

## Facilitating Classroom Discussions after a Disaster

In the wake of a crisis or disaster such as the flood, it is often helpful to provide students with a structured opportunity to discuss their experience of it. Even those not directly affected by the flooding may feel waves of emotions and often experience “survivor guilt.” Allowing students to talk about their experiences with a trusted faculty member is one of the best ways to reestablish a sense of security and to help students 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 flooding 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 it 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 trauma is 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 this flooding. I'm glad to be back with all of you again. How are each of you (feeling, doing, coping)?"*
- **Another way to initiate the discussion is to ask students to share one word that best describes their reactions to the flooding.** Write these words on the board to create a cumulative "picture" of the impact of the flood and ask for reactions or comments.
- **Remember that the class discussion is not about establishing the facts of the incident.** It is about the expression of thoughts and feelings. Faculty may respond to students' statements with reflective comments such as:

*"It must be terrible to think about that."*

*"That sounds really hard."*

*"It is apparent how (angry, sad, scared) you feel as you talk about this tragedy."*

- **After a traumatic event, 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 University Counseling Service has added additional appointments to respond to students' needs.** To take advantage of these services, students should contact the UCS at 335-7294.
- **If you would like a UCS staff member to consult with you about how to lead a classroom discussion, please contact the UCS at 335-7294.** If you are concerned about your own reactions to the tragedy, **Faculty and Staff Services** is available and can be contacted at 335-2085.