

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](#)

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