

Coping With Traumatic Events: Helping Your College Student

A campus tragedy can trigger parents' worst fears about their college student's safety and well being. You may experience tremendous anxiety, feelings of helplessness, and anger. These feelings can be magnified if your student is attending college some distance from home.

Tips to Manage Your Distress

Here are some tips that may help you to manage your distress and to feel more positive about your student's safety and future:

Manage Your Own Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response and appropriate in tragic situations. Excessive anxiety, however, can make you less able to think clearly and expends energy needlessly. Ask yourself what specific worries are troubling you most and then seek information to address them. Having that information eliminates the fears created by uncertainty.

Use relaxation techniques that may have worked for you in the past. For example, engage in exercise or deep breathing, journal your thoughts and feelings, or share them with a confidant. You'll be better equipped to manage a traumatic event if you can minimize your anxiety. Your ability to handle your anxiety will likely calm your son or daughter and relieve any fears they might have about worrying you.

Use Anger Productively

Anger is also a normal response when circumstances feel out of control. Expressing your anger to excess is counterproductive. Instead think of ways to use your energy to identify needed changes and collaborate with others who can help make change happen.

Stay in Touch

Parents can provide consistency and normalcy in a chaotic situation. Let your college student know that you are thinking of him or her and show your support. Ask what the university is doing to discuss the tragic event on campus and to help students get through this difficult time. Find out about available university counseling services and how your college student can access them (*see Services Available at Counseling and Psychiatric Services below*). There are a variety of ways you can stay in touch. In addition to phone and e-mail, you could drop your son or daughter a card from time to time.

Take a Break

Minimize your exposure to all types of media, including the internet. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can augment your distress. Give yourself permission to not worry about your college student's safety, as worry alone cannot protect your son or daughter. Also, schedule breaks to distract yourself from the ongoing media coverage and your concern about your college student's safety. Do things you enjoy to lift your spirits, go to a movie or a concert, or read a humorous book. When you model ways to take care of yourself, you are also teaching your son or daughter the importance of good self-care.

Know the Warning Signs of Violence

This tragedy sheds light on an important issue that we often don't talk about – the warning signs of violence. Know the warning signs and discuss them with your college student.

Any of these behaviors occurring over a period of time can signal the potential for violent behavior:

- a history of violent or aggressive behavior;
- serious drug or alcohol use;
- access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns;
- threatening others regularly; trouble controlling anger;
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities; feeling rejected or alone; having been a victim of bullying; feeling constantly disrespected;
- poor school performance; history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority; and
- failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others.

While these behaviors alone don't mean that a person will necessarily become violent, they might be indications that more attention needs to be paid to the causes of such behaviors in the individual.

Talk with your college student about ways he or she could handle a situation when concerned about the thoughts and behaviors of another member of the campus community. Find out how to make an appropriate report to school officials, what the limits are to confidentiality, and encourage your son or daughter to make a report if he or she has serious concerns. Remind them that there is a difference between “snitching” on someone, and seeking help for friends and others about whom they might be concerned.

Engage In Healthy Behaviors

Take actions that are healthy for you. They may enhance your ability to persevere during difficult times. You will also be setting a good example for your college student. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain and the intensity of your reaction to stress.

Tune In

When your college student comes home from school on breaks, tune into how he or she is doing. Be supportive and compassionate. If you notice changes in your son or daughter's usual activities, behaviors, or moods, discuss them. He or she may be experiencing distress related to the tragic events on campus. Share a copy of the CAPS brochure “Coping with Traumatic Events: Helping Yourself” found on CAPS' website to see if any of these tips can be helpful.

Let Go

If your college student is home for a school break, at some point, he or she will likely need to return to campus. At that time, you may experience feelings of worry and dread. Your instincts to want to protect and shield your college student are common. But, remember that life's tragedies can occur anywhere – even in your own back yard. Gather strength from knowing that you have been building a strong relationship with your college student and that you can be sources of strength for each other through life's inevitable difficulties.

Services Available at Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS)

Many parents may find the tips and strategies in this guide are sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, you or your college student may get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional can assist your son or daughter in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if your son or daughter is unable to function, academically or otherwise.

CAPS offers counseling and psychiatric services to UGA students and consultation and outreach services to UGA students, faculty, and staff. Parents are encouraged to attend a consultation appointment with their son or daughter as needed. CAPS is staffed by experienced mental health professionals, including: Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Postdoctoral Fellows, and Doctoral-Level Practicum Students. Counseling services are confidential and are available at reduced cost for UGA students who have paid the student health fee. Consultation services are available to UGA students, faculty, and staff, and outreach programs are available upon request.

Counseling Services for UGA Students

- Drop-in small group discussions
- Walk-in services for students in crisis who wish to speak with a counselor
- Telephone screening for those not in crisis who wish to begin counseling

Consultation and Outreach Services for UGA Students, Faculty, and Staff

- Phone consultation with a CAPS clinician if you have concerns about a UGA student or questions about services available to UGA students and resources available to faculty and staff
- Outreach programs for UGA students focusing on reactions to traumatic events, ways of coping, and information about our services or community resources
- Faculty and staff may call CAPS for information on how to access outreach programs focusing on reactions to traumatic events

Please contact us at (706) 542-2273 if you have questions about our services or if we may assist you in any way. You may also obtain information about our services by visiting our website at www.uhs.uga.edu/caps.

Adapted from: *Stress Management Tips for Parents of College Students in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings*. American Psychological Association (2007).