

## Helping Students Process Tragedy

The Villanova community was shaken by the deeply saddening news that an undergraduate student was found deceased in a residence hall the first week of classes. How can faculty members support students in the face of this tragedy? While there is no single answer to this question, we need to keep in mind that 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.

*How can you support students in the context of your course?* You may consider some of the following suggestions taking into account factors such as the degree to which students seem affected, and the degree to which you may find it difficult to continue with instruction.

- Acknowledge the tragic event, ask for a minute of silence.
- Share a passage from an inspirational book.
- Give students an opportunity to write about their reactions / feelings to the event and invite them to share with a peer, a small group of peers, entire class. Keep sharing optional.
- Reassure students that their feelings are important and natural.
- Send email to students sharing your thoughts and best wishes.
- Offer to talk privately with any student who might want to.
- Mention the availability of on-campus resources that students may consult, such as the [University Counseling Center](#), the [Dean of Students](#), [Residence Life](#), or [Campus Ministry](#).
- Explore connections between the event and the course material, as appropriate to help students consider the event from an academic perspective, obtain a different perspective, maintain balance between emotional and intellectual approaches.
- Facilitate a brief or longer discussion in class, considering some guidelines:
  - Invite the class to establish ground rules for the discussion. Some ideas for ground rules you might want to propose to students include:
    - ✓ Respect each other's views and avoid inflammatory language.
    - ✓ Share personal stories and feelings, as you are comfortable. (Be prepared for students to be emotional, and be supportive of them.)
    - ✓ Express anger and frustration within limits. (While it is important for students to express themselves, it is also essential to maintain a safe and productive learning environment for all students.)
  - Provide a framework for the discussion via guiding questions, such as
    - ✓ What are your hopes for this discussion?
    - ✓ What are your reservations about this discussion?
    - ✓ How were you personally impacted by this event?
    - ✓ What about this event stands out in your mind? How?
    - ✓ What positive actions can we take to respond to this event (e.g., support students who are new to Villanova)
  - Listen carefully to what the students say. Affirm their contributions.

- Invite everyone to speak (when possible), but respect their wish not to participate. For example,
  - ✓ Give each student a chance to speak in response to a question without interruption or discussion, allowing students to pass if they desire. Open the discussion for general response.
  - ✓ Arrange students into discussion partners or groups.
  - ✓ Give students an opportunity to write before speaking. Ask students to do some writing when the discussion seems to be getting emotional or off-track.
  - ✓ Keep the discussion focused, and provide brief interim summaries or observations.
- Bring closure to the discussion and acknowledge students' contributions, an emotions.
- Exchange ideas or teaching approaches with your faculty colleagues, including reflections on class discussion, and conversations with students.
- You may find it helpful to contact the [University Counseling Center](#) prior to class for suggestions, invite a professional counselor to your class, or refer to the helpful website: [\*In the Classroom-Dealing With the Aftermath of Tragedy\*](#)
- You may discuss instructional approaches to supporting students in the wake of tragic events by calling VITAL at 9-5627, sending email to [vitalinfo@villanova.edu](mailto:vitalinfo@villanova.edu) or stopping by the VITAL office in 106 Vasey Hall.

Developed by Gabriele Bauer, Ph.D., Director, VITAL based on the following materials:

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (RLT), University of Michigan. [Leading class discussion on tragic events](#). Accessed, August 29, 2013.

Davis, B. (2009). *Tools for teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Huston, T. & DiPietro, M. (2007). In the eye of the storm: Students' perceptions of helpful faculty actions following a collective tragedy. In *To improve the academy: Resources for faculty, instructional and organizational development*, 25, pp. 207-224. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.