

## UNDERSTANDING OUR PERSONAL RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

As we all struggle with the recent events and the tragic loss of life, it may be helpful to keep a few things in mind regarding how people typically manage traumatic events. It is very important to recognize that people deal with these situations differently and there is no one “right way.”

**As events continue to unfold many people may experience some of these normal reactions:**

- Shock and disbelief: immediately after learning about such a disaster, many people may feel numb, or feel like such an event can't be real.
- Speculation about what happened and seeking more information, such as listening to or watching the news, checking the web for updates, talking to others about what one knows or has heard.
- Feeling sadness or anger about the tragedy and wanting to check in with loved ones, even if they are not close to the disaster, or in any immediate danger. (It is normal to want to touch base with someone you care about.)
- Increasing fear, anger, frustration, or despair once the shock begins to wear off (often in the hours or days after the tragedy).
- Agitation or anxiety.
- Difficulty concentrating or sustaining focus.
- Irritability and low tolerance for frustration.
- Hypervigilance (feeling extra alert, cautious and nervous about what is happening around you).
- Disorientation of time (particularly the passage of time).
- Memories of previous traumatic events we or others have experienced.

From the first reports and throughout continuing coverage of these tragic events we are likely to feel emotionally overwhelmed and numb. We feel helpless to do anything and can only watch the events unfold. *Although we experience strong and powerful emotions we are not always able to put them into words.* This initial state is characterized by a desire to get information and understand what has happened. For most of us this includes watching TV or listening to radio coverage. We may replay the images in our head and consider the possible reactions of those directly involved. The numbness oftentimes is replaced by a sense of agitation or anxiousness as we consider our own vulnerability to tragedies of all types.

Although we may not want to talk, there is often a desire to be around others during this time. The strong sense of community is a valuable resource. Whether it is in a residence hall, in a classroom, or in a prayer service it is important that we find ways to connect with others.

Throughout this period we are likely to go back and forth between a desire for updated information, a state of shock/numbness and a desire to be with other people. Forcing someone to talk is not the most valuable thing during the early hours of a traumatic event. Instead, it is important to provide a context for community members—whether they are students, staff, or faculty—to talk about the events as they are ready.

Some of us are less comfortable with strong emotions or with feeling of powerlessness. There is sometimes a desire to avoid the emotional content by engaging in intellectual discussions about the events and their implications. This is a reasonable coping strategy. Remember, people deal with situations differently and at a different pace and not all people can or want to deal with the situation in this manner.

Traumatic events can be particularly difficult for those who have experienced other tragedies. It may bring back thoughts and feeling that they thought were resolved. This is a normal function of our emotional and memory systems. It may be valuable to speak with others who shared the previous experience, and to draw support from those around us.

**Here are some suggestions on how to cope with feelings over the next few weeks:**

- Accept your feelings and thoughts as normal, things many people experience.
- Talk with others about your experiences.
- Pray or do other spiritual activities that help you maintain strength and faith.
- Resume your normal routine, even if it is hard to do so—routine is calming.
- Seek counseling if you want additional support, or are having difficulty resuming your normal routines.

**Circumstances or signs that indicate that you may benefit from additional counseling support:**

- You have friends or family members in the immediate area of the tragedies.
- You experience radical or abrupt changes in your behavior.
- The tragedy brings up recollections of previous loss, trauma, or crisis that you or a loved one has faced.
- You experience heightened feelings of anxiety or fear for your safety.
- You experience crying or other strong emotions that are more than your usual response to events in your life.
- You feel rage or a desire to lash out at innocent others.
- You experience hopelessness and despair.

The Counseling Center offers walk-in hours for students each weekday between the hours of 10 am and 2 pm.

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