

Division of International Programs

Tips, Strategies, and Resources on Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy for International Students, Faculty and Staff at Northern Illinois University

Introduction

You may already have seen several helpful handouts and other materials produced by NIU and sister institutions which are designed to help faculty, staff and students deal with the tragedy of February 14, 2008. The purpose of this handout is to address questions that may arise for those who share different cultural backgrounds from those typically found in the Midwest of the US. If you consider yourself an international student or an international faculty or staff member, this resource sheet is for you. Please apply the information in this handout in considering your unique needs or situations, and if you are not sure, please contact our office.

Different cultural responses

While all humans experience great sadness in the time of tragedy, we tend to express such feelings in ways that fit in with our individual cultures. Although there are significant individual variations, Americans in the US often respond to tragedy with a need or wish to get counseling or to share their feelings openly with others, who may or may not be close friends. Americans in the US often believe that if they can express their sadness clearly and openly, they will achieve healing and comfort more quickly. For that reason, sometimes Americans will ask persons of other cultures to talk more openly about sadness, which may leave them feeling very uncomfortable, confused, or possibly even quite vulnerable.

Sometimes (but not always) people prefer to keep their feelings private rather than to reveal or express them to casual friends or strangers; instead they will want to share their feelings only with a member of their extended family or with a very trusted friend of long standing. For this reason, counseling may sometimes be a difficult option for a person from another culture to choose. In addition, sometimes those from cultures outside the US will delay their reactions to a very sad event, such as our recent gun violence on campus, and will instead experience those reactions several weeks later.

It is most important for persons from all cultures (both inside and outside the US) to recognize that there are both individual and cultural aspects in responding to tragedy, and that these responses may differ significantly.

Counseling in the US context

There are many reasons why a person in the US might consult a counselor, including developmental, academic, and psychological issues. In addition, in times of death and tragedy, grief counseling is typically available to all members of the affected community. Many (but not all) Americans in the US consider counseling normal, appropriate, and helpful rather than something to be avoided. In other cultures, it can often carry stigma or embarrassment.

What's "normal"?

"Normal" is a term that many interculturalists believe can only be defined in the context of a particular culture. What is considered normal in the Midwest of the United States may not be normal in another country or another culture. Even within one culture, there is a great range of

individual behaviors that may be considered normal. If one person's response to tragedy is quite different from another's, both may represent quite normal occurrences.

How might US students react?

If you have teaching responsibilities, please be aware that your US students may or may not want to talk about the recent tragedy. They may express anger, they may want to identify someone to blame for the incident, or they may be significantly distracted. They may seek validation or agreement from you, which you do not necessarily need to provide. However, it is always a very good idea to respond to students' concerns with respect and a caring attitude. You may wish to refer them to various campus resources, listed below.

What do people expect of me?

If you haven't already done so, please inform your family immediately that you are safe. You may also want to reach other international faculty, staff or students you may know closely at NIU and offer any practical help they may need. If you think any of them need any assistance as a result of this tragedy, please refer them to our office.

If you are a student, we at NIU expect you to study hard and get good grades on your way to completing your degree objective. As a result of this tragedy, if you need any academic accommodations because of the changes in the semester schedule, please contact your faculty advisor or department chair. If you are from another country, we hope you will represent your family and your people well; however, you do not need to feel responsible to speak for your entire country. If you have teaching responsibilities, we want you to complete your duties in the classroom fully, in a way that respects the fact that all our students and colleagues at NIU are now dealing with a most significant loss. We do not expect you to serve as a professional counselor, so please feel free to refer individuals to the campus resources listed below.

Forward, Together Forward

Thank you for all of your good efforts as a student, teaching assistant, faculty or staff member. Please contact one of the offices below if you have questions or concerns.

Resources on campus

International Programs, 406 Williston Hall, 815-753-1346,
<http://www.niu.edu/international/index.shtml>

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, 319 Adams Hall, 815-753-0595, <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/resources/crisis>

Counseling & Student Development Center, 200 Campus Life Building, 815-753-1206, <http://www.niu.edu/csdc/>

Employee Assistance Program, Holmes Student Center 7th Floor,
815-753-9191, http://www.hr.niu.edu/departments/employee_wellness/



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