Coping in the Aftermath of Tragedy, Trauma, or Death

Tips for Students

As a UW-Stout student, you may be struggling to understand how the lives fellow students could be cut short or severely impacted by tragedy. There are no easy answers to these questions.

We do know, though, that it is typical for people to experience a variety of emotions following traumatic events. Feelings can include shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief, and others. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating, or remembering even simple tasks. This is common and should pass after a while. Over time, the caring support of family and friends can help to lessen the emotional impact and ultimately make the changes brought about by the tragedy more manageable. You may feel more vulnerable today than you did yesterday. It will take some time to recover your sense of equilibrium.

Meanwhile, you may wonder how to go on living your daily life. You can strengthen your resilience—the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity—in the days and weeks ahead.

Here are some tips:

Talk about it — Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. Receiving support and care can be comforting and reassuring. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so that you do not feel so different or alone. If your parents seem particularly distressed, it may be because they are reacting to their own sense of not being able to control the college environment to keep you as safe as they would like. If you wish to speak to someone in addition to family, friends, or clergy (all good choices), counseling services are available at UW-Stout through the Counseling Center.

Strive for balance — When a tragedy occurs, it’s easy to become overwhelmed and have a negative or pessimistic outlook. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events that are meaningful and comforting, even encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows you to have a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.

Turn it off and take a break — You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in, whether it’s from the Internet, television, newspapers, or magazines. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can actually increase your stress. The images can be very powerful in reawakening your feeling of distress. Also, schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident and focus instead on something you enjoy. Try to do something that will lift your spirits.

Honor your feelings — Remember that it is common to have a range of emotions after a traumatic incident. Go a little easy on yourself and on your friends. You may experience intense stress similar to the effects of a physical injury. For example, you may feel exhausted, sore, or off-balance.

Take care of yourself — Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs, because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen
your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain. Establish or re-establish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga.

**If you have recently lost friends in this or other tragedies** — Remember that grief is a long process. Give yourself time to experience your feelings and to recover. Dealing with the shock and trauma of such an event will take time. It is typical to expect many ups and downs, including "survivor guilt"—feeling bad that you escaped the tragedy while others did not.

Recovering from such a tragic event may seem difficult to imagine. Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging days ahead. Taking the steps in this guide can help you cope at this very difficult time. If you feel stuck or are having significant difficulty managing intense reactions, a professional counselor can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. **It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. The Counseling Center is a good place to start.**

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