

HOW FACULTY CAN HELP

We hope and strive for a positive learning community at UVA. Sometimes, however, 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, 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.

Providing Support 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 many 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.

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Providing Support during Distressing Times *continued*

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 such as CAPS for additional support.

Maintain a routine.

- During times of high stress, it is very helpful is to help 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, support is available.
- You may request a facilitator who has experience navigating these difficult topics if you believe this would be beneficial to your students. CAPS can help with such facilitations or can help connect you to other resources.
- CAPS and the Teaching Resource Center (TRC) can provide consultation or workshops for your department on approaching these topics with your students.

Providing Support Following Bias-Motivated Incidents

Expect a wide array of responses from students.

- It’s OK for students to have many types of emotions, including anger, shock, sadness, confusion, hopelessness; to feel unsafe both physically and emotionally; to feel targeted; or to feel insignificant or invalidated.
- You might also feel heightened awareness around your own racial/ethnic identity or other aspects of your identity, and feel uncertain among your usual surroundings.

Acknowledge individual and community impact.

- The collective impact of violence or discrimination on a community cannot be underestimated.
- Whether or not UVA community members are directly involved in an incident, a radiating effect can occur throughout the community.

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.

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Providing Support Following Bias-Motivated Incidents *continued*

Consider the greater context.

- Bias-motivated incidents, on a small or a large scale, can highlight or exacerbate already existing negative feelings or doubts surrounding a student's sense of belonging, capability, and safety within the university.
- Understanding this can help us start to make sense of the compounding impact of discrimination and marginalization over time.

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 may feel triggered or otherwise uncomfortable.
- Carving out space for reflection can lead to learning from our students, just as much as they might learn from you.

Listen to students.

- More ideas and recommendations as voiced by a group of UVA students, is available in this open letter: <https://whatwewantfromuvafaculty.wordpress.com/2015/03/20/what-we-need-from-uva-faculty/>

Suicide Awareness

Be aware of warning signs.

- We cannot "prevent" all suicides from happening, but we can be attentive to warning signs.
- Students who attempt suicide often communicate some signs they are considering suicide.
- This mnemonic may be helpful in remembering some of these signs: "IS PATH WARM"

I - Ideation

Listen for any evidence of suicidal thoughts/ideation. Examples include references to "leaving" or wanting to be "gone." If there is indication that the student may be experiencing thoughts of suicide, ask them directly about suicidal thinking or refer them to CAPS.

S – Substance Abuse

Be aware that use of recreational substances, including alcohol (in combination with thoughts of suicide), is associated with higher risk for attempted suicide.

P – Purposelessness

Loss of "drive" or decreased sense of meaning in a student's endeavors can be cause for concern.

A – Anxiety

The presence of anxiety in combination with depression can put a student at higher risk for a suicide attempt.

T – Trapped

If a student feels he or she has no good options for resolving a crisis, they may be more susceptible to suicidal thinking.

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Suicide Awareness *continued*

H – Hopelessness

Lack of hope that circumstances can improve is one of the strongest correlates of suicide attempts.

W – Withdrawal

Pulling back from friends or social interactions is reason for concern.

A – Anger

Signs of agitation or anger are more evidence that a student may be at risk.

R – Recklessness

Impulsive behaviors (or speech) are more reason for concern.

M – Mood Changes

Any emotional change from what is typical can out a student at higher risk.

Engage the student.

- Express concern and ask about the student's well-being. Relate any concerns directly: "I'm worried about you. You seem down today. How are you doing?"

When in doubt, do not wait – consult and refer.

- Call CAPS or accompany them to CAPS.
- No concern is too small for a referral to CAPS.

Follow up with the student.

- Check in with a student in the days and weeks following your initial inquiry.
- Doing this is one of the most effective ways to show care and support.

Resources

Office of the Dean of Students • 434.924.7133

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) • 434.243.5150 daytime or evening

To request an outreach program, training for your department, or to partner with CAPS, contact:

Dr. Nicole L. Fischer, CAPS Assistant Director for Outreach, nlf6z@virginia.edu.