When Tragedy Occurs in our 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 our professional roles 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.

Types of Events
At some point, you may experience the death of someone you work with – a colleague or a student – and that personal loss may define the semester for your department or your classroom, even if the event is not widely known on campus.

Another type of loss is a when the death of a member of our campus is much publicized. You may find that such a tragedy is distressing to your students, or to you personally, even if none of you knew the person who died. Such a public event may involve illness, a tragic accident, violent crime, or suicide, all of which may trigger powerful emotions such as fear, anger, or depression.

And sometimes you may hear about violent or frightening events on another campus but find they hit close to home because we’re all members of an academic community. This type of event can feel personally threatening even if it occurs in a distant location.

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.

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. To open the dialogue, you might say:

"I am still shaken by the events. I wonder how others are feeling."

Give time for students to respond, at least 30 seconds. Many students take time to process and may need to find the courage to talk about an emotional event.

Respond affirmatively to students by making statements such as,

"I am glad you shared."
"I imagine you are not alone with that reaction."
"It must hurt to think about the event that way."

Normalize their reactions by sharing that they are responding to an event that overrides their ability to rationalize or make sense of it:

"I understand why you are reacting in this way; this event is incomprehensible."

Being young, students are often inexperienced with grief. They may be unfamiliar with the waves of emotion that may accompany it and the rituals and behaviors people may use to address those feelings. This could be the first time someone they know has died. It may be the first time they have experienced the loss of someone their own age.

Students may want to observe a moment of silence in the classroom, or write a paragraph about their feelings. You can make suggestions to help focus them or ask what they would like to do.

It is not uncommon for students to start or join Facebook groups of remembrance.

In the case of a classmate who is seriously ill, students may want to start a page on CaringBridge, a social networking site that connects people during times of critical illness.

You can remind students that professional counselors are available to them at UHS Counseling and Consultation Services to help them deal with feelings such as grief, anxiety, and depression. They should call 608-265-5600 to make an appointment, and they should tell the receptionist what is prompting them to call.

**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 UHS 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.

Particularly in the case of a suicide, it is not recommended to express your own confusion about how or why someone would do that, or to lecture students on the pain it would cause those left behind if they did that. Treat the loss as you would if it were an accidental death or an illness: Express your sadness that the unique individual is no longer with us, but do not make this particular death more salient than any other by dwelling on the mode or details of the event, or by cloaking it in secrecy and refusing to acknowledge it in any way.

A good guideline is to respect our students’ privacy in death as you respect the privacy of their academic performance during their lives – while your students may be aware of who is getting higher or lower grades, you do not publicize every aspect of every student’s performance to all the others.

Talking to UHS
If you’re concerned that the grieving process is affecting a large number of your students or your classroom as a whole, you can call UHS Counseling and Consultation Services and ask to speak to a faculty liaison about it. We can advise on the situation and in some cases may be able to send a counselor to speak directly to your class.

If you simply want to know if you’re saying and doing the right things, please feel free to call us and discuss it: 608-265-5600 (select option 2). Our business hours are Mon | Tues | Thurs | Fri 8:30 am to 5 pm and Wed 9 am to 5 pm.

If you’re ever especially concerned about the state of mind or the reactions of a student who seems particularly depressed or withdrawn, please feel free to call us. Our 24-hour crisis intervention services are available 365 days a year to students and to people concerned about students’ mental health: 608-265-5600 (select option 9).

Taking care of yourself

- Eat healthfully, exercise, and rest as well as you can.
- Talk about the experience with people you trust. It can be helpful to talk with people outside the university who may not be experiencing the same feelings of loss.
- Compare notes with colleagues who may be facing similar challenges in the classroom. But 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.
- Be aware that certain types of events or losses may trigger feelings that are tied to other painful or traumatic events in your own life. Be open to those feelings and seek appropriate support for yourself.
- Recognize that your reactions are normal and that the symptoms will improve with time.

For faculty and staff, the Employee Assistance Office is available to provide support:
http://eao.wisc.edu/
To schedule a confidential appointment, contact:
Employee Assistance Office
Lowell Hall, Room 226
610 Langdon Street
Telephone: 608-263-2987
Toll Free: 877-260-0281
WTRS: 7-1-1