

# Helping Students Cope with Trauma & Stress

The incidents at Columbine, Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon are not events our current generation of college students is likely to forget. In fact, many experts and researchers have suggested that this particular generation has witnessed more violence on American soil than previous generations. And while recent events have received an enormous amount of media attention, our students also experience many other traumatic events—from flooding of hometowns to sexual assault.

Despite the fact that trauma seems to be a mainstay in the lives of many students, we as student affairs professionals are not always equipped to help students deal with their feelings and emotions. This particular need seems increasingly important as 80% of Americans report feeling depressed as a result of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, according to NBC's Today Show. In order to serve effectively as student advocates in all crisis situations there are several things of which we must be aware.

1. Anyone who experiences or witnesses a traumatic event can suffer from stress.
2. Stress can come in many forms—psychological, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, or spiritual.
3. Individuals who experience symptoms of stress for more than one month may fall prey to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD).

In fact, the American Psychological Association recommends that people who experience the following symptoms for more than a month should consider seeking professional help and counseling for PTSD:

- ❑ Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the incident or event
- ❑ Difficulty sleeping or changes in appetite
- ❑ Anxiety or pervasive fear—feeling in danger, being

on edge, being easily startled, or becoming overly alert

- ❑ Feeling depressed, sad, and/or having little energy
- ❑ Irritability and/or experiencing feelings of agitation, anger, or resentment
- ❑ Experiencing memory problems including difficulty remembering aspects of the trauma
- ❑ Feeling “scattered” and unable to focus on work or daily activities
- ❑ Having difficulty making decisions
- ❑ Feeling emotionally “numb,” withdrawn, disconnected or different from others, or spontaneously crying, feeling a sense of despair and hopelessness
- ❑ Not being able to face certain aspects of the trauma, and avoiding activities, places, or even people that remind you of the event

However, according to Donna Arey (MA, LPC, LSW), a therapist with Highland Hospital in Charleston, West Virginia, it is more likely that student affairs professionals will need to work with students immediately following a traumatic event rather than help them cope long-term. “Not everyone who goes through trauma experiences Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” Arey explained. In fact, it is more likely that large numbers of students will experience the five stages of grief. “Any time someone experiences or witnesses a traumatic event it is likely they will feel a sense of loss and therefore, go through the grieving process,” suggested Arey.

The five stages of grief include:

1. **Denial**—denying or refusing to believe that the incident or event happened.
2. **Anger**—feelings of frustration, agitation, and

anger, which can sometimes lead to blaming others (even those not necessarily responsible) or the desire to “get even.”

3. **Bargaining**—some people experience guilt at this stage. In fact, individuals experiencing this stage often blame and burden themselves with excessive amounts of guilt and/or regret.
4. **Depression**—during this stage, individuals may experience a lapse in routine, trouble sleeping, and/or feelings of “numbness” or sadness.
5. **Acceptance**—admitting the incident occurred and accepting the reality of the situation.

Tips from the American Psychological Association, recent editions of NBC’s Today Show, and Arey all suggest that there are some things we can do to help students who are experiencing grief and stress resulting from a traumatic event. These ideas include:

❑ **Recognizing the event has occurred.**

Work with your campus public relations office to release a general statement about the incident and its anniversary. You can also coordinate candlelight vigils and hold prayer meetings (if appropriate for your campus culture). In fact, student organizations are often willing to plan and implement these types of events.

❑ **Getting students talking!** Whether you bring in counselors to hold mini-discussions in the residence halls or frame the discussion as part of a public forum, it is important to get students talking about their feelings and concerns. Encourage faculty not to ignore the issue in their classrooms—especially since some traumatic events and crises may be relevant to course readings and discussion. Initial conversations may already have occurred—just be sure that the talking continues as students face different coping needs.

❑ **Encouraging students to volunteer.**

Often students feel as if the only way they can help is by volunteering for a cause. This seems to be especially important in times of local, national, or global crisis. For example, students

at colleges and universities throughout the Southern Appalachian Region often collect items for the victims of flooding in local communities. Depending upon the circumstances and the type of crisis, students may also choose to give blood, hold food drives, raise funds, and/or circulate petitions.

❑ **Making your staff accessible.** Encourage your staff members to get out of their offices and wander around campus. A visit to the residence halls is sometimes the only way you can connect with a grieving or distressed student.

❑ **Referring students to counseling.** It is also important that student affairs administrators refer students experiencing feelings of grief to a counselor. This is especially true if students seem to be experiencing any of the symptoms of PTSD (described above). In cases of severe crisis or incidents it may also be helpful to extend the hours of your counseling center.

Of course, we would like to be able to promise that we can prevent our students from experiencing (and/or witnessing) traumatic events. However, in reality, preventing these incidents is far from our control. And, while we cannot predict every local, national, or global crisis that might occur, we can be prepared to support and counsel our students who experience stress as a result of these unfortunate events.

*by Susan M. Spangler,  
Assistant Dean of Student Life,  
University of Charleston (WV)*

**For More Information Just Point and Click!**

- **Anxiety Disorders Association of America**  
[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)
- **National Center for PTSD**  
[www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org)
- **PTSD Alliance**  
[www.ptsdalliance.org](http://www.ptsdalliance.org)

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