



**Brown University
Counseling and Psychological Services**

Supporting Yourself and Others

When a tragedy occurs in the Brown community, students, faculty, staff, and families are all affected and struggle with how to get through an overwhelming negative event. We feel the emotional pain and turmoil of this traumatic event and are besieged by questions (most commonly, “Why?”) for which there may never be any satisfactory answers.

Amidst all the confusion brought by these circumstances, at least one thing seems clear: each of us can play a role in helping one another cope with the impact and begin the process of healing and recovery. There are a number of guiding principles that will help all of us find greater understanding, support, and strength. Among the most important of these are:

- Intense emotions are normal and healthy in the face of such tragedy. They do not imply weakness or craziness. Powerful feelings of anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, disbelief, numbness, etc. will be a part of our emotional landscape for some time. If they are appropriately expressed and directed, such feelings will provide us with the passion and energy necessary to effectively cope with the tragedy.
- Spend time with people you care about. While you might not feel like being around anyone, the resulting sense of loneliness typically makes people feel worse.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone. People are often surprised to realize how much support is available through their immediate relationships (friends, families, partners, classmates, etc.).
- Remember that people deal with grief and loss differently. There is no formula for healing these kinds of emotional wounds. Some people may become overwhelmed with emotions, while others appear quieter and more reserved. Avoid comparing your reactions to the tragedy to those of others.
- Refrain from judging others’ responses and demanding that everyone think, feel, or act the same way. It is important to respect others’ perspectives and to provide support at a level and in the manner that they desire. Ask others about how you can be helpful and what the limits are.
- Be a good listener. Simply giving people the opportunity to vent and “get something off their chest” is tremendously helpful and healing to them. Saying the “right thing” isn’t nearly as important as feeling connected to and supportive of others.

- Take action. The desire to “do something” is life-affirming and healthy, and it should be encouraged. Suggestions include, attending memorial services and/or setting up your own observances, spiritual/religious practice, and in some situations, political action.
- Take good care of yourself. Feeling threatened can make you feel more impulsive. Take care of your body by watching what/how much you eat; your use of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and medicine; and by practicing safe sex. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day.
- Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others. A day must come when it is ok to smile and laugh again. Humor relieves stress, produces body chemicals that improve mood, and helps us to gain a more balanced perspective. Do not postpone joy and laughter should they come your way.
- Remind yourself that some things are out of our control. After a tragedy when hindsight is 20/20, people often torment themselves with things they “should have” done. It is important that you resist letting this kind of guilt take over your life.
- Turn off the TV news programs and be judicious in the websites that you visit. While keeping informed of developments is important, the 24/7 media machine typically ignores stories of heroism, resilience, and sacrifice and instead focuses on the most horrific images and troubling accounts. Constant exposure to these will only increase the sense of trauma.
- Seek balance in your life. When a tragedy occurs, it is easy to become obsessed, overwhelmed, and pessimistic. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.
- If problems persist, seek professional assistance. If you are having difficulty managing intense reactions to the tragedy and/or functioning in your daily activities, contact Brown Counseling and Psychological Services (863-3476), describe the situation, and ask for an emergency appointment.