



Helping Students Cope with Sudden Death

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The sudden death of a student can have strong effects throughout a college community. Everyone feels shock and disbelief, as well as concern for the student's family and friends. Faculty and staff want to be helpful to students but often have trouble themselves understanding how such a thing could happen, even if the circumstances are not immediately clear, let alone if they're not. People worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect solution, there are five guidelines that can often make a positive difference in talking with students.

1. It is helpful not to over-assume what the loss meant to them. They react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, and so on. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Not all will be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does *not* automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings. At the same time, some students who have little immediate reaction may become upset later on, even in a way that doesn't make sense to them. Contrary to what many people imagine, there is no universal timetable.
2. Young adults are remarkably resilient. They may become quite upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually resume their normal lives—and often do so more rapidly than older adults. Most students do not benefit from extensive, probing questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from faculty and staff being available to respond to their questions and to listen when they themselves want to talk.
3. If you receive difficult questions from students it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a question is spurred by a feeling. Rather than plunging into an immediate answer, it can be helpful to learn what motivates the question by asking, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Once you know the source of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.
4. There may be questions you cannot answer, which can make anyone feel inadequate. But all of us are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than to invent a response, it can be much more helpful to say, "I don't know," or, "I'll try to find out."
5. Coping with a tragic death is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a particular set of tactics that deviate sharply from one's familiar patterns of communication. The regular routines of college, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Faculty and Staff will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and students—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—your simply being with students, their knowing that you are available—can be very reassuring.

Dr. Evans is a psychologist and the Director of The Human Relations Service, which provides Wellesley College's employee Assistance Program. The EAP is directed by Dr. Allan Wyatt. He can be reached at 781-235-4950.

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