family sensitivities, it's important not to use the term prematurely and to let senior leadership and wellness professionals craft official language.

Hold classes, but ... Canceling classes may seem like the respectful thing to do. However, that may be an extreme or counterproductive approach. Normalcy and routine help provide a sense of security as students process the crisis. It is also helpful for students to come together, and for faculty members to identify vulnerable students and refer them to the counseling center or residential-support staff.

At the same time, some students will not feel well enough to attend class, or will be needed elsewhere supporting their peers. Some students may also think it is callous that classes are being held at all. For those reasons, send an email explaining that classes *are* continuing as scheduled, and why, and that students who cannot attend should not feel pressured to do so. Make sure that those who can't attend know where to turn for help.

Here is some language you might use as a starting point: "In light of our community loss I wanted to confirm that I do plan on holding class tomorrow. Some of you might have apprehensions or discomfort about coming to class. I will, too. While recognizing that possibility, my recommendation is that if you can, you do come. Learning together is what we are here to do, and I believe we will be able to move forward better if we do so together. If during class you feel you need to take a break please do so — you can step out, have a water, walk around the courtyard, come back, and that is perfectly fine. And of course, if you are feeling very overwhelmed and need to take a break from classes, I understand but do ask that you contact your [academic dean, residential hall director, or other support staff] and copy me so I know that you are getting appropriate care. If you have individual concerns about attendance or anything else, please let me know."

Student learning will be compromised, so plan accordingly. In the immediate aftermath of a student's death, try to find a balance between recognizing that learning may be diminished and doing your primary job, which is teaching, not crisis counseling. Perhaps your impulse is to divert students' attention from what has happened by sticking precisely to the syllabus. However, this kind of trauma (especially after a suicide) is likely to affect students not only emotionally, but cognitively as well — if for no other reason than that they are distracted. Some will have been up late comforting friends. Some will be truly distraught.

Slow down in recognition that students are not operating at 100 percent. If there was a test scheduled, perhaps make it a review session and postpone the test to the following week. A verbal discussion might be taxing for students who are emotionally stretched, so consider integrating some writing reflections about course material instead.

Allow for grief but don't assume it. Some students will be having a very difficult time, but others won't. And you don't want to make students who are functioning normally feel guilty about that. You also don't want to inadvertently encourage students to engage in performative grieving, which only serves to upset truly devastated students and makes it harder to identify genuinely at-risk students.

So in your verbal and written communications to students, emphasize that it is normal and appropriate that people will have different reactions to and feelings about death. You might use language like "Be kind with yourself and patient and kind to others, as people experience this terrible news in very different ways." Encourage those who are feeling well to reach out and offer support to those who are not, and for those who are struggling to lean on peers and professionals.

Avoid a mental-health stakeout. If there are students who seem clearly upset, distracted, or withdrawn, I reach out and I directly name my reasons for concern.

I say something like "I just wanted to email/chat and say I noticed you seemed withdrawn and maybe a little sad in class today. If I am misreading that, or you were just tired, that is perfectly OK. But if you are feeling affected by our community's recent loss or something else and you want to talk, do let me know. If you don't feel comfortable talking to me, I know your [administrative/support/wellness staff] are all available to you as well."

At the same time, when a crisis like this happens it is natural to be looking all around at every student you encounter: "What is she thinking?" "Is he OK?" "What should I say?" Suicide, in particular, can have contagion-like effects, possibly causing us to wonder of some other students, "are they next?"

Hard as it is, resist that tendency. If you have reason to be concerned about certain students, ask what strategies they have in place to take care of themselves, and if they have talked with friends and family. Let them know you care about them. If you are more deeply concerned, connect them to their residential or wellness staff for additional support. But remember: Most students are OK — most have been through difficult times before and have good support systems and self-care strategies.

Avoid the blame game. You may feel the impulse to control, assign responsibility, identify preventive steps so this "never happens again." Those impulses are understandable but lead down a futile path of trying to control events that are beyond your reach.

One of the things students learn in college is that life can be painful, unfair, and inexplicable. Recognizing all of that is a step toward learning how to live with it, too. For my own practice, I tell students that I have experienced times of deep sadness and loss, and the silver lining is that, having experienced those moments, I know that I can move through the next challenge, too. It gets easier. We get stronger.

Assigning blame can also undermine the strength of a community when it is most needed. Professors should avoid saying things like "I thought we had a strong community. How could this happen?" That puts some blame on the campus and thereby to some extent (even if unintended) on the students. That isn't helpful.

It is also not helpful to question your college's wellness/mental-health professionals at the very time that students in crisis are being encouraged to use those resources. In that moment, students need to feel safe and have trust in the institution's support systems. Try not to badmouth those systems during the initial crisis period. If you have real concerns, bring them directly to administrators once things settle down.

Console without romanticizing or judging. That is particularly important after a suicide. To people who have never seriously contemplated ending their lives, suicide is perplexing and generates curiosity. When talking to students, bottle that curiosity up tight. Do not probe or challenge them to defend their interpretation of events, because you don't want to turn tragedy into gossip. I avoid saying things like "Oh, did you know her well?" or "Did he leave a note?" Don't put a student in the position of informant.

Similarly, avoid language that would either romanticize or blame the student who died. Don't say things like "He is at peace" or "She is in a better place." Those are common responses, but for students who are struggling to see value in life, it can be dangerous to reinforce notions that death is a more "peaceful" or "better" alternative to living.

At the same time, when people suspect suicide is the cause of death, a common reaction is anger. In frustration, some students (and some professors) will say things like "That is so selfish" or "Don't people know the damage it does?" I try to give students room to vent their anger but then to channel those thoughts toward something more future-focused and productive. For example, I might reply: "That is a very natural reaction to have and understandable. When people leave us it is very upsetting. I wonder what we can do to alleviate pain and distress for ourselves and each other. What can you do to signal to those around you how valuable they are?"

Know your limits. If you know students who are directly affected, and you feel comfortable doing so, let them know they are in your thoughts. Include contact information for mental-health resources in your correspondence. Nudge students: "Don't forgo these resources thinking 'they are for other people.' They are for you, and it is a mature and responsible act to take advantage of them."

At the same time, be farsighted and cautious about how much you offer yourself as a resource. You have other responsibilities — including teaching, publishing, and managing your own response to these events. For most faculty members, instead of encouraging students to unload their grief on you, direct them to trained experts who can offer support over the long haul.

If you have the time and training to help a student through a personal crisis, that is great. But if you don't have the experience or the time to be there for a student — not just this week, but next week, and the weeks after that — refer them to professionals. Truly vulnerable students will need someone who can establish and maintain a supportive relationship over a longer period of time than most professors can manage.

Nudge students toward forward momentum. As someone older (if not always wiser), I can tell students that life is sometimes dotted by tragedies — but there are many reasons to be hopeful and optimistic about what lies ahead. There is learning to be had, papers to write, a graduation and future to prepare for. Sure, those things can bring stress, but they will also bring satisfaction and joy.

It is OK to transition from immediate crisis back to our day-to-day lives. We aren't forgetting what has happened, we aren't sweeping it under the rug. But we also need to move forward and make our campus a place of inquiry and joy — not only of grief.

Support the front-line staff. People in student services — especially those in wellness, residential, and mental-health roles — will often be wrestling with guilt and self-doubt themselves after a student dies. At the same time, they will be supporting the most vulnerable students throughout this crisis period.

For them this is not just a bad day. This is something that is going to dominate their work and probably their personal lives for weeks and possibly months. Staff members often feel invisible to the faculty. This is a good time to let them know you see their efforts and value their contributions.

And don't forget ...

Take care of yourself. Especially if the student crisis taps into past experiences in your own life, you may have some surprising and delayed reactions that are stronger than you anticipated. Check in with yourself, have a counseling session, or give yourself some time to process.

This is also a way to model responsible self-care for students. I make a point of sharing my own self-care strategies with my students. The better you take care of yourself, the more fully you can be there for your students.

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