

Dealing With a Crisis

--A crisis situation is one in which an individual's typical coping responses don't work or may be less effective than usual.

--An individual's response to a crisis is very individualized. We must be careful not to judge another's response, especially if it's different from our own.

--The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors experienced may be in response to the event at hand as well as previous (and potentially unresolved) events from the past.

--A sense of anxiety and panic would be absolutely predictable in response to recent events. There is so much we don't know; trying to find answers to explain such a tragedy is normal. Without available explanations, the attempt to find answers may take on a flavor of desperation and seem frantic in nature. We can help by allowing people to identify and discharge all the questions, fears, and uncertainties going through their heads. It's important to validate the concerns rather than talk people out of them. Remember, in crisis situations some people may not respond in their typical rational way.

--In crisis situations, we can help people by engaging in a problem-solving approach. This would include identifying the issues and then going through a step-by-step process to identify possible solutions for resolving the problem. For example, the concern may be that the student has a friend or family member who attends Virginia Tech. Similarly, faculty and staff may have colleagues who work there. The need is to know if that friend, family member, or colleague is alright. The problem solving steps are to find various ways to communicate with these individuals or someone else who will know if the person is okay. Also identify what the person can and cannot do, and what is within their control.

--Let students, faculty, and staff know the resources available on campus. These would include their faculty, administrative advisors, campus religious workers, staff of the Employee Assistance Program and Counseling and Psychological Services, Vice-Chancellors, staffs, RD/RA's, and their fellow students, faculty, and staff.

--It is often helpful for people to just be with one another during times of crises. Saying the "right" words isn't the most important thing; feeling connected to people close to you is more important.

--You, as a faculty or staff member, may also have either strong personal reactions to these recent tragic events or a need to discuss the response from your students. Talking about what you are going through in the wake of this awful tragedy is the most important thing you can do to take care of yourselves and each other. If you have questions feel free to contact Counseling Services, Health and Wellness or Residence Life staff.

Specific Steps That You Can Take Following A Crisis:

Unfortunately, tragic events occur on college campuses. These events often leave many students, faculty, staff, and members of the college or university community severely traumatized. When this happens, providing some time in a class setting for emotional debriefing can significantly aid and accelerate the healing process. The following guide to emotional debriefing in class was adapted from a similar guide written for the faculty at Texas A&M University following the Bonfire tragedy in November 1999.

Provide time during class to discuss the incident and the students' feelings about it. The students should be encouraged to express feelings in a supportive atmosphere as soon as possible. The professor might say, "I'm still (sad, shaken, upset) by the tragedy that happened on Monday. I'm glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?" Give the students 30 seconds to a minute to say something. They may need a little time to get the courage to speak. If students do not speak, remind them of your office hours, your e-mail address, and/or your willingness to meet one-on-one. Emphasize that talking about the trauma is a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it will encourage them to talk. The minor loss of instructional time will be insignificant because if they are having serious emotional reactions their learning will be compromised.

It is also important to let them know that when events like this occur; our Counseling Center makes special arrangements to provide support to students who are affected by the situation. If they would like help or support, they should contact that Center as soon as possible.

Remember that everyone's story is valid. Not everyone has to speak.

Emotional debriefing is not about establishing facts of the incident. It is about expression of feelings. Whatever students say can be answered with: "It must be terrible to think about that. Or "It must hurt a lot to remember it that way. If you are able to identify students who are most upset, a referral to the Counseling Center would be helpful. When speaking to students, try to do so in a calm relaxed way and don't worry if you cry in front of them. That's okay. When the students finish talking, you can offer them a moment of silence. Suggest that they close their eyes and breathe slowly and deeply three or four times.

If you are worried about a particular student, approach her/him privately. If you are concerned about your own reactions to the situation, consider seeking help. Give us a call and we can chat with you about whether you should think about seeking help.

Some students who have had close involvement with the crisis may have very vivid perceptions regarding the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the event. It's not uncommon for them to feel something is wrong with them because the memories of these sensory perceptions are so strong. You can reassure them that such feelings are not uncommon after a tragedy. You might ask: "Others have reported similar perceptions and thoughts after such a tragedy. Or, "It must have been so upsetting to (see, hear, feel, smell, taste) that.

Some students feel very guilty. They may have been close enough to the situation or victims that they believe there is something they should have done to prevent the tragedy or harm to some of the victims. They may believe that they should have been there to help some of the victims. To address

this, you might say: "After a tragedy, people often second guess themselves, and they are not sure they did everything they could. That's a natural feeling of wanting to help others. It does not reflect what was really possible.

A future orientation is helpful. You might ask: "What are you worried about right now??" When they speak about future concerns, you might be able to alleviate some of their worries with facts or other ideas and thoughts. Giving students a chance to share their worries reduces anxiety. You can say, "It's really too early to know all the facts about what is going to happen. But you help yourself to deal with this tragedy. Many people find that talking with others, spending time with family, connecting with ministers, rabbis, or priests can hasten the healing process.

After class, if students come to your office to speak in private, remember they are looking for someone who will validate their grief, not talk them out of it. Sitting quietly with them and letting them talk may be all that is needed. Share your own feelings about the tragedy. You might even tell them about other losses you've experienced if you're comfortable with that. If you do talk about past losses, it is helpful to end by saying that for you there was a gradual improvement in hopefulness and mood as time passed. You can simply say that you hope they have the same experience of healing.

What Happened at Virginia Tech: An Example

In light of the tragedy that has unfolded at Virginia Tech University, Counseling and Psychological Services at the University Health Center and the Employee Assistance Program would like to offer the University community some information about typical responses to such tragedies, and information about what kinds of reactions may warrant seeking additional counseling support.

Typical Responses:

- Shock and disbelief: immediately after a learning about such a disaster, many people may feel numb, or feel like such an event can't quite be real.
- Speculation about what happened and seeking more information, such as listening to or watching the news, checking the web for updates, talking to others about what you each know or have heard.
- Feeling sadness or anger about the tragedy and discussing this with family, friends, colleagues.
- Wanting to check in with loved ones, even if they are not close to the disaster, or in any immediate danger. It is normal to want to touch base with someone you care about.

In the hours and days following such tragedies, the shock begins to wear off, and more feelings may emerge, such as sadness and anger. It is important to share these feelings with people that you trust. For some people, the level of feelings or the kinds of questions that emerge may indicate that additional counseling support would be helpful.

Circumstances or signs that may lead you to seek additional counseling support:

- Do you have friends, colleagues, or family members at Virginia Tech or in the Blacksburg community?

- Is this event bringing up recollections of previous loss, trauma, or crisis that you or a loved one have faced?
- Are you experiencing heightened feelings of anxiety, tension, fear for your safety, insomnia, nightmares, concentration problems, irritability, or rage?
- Are you crying more than usual in response to sadness?
Are you increasing your use of alcohol/drugs in order to cope?
- Are you wondering what to tell your family about this event or how they will react?

If you are experiencing any of these circumstances, or just wish to talk to a counselor for additional support, call Counseling and Psychological Services