

Helping Students Manage Traumatic Events

As members of our Iowa State University community, faculty and staff play a valuable role in supporting our students and our community manage difficult situations. Traumatic situations have a significant impact on the student's functioning and ability to succeed in the classroom. Students can be impacted by traumatic events, loss (friends/family, other students, or faculty), acts of violence both nationally and locally, or struggle with their own mental health or other life difficulties. As a community of care, we provide support for our students through expressing care and helping them connect with the various supports and resources at Iowa State.

Faculty and staff play an important role. You are the eyes and ears of the student experience. Depending on your connection with students, you may be the first person they turn to when experiencing challenges.



1. Awareness

Psychological First Aid: This evidence informed approach provides education on understanding trauma and the impact of these events on individuals and their communities. It is based on best practices and takes a culturally sensitive and empowerment approach.

When Terrible Things Happen (PDF) – This handout provides psychoeducation on trauma and outlines normal trauma responses including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. This handout also provides strategies for coping and tips for self-care.

Connecting with Others – Giving and Receiving Social Support (PDF) – This handout provides information on giving and receiving social support after traumatic events. The information includes strategies for promoting social support, barriers commonly experienced, and information on ways to get more connected.

Recognizing signs of distress

There are common signs that can serve as potential indicators of distress in students. These signs are especially concerning when they represent a significant change from a prior pattern of behavior in the student. We generally think of emotional, behavioral or physical, and cognitive signs of distress.

- Changes in behavior and mood
- Withdrawn or increased isolation
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Loss of interest or motivation
- Low energy or fatigue

- Declining or poor performance and preparation in academics
- Repeated absences, tardiness, or cancelling class
- Multiple requests for extensions
- Avoiding participating in staff meetings, lectures, or labs
- Concerning content in assignments and/or presentations
- Dominating discussions or excessively anxious when called upon
- Poor hygiene or changes in appearance
- Confused speech or behavior
- Expressions of being overwhelmed or indirect expressions of asking for help

2. Care

Guidelines for talking with students

1. Simplify the focus of these interactions and think of it as an opportunity to connect with the student. This opportunity can focus on expression of care and support.
2. Pay attention to how you are engaging the student (consider physical communication, friendly face and tone, and open-ended questions and use listening skills).
3. Be sure to allow enough time, privacy, and follow up when speaking to a student.
4. Listening skills including summarizing to ensure understanding, asking questions, paraphrasing, and good eye contact.
5. Recommended to focus on specific observations that are behavioral in nature, and express concern.
6. Avoid "why" questions and be patient. When in doubt listen to the student. You might be the first person this student is opening up to about their concerns.
7. Know and establish boundaries of what you can offer within your role.
8. Recognize and speak to potential barriers to seeking support.
9. *"I've noticed you have missed class lately, I am worried about you and want to help"*
10. Provide resources in class and by email so the student can access them at a later time. The Psychological First Aid handouts in the awareness section above are a good resource to consider.

OARS technique – you can use the OARS technique to guide difficult conversations

1. **O - Open-ended questions.** Helps people open up with what they're really feeling and thinking - *"Tell me about what's concerning you..., what would be most helpful right now? Share with me about how you are feeling"*
2. **A - Affirmation.** Helps people feel accepted and validated. *"I'm really glad you are sharing with me how you have been feeling/doing. It sounds like you're experiencing a challenging time right now."*
3. **R - Reflective listening.** Helps people feel understood or offers a place for misunderstandings to be clarified. *"I'm hearing you say..., It's sounds like..., So I'm hearing that you're feeling/needing..."*

4. **S - Summarizing.** Brings the conversation together and can be a place to move into action: 1. Recognize/restate their issue, 2. express care/concern, 3. express intent to help and 4. check in to see if there's anything more you can assist with

3. Connection

Strategies for making a referral

- **Encourage:** Discuss fears about seeking service, services available on campus and community, and benefit of seeking services.
 - Students often face a variety of barriers to seeking care including stigma or embarrassment, a strong preference for self-reliance, difficulty recognizing own symptoms or severity, or a view that “others need or deserve it more.”
 - Promote positive messaging to address barriers including that all students deserve support and a chance to be successful, most students feel that counseling was helpful and would refer a friend to the counseling center, and addressing issues is a sign of strength.
- **Provide resource information:** Share contact information and location of resources with the student. Share what you know about types of services, that they are free, and different ways to connect with resources.
 - Social media information
 - Written materials
 - Websites
- **Contact:** Help connect students with services by helping them make the call, walking them over to the center, or giving them the contact number.

Consult when unsure or when you need support

- Connect with resources on campus (i.e. Student Counseling Services, Student Assistance Services) to get support in the situation.
- Consulting with campus resources – What is a consultation?
 - **Support:** We will provide support, information, and guidance on how to address the situation.
 - **Clarity:** We will help you clarify your role, the problem, student needs, and options for next steps.
 - **Steps:** We will help you formulate your response, establish next steps, and provide ongoing assistance as needed.
- **Confidentiality Considerations**
 - Student Counseling Services
 - All services provided to students are confidential.
 - We can answer questions about how to refer students and offer general consultations.
 - Our ability to share information is governed by state law, ethical guidelines, and accreditation standards.

- Student Assistance Services
 - Student Assistance is not confidential, but will only share information with those needing to know per FERPA guidelines.
 - We answer questions helping students navigate the university during crisis, the role faculty can play in supporting students, and generally options students may need to explore as they navigate their situation.
 - Our ability to share information is based on FERPA guidelines and Student Assistance will share information if there is a need to know.
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Other considerations:

Notification of student death

In the case of a student death, their instructors will be notified by the Dean of Students Office as soon as is appropriate (sometimes students may know before the university sends official correspondence). Keep in mind that students who are close to the deceased may know what has happened *before* the family has been notified. If you hear of a death and haven't been notified by the university, please reach out to Student Assistance to consult.

Classroom absences

Students in your class may need time away from their studies to process what has happened. While decisions to excuse absences rest with faculty, it is important to note that navigating traumatic events is a personal process and different for each student. Students should reach out when they are able to discuss any missed course work, quizzes, or exams.

The Dean of Students Office may send notice to faculty if a student isn't able to communicate on their own, but this communication isn't required. Please review this [process](#) to understand when you may/may not receive notice.

Discussion about traumatic events with class

When it is appropriate to share information with an entire class, announcing a tragedy to students need not be lengthy or rehearsed. The most important consideration is to have a caring, empathetic tone. The beginning of a conversation might include:

- *"Good morning ... As some of you may know, one of the students in this class, (NAME), died over the weekend. I don't have all the details, but I know many of you were close with (NAME), and that this may be a hard time for you, too."*
- *"Everyone is different in how they react to tragedies like this, but I want you to know the university has a variety of resources available if you would like someone to talk to, or if you are not feeling well ..."*

Resources for students

- [Student Counseling Services](#), 515-294-5056
- [Thielen Student Health Center](#), 515-294-5801
- [Student Assistance](#), 515-294-1020

Resources for faculty and staff

- Your department chair or supervisor
- [Employee Assistance Program](#), 1-800-327-4692
- [University Ombuds](mailto:ombuds@iastate.edu), ombuds@iastate.edu
- [University Human Resources](#), 515-294-4800 or hrshelp@iastate.edu
- [Supporting graduate students in distress: Creating a community of care on campus \(video\)](#)