Following a crisis ... what to say or do

Unfortunately, tragic events occur within the University community. These events may leave students and staff severely distressed.

The Counselling Centre is often asked about the most appropriate ways of addressing these events in classes or with colleagues.

**Acknowledge what has happened**

It is important to take time to acknowledge tragic events. Acknowledgement can take many forms depending on the level of comfort you feel talking about difficult issues and the extent of the impact of the events on others.

- It may be simply mentioning that the event has occurred. If relevant it may be appropriate to give some details of what has happened and what that may mean for students or colleagues.
- It may be a more significant response, if you as a teacher or manager feel more confident with managing distressing conversations or it is clearly appropriate. Possible additional responses might include: a minute's silence; a brief discussion in class or in the workplace; asking whether family or friends are been affected;
  
  *Eg I am still very upset by what happened on campus last week. I'm glad to see you all again. How are each of you coping (feeling, doing) with this?*

- Alternatively, it may be an offer to talk privately with anyone who is affected; or a reminder that the university provides counselling, chaplaincy and health services for support.

Failure to mention an event can result in others becoming angry at insensitivity about what has happened or modelling that it is best to ignore the incident.

**Acknowledgement will generally need to be followed by some reassurances**

Acknowledgment may extend to recognition of the impact on study and work performance. Most people take time to reflect on tragic events, even where the event may not directly touch them. Sometimes it revives past painful memories or touches on fears of loss we all have. Or rouses concerns for the safety of family and others and creates a desire to provide immediate protection for them. These are common and normal responses in these circumstances.

- In the classroom with students, it may be appropriate to offer students a general extension on assignments, or to make a more limited offer that students can ask for special consideration.
  
  *Eg Sometimes people find it difficult to concentrate at times like this. Sometimes a focus on study helps. If you are having trouble, please let me know.*

- With colleagues, they may need to step aside from the work for a short time to manage their responses to an announcement. They should be reassured that this is ok, but please let others know if they need to go home or be out of the workplace for a lengthy time.
**Group responses**

Sometimes it is helpful for staff or students to mark the tragic event together. This may include eg

- Attending a funeral or having a memorial service or meeting.
- Organizing a group discussion with a counsellor.
- Reading an inspirational poem or book
- Collecting money for a gift/flowers
- Making a gift or card or remembrance book and having all sign it who would like to do so
- Donating money to a relevant cause or in the event of a major disaster, donating blood, collecting resources such as blankets and clothing etc
- Doing a group project such as making a quilt, etc

**In class**

Some subjects may be suitable for further exploration in class with the event as a discussion topic eg 9/11; tsunami, the Canberra bushfires etc.