

# Providing Support During Distressing Times

*For University of Virginia Faculty and Staff*

**We hope and strive for a positive learning community at UVA.** However, sometimes events—whether personal, university-related, local, national, or global—disrupt the lives of our students and their sense of community, as well as our own. While these events can negatively impact our students' ability to focus on academics, they also can create opportunities to engage in meaningful and honest discussions about difficult and important topics. Faculty members' willingness to reach out and connect with students can help them feel supported and also learn what it means to be a thinking, caring citizen. **You can help provide a space for students to process and make sense of challenging experiences.** Below are important considerations for engaging and supporting students during distressing times:

## Be Gentle.

- Acknowledge that these are hard and complex conversations.
- We need to be gentle with ourselves and each other as we learn to navigate shared experiences.

## Expect to experience mixed emotions.

- Depending on the situation, students may experience different types of feelings including confusion, sadness, anger, numbness, or fear. Some may not feel affected or exhibit any noticeable emotions.
- Remind yourself and your students there is no one right way to feel or react after a difficult event. Each person's process may look different.

## Take notice of changes in student functioning.

- Remember that reactions to experiences of personal and community trauma can lead to difficulties in academic performance or aspects of daily functioning.

## Reach out to your students.

- Send an email acknowledging the recent events and possible impact on students and the community at large. This can help students feel seen, validated, and recognized.
- Acknowledge recent events at the beginning of a class and your recognition of its potential impact on students in a genuine way. Students will sense you care about them and what they are experiencing.

## Consider opening up a space to talk.

- If you feel comfortable doing so, you may initiate a conversation about recent events in your class or during office hours. You do not have to be teaching a class related to the topic to do so.
- Make the conversation optional, to account for the student(s) who might feel triggered or otherwise uncomfortable.
- Carving out space for reflection can lead to learning from your students, just as they learn from you.

## Check in with your students.

- Take a moment to ask students how they are doing, especially if you notice changes in their behavior, mood, or academic performance.
- You do not need to always have the "right" thing to say, but rather to show care, compassion, and empathy. If needed, guide the student to resources for additional support.

## Maintain a routine.

- During times of high stress, it is very helpful to maintain a sense of routine.
- Sticking to the planned curriculum and the normal schedule will help keep students grounded.
- At the same time, remain flexible about making changes or accommodating special requests.

## Use your resources.

- If you would like to facilitate a dialogue in your classroom but you are not sure how, you may request a facilitator who has experience navigating difficult topics. CAPS can help with this or connect you to other resources.

## When in doubt, do not wait—consult and refer.

- Call CAPS or accompany a student to CAPS.
- Other University counseling services include the Women's Center and the Sheila Johnson Center.
- A list of community providers can also be found on the CAPS website.

Need more help? Call **UVA CAPS** at (434) 243-5150 or visit [studenthealth.virginia.edu/CAPS](https://studenthealth.virginia.edu/CAPS). CAPS is available for support, referral assistance, and crisis services. Additional Student Health resources include WahooWell Remote and UVA's Collegiate Recovery Program.