

Supporting Students through Challenging Times: Resources for Faculty and Staff¹

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If you are concerned about a particular student, you should contact the WPI Care Team using the [I'm Concerned About a Student](#) form, or contact the Student Development and Counseling Center (SDCC) at 508-831-5540 or sdcc@wpi.edu. If you believe a student is in imminent danger, contact Campus Police at 508-831-5555.

As educators, one of our fundamental goals is to help students learn from their experiences. Those experiences sometimes involve unexpected loss and tragedies. As faculty and staff cope with our own reactions, we also care about the welfare and well-being of the students with whom we interact. This document provides suggestions and communication samples for supporting students and each other.

General Advice for Talking to Students After a Tragedy or Loss

The effects of a tragedy are often felt most intensely in the classroom. Sometimes the first face a student sees after a tragedy is their professor's. Although students who are impacted directly are often the most affected, tragedies ripple across campus and affect different people in different ways. If a professor starts class by jumping right into a lesson without acknowledging what has happened, it can feel disconcerting or upsetting to students.

In the wake of an unexpected loss, it's helpful to provide students with a structured opportunity to share the thoughts and feelings they're experiencing. Allowing students to talk about their experience or reactions with a trusted faculty member is one of the best ways to reestablish a sense of security and to help students cope with their grief and stress.

Following are some suggestions for setting aside time in class to discuss the loss, tragedy, or event and the students' thoughts and feelings. Doing so can help students be better able to return to academic work. Opportunities for this supportive processing should happen as soon as possible after the loss occurs.

1. Acknowledge what happened

This doesn't need to take a long time. It shows your students that it's normal to be thinking about what happened.

2. Provide an opportunity to talk

Ask broad, open-ended questions such as, "How are each of you (feeling/doing/coping) with this...?"; or "How are people reacting to..." Another way to initiate discussion is to

¹ This resource is a mix of contributions from WPI's Student Development and Counseling Center and from MIT. Portions adapted with permission from <https://studentlife.mit.edu/support/faculty-staff>

ask students to share one word that best describes their reactions to the loss. Write these words on the board to create a cumulative “picture” of what has happened.

3. Share your experience

Sharing your experience helps humanize you, and it may encourage students to talk. It's even okay to show emotion. If you don't feel comfortable sharing personally, that's okay too.

4. Make sure students are aware of supports on campus

Emphasize that talking about loss at their own personal pace is a good and healing thing to do. Both orally and in writing, guide students toward WPI's [resources for mental health, wellbeing, and academic support](#). In particular, the Student Development and Counseling Center, Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Collegiate Religious Center are all great resources in times of tragedy. You can also encourage students to reach out to their closest friends, family, and student groups.

5. Make accommodations for the students and for yourself as needed

Some affected by the tragedy may need temporary accommodations with their course work. It is normal for people not to be able to function at their full capacity when trying to deal with an emotional situation. This is the time to be flexible. Some people may not feel affected by the tragedy, and that's okay too.

Remember that the class discussion is not about establishing the facts of the loss. It's about the expression of thoughts and feelings. Ask that students speak only for themselves, as no one can possibly speak about how someone else is feeling. The focus is on support, not judgment.

This MIT video on [Helping Students Cope with Loss](#) may also be helpful to the WPI community.

Sample Script and Outline for Class Meetings

Example Talking Points for Start of Class

I want to start our class today by acknowledging that many people might be thinking about things other than academics today. I know that I am. I know it might be hard to focus. I understand, and I want to encourage you to prioritize your wellbeing today and during this time.

I know that people in this class might be having different reactions to [insert event]. I am personally (sad/shaken/upset) by _____. I'm glad to be with all of you at this time. No matter your perspective, I want everyone to know that you don't have to go through this alone. You might want to turn to family members, friends, or some of the excellent support resources here on campus. In particular, if you are worried about being able to get through work during this time, the Student Development and Counseling Center, Office of Multicultural Affairs and Collegiate Religious Center, and the Academic Advising Office—really all of us in this community-- are prepared to help you.

Please know that, while your learning is of course important to me, I care about your wellbeing most of all.

Example Outline

This outline is provided to help you structure a conversation with your students during a class meeting after an unexpected loss, tragedy, or major event at WPI or in the world. If only portions of the outline work for you, that's okay.

1) Introduction

- a) State why you are having this conversation and how long it will last
- b) Include that the discussion is optional (students do not need to participate) and that difficult topics may be discussed
- c) Share your goals for the conversation:
 - i) To acknowledge that something has happened and that you understand that this is likely impacting them
 - ii) To give students an opportunity to share how they are feeling
 - iii) To share resources for students

2) Discuss Reactions (could be done as [Think-Pair-Share](#), without required participation)

- a) How are you feeling? How is this impacting you?
- b) What do you feel like you need for yourself?
- c) Another way to initiate discussion is to ask students to share one word that best describes their reactions to the loss. Write these words on the board to create a cumulative "picture" of what has happened.

Faculty may respond to students' statements with reflective comments such as:

I can hear how much ___ meant to you.

It sounds like this loss/event really impacted you.

It must hurt a lot to remember it that way.

It makes sense to be feeling so many different emotions right now.

After a loss, students often question themselves for feeling the way they do. They will need reassurance that their feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Finding out that their fellow students are having some of the same reactions can be a great relief.

3) Share Your Own Perspective

- a) This is a chance for you to share your own perspective and reflections, if you feel comfortable. Sharing your own feelings can be a great model for students.
- b) After you and/or the students finish talking, taking a moment of silence may be helpful.

4) Share Resources

- a) Student Support Resources: A summary can be found on WPI's [Be Well Together](#) webpage. Also remind students of your office hours, email address, and/or willingness to meet one-on-one.

Sample Email Templates

In addition to setting aside time in class, additional outreach to students will be helpful to them. This could be with students in your current or past courses, project teams, academic advisees, research group, or student workers. Broadly speaking, we encourage faculty and staff to acknowledge what has happened, recognize that it will have an impact on students' work, and make sure students are aware of support resources. Some of the sample templates below invite students to a conversation and to acknowledge the challenges they might be facing after a specific event. In other situations, it will also be helpful to check in with students without acknowledging any specific events or if you have already acknowledged the events in a previous communication. When major events happen, students can feel a greater sense of isolation such that ongoing check-ins from faculty, staff, and peers can provide important reminders of community connections.

Sample Email to Students to Acknowledge a Specific Event or Tragedy

Dear students,

I know that we usually spend our time talking about [course name]. However, in these difficult times, I anticipate that many of you may be thinking a lot about [event]. I am too. No matter what your beliefs or opinions, you deserve support at this time. That might mean talking to friends or family, reaching out to one of the many [support resources](#) at WPI, or taking some extra time for self-care. Please know that, while your learning is of course important to me, your wellbeing is most important. If you need anything from me or the rest of the teaching staff, please let us know. [Provide guidance for contacting you and what they can expect for response time.]

Sample Email to Individual Student to Offer General Check-In

Dear [student name],

I'm reaching out to let you know that I'm thinking about you and that I hope that you are doing well. I just wanted to [insert something that you want to acknowledge about them personally - it could be how well they did in a recent class or project, how they positively contributed to something, or you want to check in with a life event that you're aware of such as their graduate school or job search progress].

I know that the spring semester will continue to present lots of challenges, so I just wanted to remind you that I will continue to be available if you need anything. [Insert information about ways that the students can connect with you and each other, including office hours, upcoming events, or other ideas.]

There is no need to respond to this message, but don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything.

Sample Email to Class/Advisees/Other Students to Offer General Check-In

Dear [class/group],

I wanted to reach out and let you all know that [I am/we are] thinking about you. [I/we] know that the past few months have been difficult but [I/we] just wanted to remark at how [impressed/proud/happy] [I am/we are] by how we have persevered together.

The spring semester will continue to present challenges for all of us, so [I/we] want to remind you that [I/we] will continue to be available if you need anything. Also, don't forget all of the [support resources](#) that are available to help you. [Insert information about ways that the students can connect with you and each other, including office hours, upcoming events, or other ideas.]

There is no need to respond to this message, but don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything.

Examples of Open-Ended Questions to Ask Students When Meeting

- It's been some time since we last connected. I'm glad we have a chance to connect now. How have things been since we last talked?
- This [an article, a book, a media clip, or something else that you know aligns with their interests/area of study] made me think of you. I'd love to talk with you about it after you check it out.
- I've been thinking about you and wanted to check in and see how things are going since I haven't heard from you in a while. Does [insert time and date] work for you? If not, what times/dates work for you?
- I noticed that [insert some observable change in behavior (i.e. they are showing up to meetings late or not showing up at all)] recently. I'm worried about you and want to make sure you're okay. Can you tell me what's going on?

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Resources for Department Heads and Supervisors

Department heads and other leaders are also encouraged to acknowledge what has happened, recognize that it will have an impact on faculty and staff as well as students, and make sure that faculty and staff are aware of support resources. The sample templates below are provided to help you invite people to a community conversation and to acknowledge the challenges they might be facing.

Sample Email to Invite Faculty and Staff to a Department Meeting

Dear colleagues,

We know [event] may be a significant source of stress for many in our community. I certainly am feeling it. I want to invite each of you to a meeting on [date] at [time] time to check in and learn how you are feeling and what you are hearing from students as we navigate this difficult time. Although you are under no obligation to attend, my hope is this will be an opportunity for us to connect with one another and determine next steps as a group. If there is anything related to this situation that you would like to discuss privately, please feel free to reach out to me directly.

I also want to make sure you are aware of the resources available to students and others in the WPI community, which are summarized on the [Be Well Together webpage](#). For faculty and staff, I especially recommend the [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP), which provides free, confidential services including counseling (in-person, online, or by phone), in addition to health resources, mental health toolkits, and crisis support.

Sample Email to Colleagues to Acknowledge Events without a Meeting

Dear colleagues,

We know [event] may be a significant source of stress for many in our community. I certainly am feeling it. No matter what your feelings, beliefs, or opinions are, it's important that we take care of ourselves and support each other during these difficult times.

While some students may be focused on other things, many will be looking to us to see how we respond. These moments can be an opportunity for us to truly make an impact on the lives of our students. Please check in with your students. Acknowledging what is happening and understanding that it might impact them makes such a difference. In your communication to students, please also be sure that they are aware of our [resources for mental health, well-being, and academic support](#). If you are worried about a particular student, use the [I'm Concerned About a Student Form](#) to notify our Care Team. And for your own mental health and wellbeing, I want to be sure you're aware of the [Employee Assistance Program](#).

If there is anything related to this situation that you would like to discuss privately, please feel free to reach out to me directly.

Sample Agenda for Department Meeting

The template below is provided to help you structure a conversation with your faculty and staff colleagues during a department meeting after a major event at WPI or in the world.

1) Introduction

- a) State what you are there to talk about and how long the meeting will last
- b) Include that the discussion is optional (people do not need to participate and may leave at any time) and that difficult topics may be discussed
- c) Establish ground rules

- i) Each person can talk for X minutes
 - ii) Respectful dialogue
 - iii) We each listen more than we talk
 - iv) If talking about the meeting afterwards, we must treat what others said with privacy and respect, and not link statements to specific people
- d) Offer resources
 - i) [Be Well Together Resources](#): Mental Health, Wellbeing, Academic Support
 - ii) Check awareness of [I'm Concerned About a Student](#) form / Care Team
 - ii) [Employee Assistance Program](#)
- 2) Share Goals for the Meeting:
 - a) Give people an opportunity to share how they are feeling
 - b) Share resources for faculty and staff
 - c) Share resources for students
 - d) Discuss ways that the department can support faculty, staff, and students
- 3) Discuss Reactions
 - a) How are you feeling? How is this impacting you?
 - b) What do you feel like you need for yourself?
 - c) What do you need to be able to support students?
- 4) Share Your Perspective
 - a) This is a chance for you to share your own perspective and reflections, if you feel comfortable
- 5) Next Steps
 - a) How can the department and WPI leadership be most supportive to the community?
 - b) What are some good next steps as a department?
- 6) Conclusion