When Tragedy Strikes: Tips for Families

What Family Members Can Do

As a parent, one of your most important concerns is the safety and well-being of your child. When a tragedy occurs at your child’s university, you may be wondering how you can help. It is important to remember that reactions will vary widely, and that most students’ reactions can be considered normal or typical in light of abnormal circumstances. Some students will seem unaffected initially, but may have delayed reactions at a later time. Others will react strongly from the start, even though they may have suffered little loss or any real sense of threat. There is no single “right” way to react, but there are some things you can do to assist your student in responding in a resilient manner.

You can help your young adult child by...

Listening.
It may be difficult, but the best thing you can do for your student is to listen to them talk about the events and deaths of fellow students. Talking and writing are two healthy and natural ways for young adults to work through their reactions.

Comforting.
Feel free to offer additional support during this time, through increased phone and email contact, visits, and physical displays of caring such as hugs. They may be reaching out to you for added comfort and security, and a little extra love and affection may be helpful to both of you.

Reassuring.
Reassure your student that you are available for extra support and that you have confidence in their ability to cope effectively. Remind them that the university is responding to the tragedy and encourage them to talk to others on campus and to take part in events memorializing the losses. Direct them to the Counseling Center website (www.uwstout.edu/counsel) for additional information on how to help themselves.

Giving space.
This may be the most difficult for you to do, but you must fight the temptation to over-protect your child. It is natural to want them near you after something bad happens, but it is also important that they maintain a regular routine in order to return to normal functioning.

Being a good example.
Actions speak louder than words, and by your actions you can set an example for your student on how to handle their reactions in a productive way.

Encouraging help-seeking.
If your student was directly impacted by the tragedy (e.g., personally knew students who died or were injured), or if they have had serious losses or traumatic experiences in the past, their reactions may be stronger. If you are concerned about the seriousness of their reaction, you may encourage them to meet with a counselor in the Counseling Center (410 Bowman Hall; 232-2468; www.uwstout.edu/counsel). Counseling Center staff are also available to consult with parents about their concerns and how best to respond.

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