

THE “VIP” RESPONSE TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS

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“VIP” HAS MULTIPLE MEANINGS IN THIS FRAMEWORK...

It emphasizes that everyone deserves to be recognized as “**very important people**” who are inherently deserving of belonging, respect, and authentic compassion.

It also stands for the main steps in the response process:

1. **VALIDATE** the reality of the experiences described by students
2. **INQUIRE** their needs, strengths, resources, and available supports
3. **PLAN** a first step to address primary needs

VIP also applies to instructors, who need to validate, investigate, and plan for their own needs in community with their network of social support.

There is no single “correct” way for instructors to address their students after a crisis or tragedy. Research indicates that the most important thing instructors can do is simply **acknowledge the event(s)** in some way (Huston and DiPietro, 2004).

The “**VIP**” **Response** is one framework instructors can use for brief and effective responses to classes or individual students needing social or emotional support after a critical incident. “VIP” is an acronym that stands for the key steps in the process: **Validate, Inquire, and Plan**.

In this guide, we introduce the VIP framework and offer examples of what instructors might do in each step. These are meant as inspiration, not a script. Words or actions that feel at odds with your personality or relationships with your students are not likely to feel authentic to your students. The framework is adaptable! Use language and activities that feel aligned with your values and who you are as a teacher.



RESOURCING YOURSELF

Resourcing is the act of identifying and practicing the activities that help you cope with stressful situations, difficult emotions, and traumatic experiences.

Resourcing yourself is a critical part teaching in times of crisis. If you need support, consider reaching out to your organization’s Faculty and Employee Assistance Program. [UVA’s FEAP](#) offers counseling and mental health supports.

Connecting with friends, family and colleagues is vitally important in times of crisis. Social support is a well established protective factor. To offer social support to our students, we need to receive it ourselves.

STEP 1: VALIDATE

FREQUENTLY ASKED:

Is it ever appropriate to share your own feelings when responding to a crisis?

It is appropriate to acknowledge that you are affected by the event and to be transparent about your feelings as they relate to your interactions with students. For example:

"This has hit me hard. The best way I know to show up for all of you today is to be real about how much this hurts."

"Like many of you, I am feeling overwhelmed. I'm still processing and don't feel equipped to make a plan for the rest of the semester right now. We will talk about next steps when we resume next week. Today is about reconnecting and being together."

Validating students' perspectives and emotions is a form of listening with an intent to convey compassion and non judgment. This is possible even if you hold a differing perspective. The goal is to **listen and understand another person's experience**, not to offer advice or to draw conclusions of any kind. Effectively validating students' experiences allows them to feel truly heard, believed, and cared for, and is a key protective factor that supports emotional resiliency and recovery from traumatic events.

Offering authentic expressions of care

For example:

- *"I have been thinking about all of you. It is normal for people to have a wide range of responses to all that has happened, and I will be working to make any needed accommodations. I care about all of you and hope to be a support."*
- *"I'm available after class this week, and I would love to meet with you during that time if you want to check in with me."*

Giving choices to help students feel a sense of control

For example:

- Invite (don't require) participation in activities.
- *"Some of you may want the typical class structure and activities today and some of you may want time to process recent events. We have options for both. While people vary in their responses and needs in tough situations, all of us benefit from caring connections. With that in mind, you may choose to join me at the tables for a twenty-minute reflection on what we're noticing about this time both personally and in the community. We will not have any cross talk, but will give people the chance to support each other through listening. If you'd rather do some work, have a moment to yourself, or connect with each other socially, please find a space to do that. We will resume class in twenty minutes."*

STEP 2: INQUIRE

CATEGORIES OF SUPPORT

People: Who is helpful to talk to or be with? Where might you go to feel part of a community? If this is hard to answer, what first step might you take to connect with others?

Information: What information might be helpful in meeting the needs you identified? Where can you go to get that information?

Material support: What can you give to yourself to support your health and well being? Good food, music you like, art, running, meditation, etc

Internal strengths: In what ways can you show compassion for yourself? What special people, places and experiences are sources of comfort, protection, or wisdom?

While there is no “correct” or “one-size-fits-all” approach to responding to critical incidents, checking in on students’ welfare is an important element to consider. The inquiry phase of the VIP response supports students in identifying both their needs and the strengths and resources they may access to meet them.

Students come to our classes with an array of resources available to them. Some have what they need and others benefit from support finding it. Prompting students to slow down and reflect on needs and resources encourages adaptive behavior, and is easily done in a class of any size. Below, we provide an example of what the “inquire” step of the VIP response might look like in a large class.

- **Prompt:** *“Because we don’t always stop to notice what we’re feeling and what we might be needing (even in times of crisis), I wanted to take some class time today to give you a chance to do a self check-in. Your experience matters and your needs matter. I invite you to take the next several minutes to write down a list of your current needs, as they may be different now that they were before the recent tragedy. Reflect with compassion on how your body feels, what emotions you’ve been having, and how you have been going through your days, as this will inform what needs you may have. For example, you may need time to get outside, visit a friend off campus, or read a book you love. This reflection is just for you. You will not be asked to share your responses. If you prefer to use this time in another way, to meditate, draw, or talk to a classmate, you are welcome to do that.”*

Once you have your list of needs, I invite you to think about what will make a positive difference for you in addressing your needs. I encourage you to keep an open mind even if this feels like a challenging or unfamiliar thing to do. See what you come up with.

To make this final step simpler, you can encourage students to break the list into the categories listed in the sidebar. It may be helpful to display the categories on a screen for their reference.

STAGE 3: PLAN

CONSIDER:

Reactions to traumatic events vary by individual. Most people experiencing symptoms will recover without intervention, but some students will need professional help. It is impossible to know what students are experiencing or needing unless they self-report, so it is important not to make assumptions about how they have been impacted by a crisis. It can be helpful to normalize the wide range of responses.

For example:

"It is common and expected for people to have a wide range of reactions to a crisis. Some may struggle with concentration, appetite, sleep, and routines. Others feel numb or relatively normal. People may feel an urge to connect to others or to help, while others may find themselves isolating. Mental health professionals know a lot about how to help people in hard times, so its worth reaching out for help if you need it. "

To conclude your VIP debrief, help students make a plan. For example:

- **Ask students to plan a first step.** Ask students to decide how and when they will use a resource they identified in the "Inquire" reflection. For example: *"Please choose a "first step" you can take in the next 24 hours to address some of the needs you identified. You may also chart out steps you would like to take over time. Having a plan increases the likelihood it will happen."*
- **Provide information about resources.** Consider providing a handout with a list of referrals.
- **Share information about what students can expect in class in the next few weeks.** If you don't know yet, tell students how you will communicate updates to them.
- **Encourage students to ask for help when needed.**