

Teaching in Times of Crisis¹

Originally written in 2001 by CFT staff

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Whether local, national, or international in scope, times of crisis can have a significant impact on the college classroom. The students need not be directly related or personally involved to experience anxiety or trauma. While proximity (a local event) may lead to a more obvious impact on your students, the effects can be just as difficult based on “the sheer *magnitude* and scale (national events with wide media coverage)” and “the degree to which students are likely to *identify* with the victim(s) of the tragedy and feel like ‘vicarious victims’” (fellow students, fellow women, fellow members of a group targeted by a hate crime, fellow Americans) (Huston & DiPietro, 2007, p. 219).

The resulting anxieties students—and teachers—bring into the classroom in response to a crisis can affect student learning, as documented by psychological, cognitive, and neuroscience research. Individual crises, such as coping with the loss of a family member or recovering from a difficult break-up with a significant other, can affect an individual class member’s learning and performance. However, communal crises, such as the unexpected death of a fellow student or teacher, the shock of 9/11, the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, the tragedy of the shootings at Virginia Tech, or the bombing of the Boston Marathon, can affect everyone’s well-being—personal and academic.

“It Is Best to Do Something.”

A 2007 survey by Therese A. Huston and Michelle DiPietro (2007) reveals “from the students’ perspective, **it is best to do something**. Students often complained when faculty did not mention the attacks at all, and they expressed gratitude when faculty acknowledged that something awful had occurred” (p. 219). Students report that “just about anything” is helpful, “regardless of whether the instructor’s response required relatively little effort, such as asking for one minute of silence..., or a great deal of effort and preparation, such as incorporating the event into the lesson plan or topics for the course” (p. 216). The exception, the least helpful and even most problematic responses are a “lack of response” and “acknowledging that [the crisis] had occurred and saying that the class needs to go on with no mention of opportunities for review or extra help” (p. 218).

There are many possibilities for how to address a crisis in class, from activities that take only a moment to restructuring your entire course, and plenty in between. Again, consider that students appreciate any action, no matter how small.

Taking A Moment of Silence

Taking a moment of silence interrupts a course very little but gives everyone a chance to reflect as a part of a community and demonstrates the instructor’s sense of humanity.

Minding the Cognitive Load

Such events affect students’ cognitive load, as “working memory capacity is reduced immediately following an acutely stressful experience” (p. 218). This awareness may lead you to be **lenient with due**

¹ A more complete, online version of this guide is available at <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/crisis/>

dates or adapt your syllabus for the week following the crisis to accommodate a **reduced workload**, both in terms of introducing new concepts and expecting students to exercise typical study habits. **Holding a review session** for material covered during the crisis may also be helpful.

Assigning Relevant Activities or Materials

Huston and DiPietro cite specific activities that helped students cope after 9/11: “College students who participated in a **journal writing exercise** or who **listened to a story that addressed themes relevant** to the terrorist attacks showed greater improvements and fewer signs of trauma” (p. 209). Consider how you may “**use the lens of [your] discipline to examine the events surrounding the tragedy,**” such as assigning a relevant poem, connecting it to a similar historical moment, or examining the engineering concepts involved in a relevant structure (p. 219).

Facilitating a Discussion

If you would like to **talk directly with your students about the crisis**, you might consider contacting the [Vanderbilt Psychological and Counseling Center](#) for ideas on how to approach such a conversation. Additionally, the information below may also be useful in discussing a tragedy with your students. There are a number of factors that can affect how a conversation about a crisis might go. As Deborah Shmueli (2003), a professor at Haifa University in Israel, has suggested, some things to take into consideration are as follows:

- Students’ perceptions about how the crisis has affected them personally
- Students’ perceptions about others whom they consider to be affected
- Issues deemed important to each person or group
- Institutional, financial, and other impediments to successful communication

Taking these factors into account, researchers and practitioners who study communication make the following suggestions for difficult conversations (Chaitlin 2003):

- *Consider how much time the conversation might take:* Teachers who wish to create safe places for communication need to consider how much time a difficult conversation will take and how much time they can provide for that conversation within the semester. Since a single conversation may not be enough to address the issue fully, teachers should be willing to be flexible, extending the conversation into future class sessions or over the course of the semester, as needed. The teacher should allow enough time for each conversation so that students who have difficulty opening up to the class or who need time before they can begin talking about their experiences may also be included.
- *Acknowledge both verbal and nonverbal communication:* In a discussion or conversation, silence can make a teacher feel uncomfortable, but silence and other non-verbal behaviors can be just as vital to a productive conversation as words are. It is tempting to fill silence with variations on the question asked, but doing so can inhibit students’ abilities to think through the issue and to prepare to share their thoughts with their classmates. If students repeatedly need extremely long silences, however, the teacher should invite conversation as to why students do not feel comfortable sharing with their classmates.
- *Let students set the ground rules:* Allowing students to set the ground rules not only can help students create a space where they feel safe to share their thoughts, emotions, and ideas, but can also help students find power at a time when the crisis has left them feeling powerless. Ground rules should be set before the conversation begins and reiterated every time thereafter that the conversation is continued.
- *Encourage students to be empathetic listeners:* In conversation, people are often thinking about what they want to say in response rather than fully listening to the individual who is talking. In addition, if the crisis at hand is difficult to handle emotionally or if classmates feel defensive,

empathic listening becomes all the more challenging. Pointing out such dynamics to students can at least encourage them to think about their positions as listeners.

- *Allow freedom of participation:* If students feel uncomfortable, allow them to leave. If they feel coerced into the conversation, then they are likely to withdraw from the conversation or guard closely what they say.
- *Balance the power in the classroom as much as possible:* Ensure that no one student or group of students has more rights than others and take care that all receive equal respect.
- *Provide a predictable forum:* For continuing conversations, provide a format and space that is familiar and predictable for your students so that they feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

You may even want to identify or even facilitate a way to **help those most affected by the crisis**, such as collecting money, donating goods, volunteering to help at the crisis site, or other ways of supporting rescue and relief efforts. Such “problem-focused coping” is among the most helpful responses identified by students and one explanation for the “lower levels of long-term stress” among people “indirectly affected” by 9/11 (Huston & DiPietro, 2007, p. 216-218).

Remember that it is not necessarily your role to help students through the crisis, and, in fact, it may be **counter-productive for the students if you bring up emotionally difficult issues *without providing appropriate support and assistance***. See the resources below.

Providing Resources

If you are unsure of your ability to provide emotional support but feel the need to show that you are aware of its impact on your students, acknowledge the crisis by providing your students with resources for dealing with it. Below are a few suggestions:

- Ask a professional from the [Vanderbilt Psychological and Counseling Center](#) to come talk to your students.
- Provide the class with the contact information for local counseling, support, or action centers. (See “Campus Resources” below.)
- Share with students the APA’s “[Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings](#),” even if the crisis is unrelated to campus shootings.

Depending on the nature of the crisis, the following offices on Vanderbilt’s campus may be able to offer individual support to your students or be willing come to class to speak to your students as a whole:

- [Psychological and Counseling Center](#) (322-2571): Offers counseling services to individuals and to groups. Free to all students.
- [Office of Active Citizenship & Service](#) (343-7878): Can provide resources and information for volunteering time and money.
- [Student Health Services](#) (322-2427): Supports both physical and mental health with doctors, nurse practitioners, and psychiatrists.
- [The Office of Religious Life and Affiliated Ministries](#) (322-2457): Staffed by the Director of Religious Life and affiliated professionals representing several religious traditions, the office offers emotional and spiritual support to the university community.

Additional Resources for Faculty

- **[Creating Safe Spaces for Communication](#)**: This article by Julia Chaitin comes from the website of the *Beyond Intractability Project*, which is dedicated to conflict intervention and successful communication. See especially “The Creation of Safe Places for Open Communication—Some Ground Rules and Useful Guidelines” in Chaitin’s article for an expansion of the suggestions listed above.
- **[“Working with the Emotionally Distressed Student”](#)**: A booklet from the Counseling and Psychological Services of San Diego State University
- **[GrievingStudents.org](#)**: website from the Coalition to Support Grieving Students with resources and advice for how to respond to students dealing with loss (written for K-12 students, but the experiences of grief and compassion don’t magically change at 18 yrs old); see [this NPR story](#)

References

- Chaitin, Julia. [“Creating Safe Spaces for Communication.”](#) Beyond Intractability. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003.
- Shmueli, Deborah. [“Conflict Assessment.”](#) Beyond Intractability. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: October 2003.
- 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.
- American Psychological Association’s [“Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings”](#) (2004).



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