

Baseline Response to a Critical Incident

SPEAKERS

Caroline Warren, Carolyn Schuyler

Caroline Warren 00:01

Hi, I'm Caroline Warren, I'm a postdoc at the CTE at UVA. And I am here with Carolyn Schuyler, who is a trauma therapist and a visiting scholar at UVA. So today we're going to talk about how instructors can respond to a critical incident or tragic event in their community with their students. Carolyn, I'll give you a scenario. And so something tragic has happened on campus or in the community. And I know that my students are going to be really affected by it, I am sort of at a loss of what to do, what to say to them how to even start. So can you give me a sense of how I should approach communicating with my students after this event? What's the first thing I should do?

Carolyn Schuyler 00:48

Well, I'm grateful to be able to talk about this because we know that people listening in the UVA community probably have experienced several incidences like this over the years of being put in the position to have to come up with a response to students that are having a wide range of responses to some kind of a critical event, what I would like to share with you is a step-by-step process. And we'll go with the first step: you always got to start with actually yourself. The first step is to give yourself enough space to process how you're dealing with the events. And hopefully that your schedule will allow that that you're not about to walk into a classroom. So this is assuming that you actually do have a little bit of time to take care of your own well being during this. And of course, everyone has their own ways of doing that. But it's just a reminder, to take the time to talk to a colleague about how your colleagues might be processing it, to talk to a good friend, to spend some time journaling, to take a walk just to notice what's going on in your own body and emotional well being just so you can get some clarity, because that can be really grounding.

Caroline Warren 01:57

Yeah. And that's a good reminder, because faculty are often pulled in so many directions, like they have so many responsibilities, I have to cover all this content, I have to do my research, I'm also teaching, I'm also totally overwhelmed by this event. But everyone's asking me to take care of my students. So it's, it's a helpful reminder that people should pay attention to their own needs first.

Carolyn Schuyler 02:17

Yes, and I just want to acknowledge too, because I think this is important to say, universities are not designed for the kind of crises that we've been experiencing over the last several years, they don't have the the infrastructure to really provide the level of support that would be ideal for dealing with a trauma. So it's natural to feel overwhelmed, it's natural to feel frustrated. All the range of feelings that people have in a traumatic event happened to instructors too. So there's, this is a time to really give yourself grace, because it is objectively a very difficult situation to be in. So once you've kind of acknowledged

the reality of your situation for yourself, now it's time to acknowledge it for your students. And it is important when there's been a major disruption in the normal flow of events, to take time to acknowledge it, and also to prepare your students for what to expect. So if your time schedule allows it and you can send an email to your students before class, that's highly recommended because it gives them the sense of what they can expect. And it also communicates to them when it's closer to the epicenter of whatever the crisis is that there are people that care about them, that you may be one of the few adults in the community that they're looking to, in a situation for guidance and support. So to receive an email from you, that basically says, "I'm thinking of you, this is a really big event, that's happened, I'm looking forward to seeing you all in class. And we're going to have an opportunity to be together, I did want to let you know what you can expect, we are going to be talking about what you're going to need in terms of maybe some adjustments to the curriculum to make sure that everyone has a chance to do what you need to do to take care of however this event has impacted you and I'm committed to, to putting your emotional well being first over content," because that's the humane thing to do. We're not always used to doing that. But we have a better understanding now of how important it is to prioritize student's emotional needs. Because the truth is you can't learn if you are in crisis. And so we have to make space for it. So you're letting them know that you're going to be there for them in class. And you can also let them know what activities to expect. And also give them permission to opt out. Because there may be some students if they're really close in, or if they already have a mental health condition that has been exacerbated by this event. They really may need to be seeking help from their support system, whether that's a therapist or a friend, group or family, and they need to be able to make that choice. So you just want to cover those bases in the email.

Caroline Warren 04:49

So I've sent this email letting my students know what they can expect in class and letting them know that I'm thinking about them. And now we're back in the classroom. I'm assuming that I should say something to my students.

Carolyn Schuyler 05:04

Yes.

Caroline Warren 05:04

But for me and for other professors that I've spoken with that can be so hard, because there's so many reasons, but you're worried about maybe saying the wrong thing, or opening up conversations that could be not what all of your students need. They could be like triggering or upsetting. But some students want to talk about what happened. So it just, I don't even know how to start. What would you recommend for someone like me?

Carolyn Schuyler 05:30

Yeah, well, first of all, I just want to say that there is no one right way to do this, we just have to kind of accept that that there, there is no perfection around this, in part, because the students that are in front of you are having a very wide range of reactions and have a wide range of needs. So the idea that you could say the perfect thing that's going to meet the needs of everybody in there is too tall in order. But the good news is we do because unfortunately, there's been enough incidents like this throughout the country over and over again, and students have been surveyed to get a sense of what they need, there

is a resounding cry that we do need it acknowledged at least. So I'd like to talk about the concept of a baseline response. And this is something that anyone can do any size classroom with any range of comfort, talking about emotional things, all of us can find a way to make some kind of a statement that acknowledges that something that has happened. And it could be as basic as you know, "I want to pause for a moment to acknowledge the the tragic event that's just happened. I have sent an email to you, because it is really important to me that you know that I care about how this is impacting you. So I just wanted to pause for a moment to recognize that this does impact our class. And that we do need to make space for people's wide range of responses. And I can imagine that some of you may really be in a lot of distress around this, others of you may feel like I just want to get back to normal. Some of you may be feeling that you don't even want to be in the classroom right now. And I want to give you permission, if you need to step out at any point, that's okay, we have understanding and grace for whatever reaction people people are having right now." That could be the baseline thing that you say.

Caroline Warren 07:07

Okay, so acknowledging and offering some reassurance and about however they might be...

Carolyn Schuyler 07:13

Right, you're acknowledging that something bad happened. And you're acknowledging that whatever kind of reaction people are having is to be expected. One of the lines I like to say to people is that this, this is a situation where you may feel like your reactions are abnormal, you may find yourself not being able to concentrate or feeling really anxious or irritable. But those things are actually normal when something really terrible happened. And so people may be finding themselves behaving in ways that they don't normally behave or feeling concerned about how something is cropping up that is very hard to hold. And to just let people know that we expect that that's normal, this is predictable. And I think it's also helpful, you can say this to the class, but also to know for yourself that sometimes when things like this happen, there's a fear that for some people, that there's going to be a really long stretch of not being able to manage. And the research doesn't really say that most people move through these incidents, and recover without needing professional help, okay, but there are some people that will. So this is another part of what you can say after you've made your acknowledgement and recognized to them, that they probably are having a wide range of reactions, you can say, "I just want to give you the friendly reminder that there are a lot of supports available on campus for different kinds of needs." So you might want to just educate yourself to find out what is going on in campus before you go in. So you can remind them of that. So that's kind of the basics. If you want to say a little bit more, I have just three concepts for you to consider. I think when we're really wanting to connect with some group and offer ourselves as a resource, it can be useful to actually name that to remind people that we are connected. So you might make a statement like, "it's really good for us to be together. I really value the fact that we can support each other in this time," just making a statement reminding people of community is useful.

Caroline Warren 09:10

So what if that's not really like, my style or my approach with my students or other other ways you can say?

Carolyn Schuyler 09:18

Yeah, I think what's so important about this is like how I was saying, there's no right way to do it. But it is important to be authentic and to be who you are because people can read it. If you're so uncomfortable that you're trying to do something that's not obviously how you're really feeling or in your character. So it actually is okay to say something like, you know, "I really, I want you guys to know that I care about you and I that I realize this is a really big disruption. I'm actually not sure of the right words to say, but I do want you to know that I get it that this is a big this is hard." Like sometimes you can just say, "I don't know, but I do acknowledge that this is a big deal." So any way that you can get those words across that fits your personality is good.

Caroline Warren 10:01

Okay.

Carolyn Schuyler 10:02

And if you feel like you can go a little further, and it's okay to even have a script and just say this is so important to have put thought into this, I'm actually going to read something to y'all, I'm not actually showing a lot of intention and care which people appreciate. I think there's a little bit of a myth that some of us acquired in our childhood that to show strength or to show competence or professionalism, that those kinds of expressions of emotion are not appropriate. But in a crisis situation, showing the natural emotion that comes up for you can actually send a message to the people that you're trying to support, that emotion is allowed here that it's normal, it's to be expected. And if you react to it as though this is something you can manage and move through, that gives that message to the students that we can have these feelings, we can hold them together, they don't need to derail us, and we're going to move through it. The other concept besides connection is reassurance. And I think reassurance goes along with giving that information about the resources on campus, and letting them know that there is going to be adjustments to the curriculum and that their needs are first and that if you want to offer that you're going to be available to talk after class or during office hours, you can do that. But you're not obligated to do that. Because that really feels out of some people's comfort zone. There are plenty of people on campus that can provide that kind of emotional support for your students. If it's not right for you, too, you can be just the one that points in the right direction, okay, and in your own way, show concern for your students. And the third one is just validation. And when people are struggling, it's so important to know that somebody else sees you believes what you're experiencing, experiencing, and cares about it. So you might have an opportunity to validate depending on what happens in the class. If someone says something that, you know, share something and you're not sure how to respond, you can always just validate, you can always just say, "That sounds really hard. I'm so glad that you shared that this is really important. I'm glad we're together." You're not there to fix it, you don't have to have some wise comment, all you have to do is say I heard it, and it's real. And I got it, okay, and whatever way feels right to you. And that's usually enough for people to feel like their needs are met.

Caroline Warren 12:15

That is a really good sort of entry point into responding to an incident a crisis of tragedy with your students. I've heard you talking about these responses as on a spectrum. So on the one end, there's the baseline, which you just described. And then on the other end, there's sort of community-building responses. I know we're going to do a different podcast about that, but can you just say a couple of words about what it means to do a community-building response.

Carolyn Schuyler 12:40

So so we know actually, in terms of our neurobiology that we are wired to be in connection to other people, particularly when there's something that makes us feel like we're under threat, or that we're overwhelmed. So if it feels within your comfort zone, to think about having an activity in your classroom that allows students to share their experiences, and to have some kind of a collaborative experience that builds a sense of community, that can be really powerful. So we will talk about that in another podcast. But I do want to say that because I think a lot of people have anxiety about opening up the emotional conversation, like you mentioned earlier, that there are ways to build community and allow people to express themselves without it turning into what feels like a therapy session gone amok. I did want to say one thing about that, because it just hit me that someone might be thinking, okay, so I acknowledge them, I kind of normalize their responses, I let them know that we're gonna make adjustments. But then I still have the rest of the class, what do I do for the rest of the class?

Caroline Warren 13:40

Yeah.

Carolyn Schuyler 13:41

So I do want to say there's a temptation, because anyone that's teaching at UVA, could do a beautiful presentation on all kinds of topics. But this is a time to refrain from that. Because really, to present a lot of academic content in a time like this could really feel off for many of the students in class, particularly those that are on the end of the spectrum of feeling really overwhelmed. Yeah, so you might want to choose an activity that doesn't require a lot of mental energy that isn't going to put anyone in a position to perform that that isn't the normal kind of activity that you would have, but still is related to your course content, something that's a lower bar so that people are really getting that you understand that concentrating is hard right now that people are just trying to get acclimated and grounded. And you can say I'm choosing a different activity today. Because really, the way I'm seeing this is this is the most important thing today is that we're together and that we're coming back and we're getting back into our routines without pretending that something didn't happen because it did this is really well understood in terms of trauma recovery, one of the worst things you can do is pretend something didn't happen.

Caroline Warren 14:47

Okay, that's helpful to remember. And I have one final question. So I have heard from some students that they've had experiences where instructors have responded to an act of violence in their community by talking about like gun control and policy questions and trying to move quickly into problem solving. And students have sometimes found that to be too much too soon. And I know that there's the impulse to do that, because we recognize that a lot of the violence that's happening in our communities is related to giant structural issues. What would you say is that a good move? Or should I wait before I do something like that?

Carolyn Schuyler 15:31

I think, you know, sometimes people do have a pressing need in these situations, to think about activism to think about the structural issues that are contributing to the problem. And there can be a time and a place for that, but not the first class.

Caroline Warren 15:43

Yeah.

Carolyn Schuyler 15:44

Because there are going to be a proportion of your students that are really just trying to get through the day. And there are going to be others that that wouldn't be able to have that kind of handle that conversation. But out of sensitivity to kind of honor the significance of the event. And oftentimes, in crisis events, there are a certain number of people that have been very deeply affected. And maybe this is just me that there's sort of a disrespect, yeah, moving into business as usual to quickly and not allowing space for people to notice how they're feeling and how they're reacting. And the first class back is probably pretty close to something being announced. And it's modeling making space for our humanity. And in the end, that's a pretty powerful message to send.

Caroline Warren 16:32

Well, I think that's a good note to wrap up on. So thank you so much. I feel more prepared to respond to a crisis with my students, and I hope it was helpful for other folks too. If you're interested in learning more about some of the approaches Carolyn described, we have some links in the description of the show to a couple of documents that offer written out guidelines to this. Thank you so much.

Carolyn Schuyler 16:59

Thank you.