



Responding to Campus Tragedy

In the days and weeks after a collective tragedy, it can be difficult to know exactly what to do or how to respond. As an instructor or TA, it can be difficult to decide how to balance caring for students on the one hand, with a return to routine and moving forward with the requirements of your course on the other. We know that different people experience and respond to tragedy, loss and violence in different ways (including both students and faculty), and that what one person needs or is ready for might be different from what others need and/or are ready for.

In the context of your role as an instructor or TA, it is important that you find ways to acknowledge the impact of recent events on both yourselves and your students. The suggestions and strategies provided in this resource have been collected together from a variety of sources, including prior research and the contributions of participants at our CTL workshops on Friday, February 23, 2024. The goal is not for you to do everything on the list, but to find options that work for you, in your context, and allow you to move forward in productive and useful ways.

Note also that it is important to offer students opt-out opportunities for activities like the ones on this list, as not all will be ready for or comfortable with engagement in open discussion or disclosing their thoughts and feelings. Aim to affirm and validate students' thoughts and feelings, and to ask what they need instead of assuming you know what they need.

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INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES & SUGGESTIONS

SHORT IN-CLASS ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & REFLECTIONS

- Pause & acknowledge impact of recent events (e.g., “I know that for many students, faculty, and staff, this is a lot to process. I am so sorry for the loss you and we are experiencing as a community.”).
- Hold a moment of silence for students to breathe and focus their minds on our class time together.
- Tell students it is okay to be not okay – and to reach out when they need support from others. Remind them they are not alone.
- Communicate with students that we are going to get through this week as well as we can, with all deadlines flexible as needed.
- Let students know that you (and your TAs) are also not feeling as focused or productive as you might be, and understand that they may be dealing with something similar. Let them know you’ll be taking that into account on their upcoming work and midterm.
- Share your agenda for the day’s class, and ask if it feels doable. Provide alternative options for students, based on their responses.
- Let students know that you are there for them. Try to get them back to learning so that they are back to a routine, which may help with dealing with the situation – while also providing options for those who are not ready or able to return to routine.
- Make space to talk together about what they are going through and how it might affect their coursework, while keeping as much of the schedule and structure in place as possible so they still have a toehold in something familiar and secure.

CLASS DISCUSSIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Invite students to post a note about how they are doing, via a shared document or poll.
- Facilitate discussion with students about their (and your) strategies for processing loss, fear, and how to heal as a community.
- Invite students to (optionally) share personal “highs and lows” in small groups. Listen in on conversations and decide, based on what you hear, whether a whole class conversation could be helpful to students.
- Lead students through an anonymous reflection activity, allowing them opportunities to respond to the following five questions: (1) How are you feeling right now? (2) What is something you are worried about? (3) What is something you are hopeful about? (4) What is something others (the instructor/TAs and/or your classmates) can do to support you through the next few weeks? (5) What is something you can do to support your own well-being through the next few weeks?



PROMOTING HEALTHY PROCESSING

- Use an [emotion wheel](#) to give students language to talk about how they are feeling.
- Facilitate a short discussion about ways students might manage their fear (and other emotions), and how to incorporate community into their time outside of class.
- Tell students that it's okay to proactively seek mental health support, sharing that you and/or many people in our community do that on a regular basis.
- Tell students that processing these recent events can be difficult in unexpected ways, and there is no single "right" way for a person to be feeling.
- Emphasize that grief is unique: some students may feel guilty for not being sad, while others may be distraught. It's okay to be not okay, and it's okay to be feeling just fine.
- Encourage students to come to class regardless of whether they've completed work for class – noting that community is more important than ever at a time of crisis.
- Encourage students to find time to rest and recover over Spring Break, engaging in activities that bring them peace and joy. Share some of your own strategies for taking care of yourself in the face of events like these.
- Be transparent about the fact that you and your TAs are also grieving, and that this process both takes time and is okay.

INCORPORATING RESPONSIVE FLEXIBILITY

- Announce a no-questions-asked flexibility on attendance.
- Allow for virtual attendance at class.
- Introduce flexibility on smaller assignments & extensions for homework.
- Shift some upcoming deadlines to make assignments more flexible.
- Move exam to after Spring Break.
- Move exam to an online format and give students options/extended time to complete the exam.
- Focus midterm grading on feedback and coaching rather than specific grades, during this time when students are feeling more vulnerable.
- Survey students to find out what kind of flexibility they would find helpful, in light of recent events.

COURSEWORK ADAPTATIONS

- Allow students to use current reflection assignment to instead share any thoughts, feelings, and/or concerns about the recent tragedies.
- I will incorporate this in the class. I teach journalism where students have already volunteered to report on the tragedy. So I will give them freedom to address issues that matter to them and look at this day as a service to their community, to provide information to guide them through this loss.



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- Discuss field safety with students, as they go outside for their work.
 - Offer alternatives and/or adjustments for field work, noting that these types of changes in methods will not negatively impact their grade.

COMMUNICATION OUTSIDE OF CLASS MEETING TIME

- Email your student research groups to ask if there is anything they need from you to make their work easier and/or to be helpful.
- Offer to meet with students via Zoom on non-class days, simply to check in with them.
- Post an eLC announcement sharing mental health and well-being resources.
- Make a note in your calendar to check in with students again after Spring Break and/or about a month from now.
- Make a note of specific students who indicate that they're struggling. Reach out to them in a few weeks to see how they are doing.

RESOURCES

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

National Crisis Hotlines & Support:

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
- Crisis Text Line: Text "MHFA" to 741741
- [988 Lifeline Chat & Text](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)

UGA Student Support

- [Be Well UGA](#)
- [Counseling & Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#): 706-542-2273 (available 24/7, walk-ins welcome)
- [Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention](#)
- [Student Care & Outreach](#): sco@uga.edu, 706-542-8479
 - Note that SCO is also available to provide advice for instructors as they seek to respond to specific student needs.
- [UGA Safe App](#)
- [UHS Emergencies & After-Hours Support](#)



FURTHER READING & RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

- Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([GrievingStudents.org](https://grievingstudents.org)) - a website with resources and advice for educators on responding to students who dealing with loss.
- [Discussing Traumatic Events and Sensitive Content: Traumatic Events](#). Graduate Student Instructor Teaching and Resource Center. University of California, Berkeley.
- [Guidance for Responding to Student Distress Following a Tragedy or Crisis](#). Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. Tufts University.
- 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.
- Mirick, R. G., Bridger, J., & McCauley, J. (2024). Trauma-Informed School-Based Postvention Services: Support to Students Following a Suicide Death. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 52(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-023-00887-x>
- [Strategies for Supporting Students Through Tragedy](#). Center for Teaching and Learning. Washington University in St. Louis.
- [Teaching in Times of Crisis](#). Center for Teaching. Vanderbilt University.
- [Using Check-In Questions to Promote Well-Being](#). University Health. University of Utah.
- Well-being UGA, [Request a Program](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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