

Resource Guide

Responding to Tragic Events

Whether a natural disaster, violent event, death, or pandemic, tragic events everywhere from across the globe to individual communities and families effect what happens in our classrooms. Given that most instructors have no formal training as counselors or clinical psychologists, it is difficult to know how to respond to tragic events, and the ways in which those events may be affecting our students. Tragedies may have a severe emotional and cognitive impact on some students. They may find it difficult to concentrate, remain focused on, or complete their academic work; they may feel anxious, angry, or vulnerable. Because of this, and because we are called upon to be in community with one another, especially during difficult times, it is important for instructors to consider our role in supporting students after a tragic event.

Below are a few ways for any instructor to use a small portion of class time to be responsive to the context in which our teaching takes place after a collective tragic event.

- **Make a verbal acknowledgement of the event at the beginning of class, and reference resources available to students.**
Even the small act of acknowledging that something tragic has occurred and making sure students know all of their options for support and assistance through the crisis, can make an important difference in students' lives. Acknowledge that there may be a wide variety in responses to the tragedy and that they are all normal and important. Communicate that you understand that class cannot simply go on in the same way.
- **Provide a moment of silence.**
Taking a moment of silence interrupts a course very little but gives everyone a chance to reflect as a part of a community and demonstrates the instructor's sense of humanity.
- **Read a meaningful passage.**
Often putting our own thoughts and emotions into words is too difficult, or too far outside of our comfort zone to be effective. Turning to a passage you find meaningful in some way can convey your sentiments and create a connection with and among your students without the need to pen something of your own.
- **Devote time for students to reflect in writing.**
Two to five minutes of time for students to reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the tragedy and its aftermath can be a powerful way both to acknowledge the event and to help students to refocus for a while. An open prompt to record their thoughts and emotions or a more specific prompt, such as "what is keeping you from being present to learning today" can be equally effective. Ending the time with putting away their writing and taking a deep breath can create closure for the exercise.

- **Reduce cognitive load.**

Tragic events affect students' cognitive load, as "working memory capacity is reduced immediately following an acutely stressful experience" (Huston and Pietro 218). Rescheduling deadlines, quizzes, or exams can be helpful to students who are suffering emotional stress or other disruptions to their normal schedules. Additionally, adapting the syllabus for the week following a crisis to accommodate a reduced workload, both in terms of introducing new concepts and expecting students to study as normal can support cognitive load. If reducing workload is not an option, holding a review session for material covered during the crisis may also be helpful.

- **Explore connections between the event and the course material.**

Where it is appropriate, use your disciplinary expertise to help students consider the event from an academic perspective, obtain a different perspective, maintain balance between emotional and intellectual approaches. These kinds of activities give students additional ways to make sense out of the senseless, and to connect with their thoughts in new ways.

If you are concerned for anyone's safety, call 911 or SLU DPS Police (314-977-4000) on any campus phone). If you are uncertain, call 314-977-2323, and press #9 to consult with the nurse advice line.

References

Huston, Therese A., & DiPietro, Michele. (2007). *[In the eye of the storm: Students perceptions of helpful faculty actions following a collective tragedy](#)*. In D. R. Robertson & L. B. Nilson (Eds.) *To Improve the Academy: Vol 25. Resources for faculty, instructional, and organizational development*. Bolton, MA: Anker. Pp. 207-224.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).