HOW TO: TALK ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

As faculty, you may be the most constant figure in students’ lives. When tragedy strikes – whether it is a student death, social justice cause, car accident, fire or hurricane, students will look to you to help them sort out their feelings and thoughts about the situation, the meaning it might have in their lives, and how to deal with the aftermath. And remember that a student doesn’t need to be connected to the tragedy to be affected.

We know that acknowledging a crisis or traumatic event early on is more helpful than waiting. It is often very helpful to simply allow some time – perhaps fifteen minutes – for discussion at the beginning of the class. Students may or may not feel comfortable talking, but you’ve given them a venue to consider how they are feeling and the permission to seek help.

Regardless of your discipline, personal teaching style, or philosophical bent, here are a few practical suggestions that everyone should be able to do:

- **Acknowledge the incident and show empathy.** Consider providing an opportunity at the beginning of class. What is most important is acknowledgement. Consider simply saying something like, “I understand that the recent events regarding [the situation] are upsetting for many of us. I want you to know that there are a number of campus resources available to you and that I recognize we each respond to and process tragic events in different ways.”

- **Consider course deadlines in light of the event.** Some students may be affected in such a way that it could impact their ability to complete assignments or prepare for tests. Consider what reasonable accommodations you would be comfortable making without unduly penalizing such students.

- **It is normal for people to seek an “explanation” for why the tragedy occurred.** You do not have to have the answers, but it is helpful to provide space and remind students of the campus resources and experts that can support them through their need for explanation.

- **Be prepared for blaming.** When people are upset, they often look for someone to blame. Assigning blame may be a way of coping with life’s uncertainties. The idea is that if someone did something wrong, then future tragedies can be avoided by doing things “right.” If the discussion gets “stuck” with blaming, it might be useful to say, “We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and that’s not unusual, but we may not be able to blame a specific person in this moment. What can we do to make the situation better?”

- **Thank students for sharing and remind them of resources on campus.** In ending the discussion, it is useful to comment that people cope in a variety of ways.
Encourage students who may be struggling to connect with one of the following resources:

**ON CAMPUS RESOURCES**

- **Center for Assessment, Referral & Education (CARE)**
  Students primary resource for mental health and well-being support.
  404.894.3498 | care.gatech.edu

- **Dean of Students Office/Student Life**
  Have a student reach out directly or you can refer a student that you may be concerned about.
  404.894.6367 | studentlife.gatech.edu

- **Georgia Tech Police Department**
  404.894.2500

- **Counseling Center**
  Mental health support for students or partnering with faculty in the classroom.
  404.894.2575 | counseling.gatech.edu

- **Student Diversity Programs**
  diversityprograms.gatech.edu

- **Victim-Survivor Advocate:**
  404.385.4464/4451

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**NATIONAL CRISIS RESOURCES**

- **Georgia Crisis and Access Line:**
  1.800.715.4225

- **JED Foundation ULifeline**
  1.800.273.8255
  ulinfeline.org

- **Trevor Lifeline:**
  866.488.7386

- **Crisis Chat Line**
  CrisisChat.org

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**
  1.800.273.TALK (8255)

- **GA COVID-19 Emotional Support**
  1.866.399.8938

If you are one of your peers and also looking for support, we encourage all Georgia Tech employees to reach out to the Employee Assistance Program for immediate support: 1-844-243-4440 or health-and-wellbeing.gatech.edu/eap.