



Student Success Center – Third Floor
<https://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/>
540-568-6552

A Faculty/Staff Guide: Suggestions for Facilitating Classroom Discussions Following an Unexpected Loss

As educators, one of our fundamental goals is to help students learn from their experiences. In the current situation, those experiences involve loss. The faculty and staff of JMU are coping with our own reactions, and we also care about the welfare and well-being of the students with whom we interact.

In the wake of an unexpected loss, it is often helpful to provide students with a structured opportunity to discuss their experience of it. Allowing students to talk about their experience with a trusted faculty member is one of the best ways to reestablish a sense of security and to help students to cope with their stress and grief. Here are some suggestions to achieve those goals:

- You may want to set aside time in class to discuss the loss and the students' thoughts and feelings. Doing so will normally help students to be better able to return to the academic work at hand. Opportunities for this supportive processing of the event should happen as soon as possible after the loss occurs.
- Let students know that each person will have an opportunity to talk but that no one will be required to participate. If students choose not speak, remind them of your office hours, e-mail address, and/or willingness to meet one-on-one.
- Ask that the students speak only for themselves, as no one can possibly speak about how someone else is reacting. Remind them that everyone has a unique perspective on what has happened and that the focus will be on support, not judgment.
- Emphasize that talking about the loss at their own personal pace can be a good and healing thing to do. If you share some of your feelings, it may encourage students to talk. You might say: *"I'm still (sad, shaken, upset) by the loss that occurred on _____. I'm glad to be with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping) with this?"*
- Another way to initiate the discussion is to ask students to share one word that best describes their reactions to the loss. Write these words on the board to create a cumulative "picture" of the impact the incident.
- Remember that the class discussion is not about establishing the facts of the loss. It is about the expression of thoughts and feelings. Faculty may respond to students' statements with reflective comments such as:



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“I can hear how much _____ meant to you.”

“It sounds like this loss really impacted you...”

“It must hurt a lot to remember it that way.”

“It makes sense to be feeling so many emotions right now.”

- After a loss, students often question themselves for feeling the way they do. They will need reassurance that their feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Finding out that their fellow students are having some of the same reactions can also be a great relief.
- Let students know that the Counseling Center has made special arrangements to provide support to students. To take advantage of these services, students should contact the CC (Student Success Center 3rd floor, 568-6552) as soon as possible. The website for the CC is <http://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/>.
- When the students finish talking, a moment of silence might be helpful. If you are worried about a particular student, approach her/him privately.
- If you would like a CC staff member to consult with you about how to lead a classroom discussion, please contact the CC at 568-6552.
- If you are concerned about your own reactions to the tragedy, the Employee Assistance Program (through the Office of Human Resources) provides up to four counseling sessions at no cost to the employee. For more information, contact the Benefits Office (568-3970).