

## Guidance for Supporting Classes, Teams, and Other Groups After a Traumatic Event

While it is important to acknowledge disasters when they happen, it is equally important to minimize additional impact and trauma to one another. Learn more about how to support your colleagues, teams and each other after incidences of mass violence, large disasters or impacts after the death of a student or staff member.

**Note:** The following information is intended to help people offer informal support and self-care sessions or meetings that are not therapy.

### Things to be aware of following a traumatic event or loss:

- Impact may show up in a variety of ways over the next few days, weeks and even months and can look different from person to person.
- Not everyone will be responding in the same way to an incident or loss. Some may have no response or reaction at all. This is all normal and ok.
- In times of crisis our executive functioning (e.g., ability to reason, plan, concentrate, etc.) may be impacted.
- Sometimes people forget to take care of themselves in this process so it is most important to encourage basics like sleep and rest, eating, hydrating, showering/bathing, etc.
- People may experience a number of changing emotions, including but not limited to, numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, ambivalence and confusion.
- Recognizing and healing from the impact of mass violence, loss and natural disasters can follow multiple pathways (depending on personal experiences, cultural background, religion and many other factors).
- We, as staff, want to foster (and not interfere with) the natural support and healing functions that various sub-communities of the campus community already have in place and are utilizing.
- It is important to encourage self-care, including but not limited to sleep, healthy eating, and connecting with their already developed support systems.
- These natural healing functions might be vested in groups such as academic or social organizations to which the students/staff/faculty belonged, as well as already existing colleagues
- You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in. Overexposure can actually increase stress. It's okay to take breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident.

### Following up with a team or group after a death or traumatic event:

While we will want to support students and staff requests for space to discuss these experiences, we want to be mindful that staff/faculty need to avoid imposing any program of “debriefing” onto any students/staff or group of students/staff.

Avoid gathering people in a big group to talk about how they are feeling or how they are impacted as that typically creates more heightened emotions and can even delay recovery.

- Discourage detailed descriptions of what people experienced (reliving/telling of what occurred) which can add additional impact and trauma to others in the group.
- Remind the group that impact can vary from person to person and to anticipate potential future impacts or delayed impacts.
- Focus on factual information, coping skills and self-care.
- Limit conversation around graphic details and personal experiences which can increase anxiety and fear. Individual counseling is a better way to support more in-depth, emotional responses to these types of situations.
- Single session/meeting (voluntary, not mandatory) with opportunities for individual follow-up.
- Provide referrals to support resources.
- Emphasize existing strengths, resources and support structures.

#### Avoid holding debrief sessions:

It is important to avoid holding debriefs (open dialogs for people to share how they have been impacted) as this can cause more negative impact than help. Debriefing often results in heightened emotions and can increase anxiety and depression. Some research has seen debriefs make it worse for those who attend compared to those who do not. Vicarious trauma can occur amongst participants when listening to others experiences of the disaster.

According to the Society of Clinical Psychology, research shows that the medium- and long-term effect of psychological debriefing is suspect, and that the practice can negatively impact the natural healing process and can lead to increased traumatic responses in participants. \*

#### \*Key references:

McNally, R., Bryant, R.A., Ehlers, A. (2003). Does early psychological intervention promote recovery from posttraumatic stress? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4, 45-79.

Van Emmerik, A.A.P., Kamphuls, J.H., Hulsbosch, A.M., & Emmelkamp, P.M.G. (2002). Single session debriefing after psychological trauma: A meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 360, 766-771.

Lewis, S.J. (2003). Do one-shot preventative interventions for PTSD work? A systematic research synthesis of psychological debriefings. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 8, 329-343.

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