



Student Success Center – 3rd Floor
<https://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/>
540-568-6552

Coping with Traumatic Loss: Supporting Yourself and Others

The students, faculty, staff, and families of the JMU community are in the midst of a struggle to deal with the sudden loss of one of our members. We may be feeling the emotional pain and turmoil of this sudden and traumatic event. It can cause us to feel besieged by questions (most commonly, “Why?”) for which there may never be any satisfactory answers.

Amidst all the confusion brought by the loss of a fellow JMU student, at least one thing seems clear: each of us can play a role in helping one another cope with the impact, beginning the process of healing and recovery. There are a number of guiding principles that will help each of us find greater understanding, support, and strength. Among the most important of these are:

- Intense emotions are normal and healthy in the face of such events. They do not imply weakness or craziness. Powerful feelings of anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, disbelief, numbness, etc. will be a part of our emotional landscape for some time. If they are appropriately expressed and directed, such feelings will provide us with the passion and energy necessary to effectively cope with the loss.
- Spend time with people you care about. While you might not feel like being around anyone, the resulting sense of loneliness typically makes people feel worse.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone. People are often surprised to realize how much support is available through their immediate relationships (friends, families, partners, classmates, etc.).
- Consider peers’ assessment of your well-being. Others close to you may be the first to recognize problems that you may have coping with this loss. Listen to their concerns and be open to the support they offer.
- Remember that people deal with grief, loss, and trauma differently. There is no formula or timeline for healing these kinds of emotional wounds. Some people may become overwhelmed with emotions, while others appear quieter and more reserved. Avoid comparing your reactions to the loss to those of others.
- Refrain from judging others’ responses and demanding that everyone think, feel, or act the same way. Recognize whether you solve problems by distancing (solving problems by yourself) or merging (solving problems with others). Distancers and mergers often choose one another for intimate relationships. It is important to respect others’ perspectives and to provide support at a level and in the manner that they desire. Ask others about how you can be helpful and what the limits are.
- Take action. The desire to “do something” is life-affirming and healthy, and it should be encouraged. Suggestions include attending memorial services and/or setting up your own observances, spiritual/religious practice, and/or volunteering.



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- Take good care of yourself. Feeling loss may make you feel more impulsive. Take care of your body by watching what/how much you eat; your use of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and medicine; and by practicing safe sex. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day.
- Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others. A day must come when it is ok to smile and laugh again. Humor relieves stress, produces body chemicals that improve mood, and helps us to gain a more balanced perspective. Do not postpone joy and laughter should they come your way.
- Remind yourself that some things are out of our control. After a loss when hindsight is 20/20, people often torment themselves with things they “should have” done. Resist letting this kind of guilt take over your life. It is also important to recognize and accept what you cannot change (e.g., the chain of command, organizational structure, waiting, equipment failures, etc.).
- Be a good listener. Simply giving people the opportunity to vent and “get something off their chest” is tremendously helpful and healing to them. Saying the “right thing” isn’t nearly as important as feeling connected to and supportive of others.
- Seek balance in your life. When a loss occurs, it is easy to become obsessed, overwhelmed, and pessimistic. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.
- If problems persist, seek professional assistance. If you are having difficulty managing intense reactions to this loss and/or functioning in your daily activities, the Counseling Center provides a variety of services for students experiencing emotional difficulties. Please contact the Counseling Center by phone (540-568-6552) and/or visit our website at <https://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/> to learn more about the support services and resources available.