Tips for Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of a Tragic Event

As a student, you may be struggling to make sense of this tragic event and how it took place so close to our university's campus.

Following a traumatic event, those affected usually experience a variety of reactions. You may find that this impacts your larger sense of safety. Feelings can include shock, anxiety, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief, and others. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating, or remembering even simple tasks. These are common reactions to trauma, and for some people these feelings will fade 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 that the world is a more dangerous place today than you did yesterday. It will take some time to recover your sense of equilibrium.

In the aftermath of tragedy you may find it difficult to return to your “normal” daily life. We have collected this information for you in hope that it may be able to help you cope, to help you understand trauma and its impact on your larger sense of safety. Feelings can wax and wane, including “survivor guilt”—feeling bad that you escaped the tragedy while others did not.

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. Counseling services are available at UW through the Counseling Center. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so that you do not feel isolated or alone in your experiences. 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.

**Strive for balance**—When tragedy occurs, it's easy to become overwhelmed. Being reminded of people and events that are meaningful and comforting can be encouraging and provide balance.

**Turn it off and take a break**— 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. Try limiting the amount of news you take in, whether it’s from the Internet, television, newspapers, or magazines. 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. Have compassion for yourself and for your friends. Reactions to trauma can induce stress similar to the effects of a physical injury, and you may feel exhausted, sore, or off-balance. Listen to your body and how it feels.

**Take care of yourself** — Take care of your body and help enhance its natural ability to cope and manage stress. Some people find that eating well balanced meals, getting plenty of rest, and building physical activity into their day are helpful forms of self-care. You may want to avoid alcohol and drugs because of the ways they may intensify your emotional or physical pain or contribute to unhelpful coping mechanisms...If you are having trouble sleeping, you might try relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation.

**If you have recently lost friends in this, or other tragedies**— Remember that grief is a long process that can look very different or different to people. Give yourself time to experience your feelings and to recover. For some, this might involve staying at home; for others it may mean getting back to school or work. 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.

For many people, using the tips and strategies mentioned above may be sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. The UWCC may be a good place to start.

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.

**My SSP**— If you are having a hard time or need crisis support, MySSP is available 24/7 to chat. You can reach them at 1.866.775.0608.