

Talking with Students About the Virginia Tech Tragedy

The effects of the April 16th shooting tragedy at Virginia Tech, where a student killed 32 people and injured scores of others, have left campuses reeling. In a society where we hear about violent acts all the time, this one hits so close to home. As you work to serve students during this difficult time, here are a few things to consider when discussing Virginia Tech:

- **Students May Know Someone.** The stories of “I have a friend at Virginia Tech” or “My roommate knows someone from high school in the VT engineering program” are numerous. When something of this magnitude occurs, many students are quick to make their connection to it. There is no right or wrong way to do this; it’s all part of students’ processes in making that all-important human connection.
- **They’re Going to Question Authority.** What is your campus doing to keep students safe so they don’t have to go through what Virginia Tech did? Why didn’t officials do more? How can we trust the people who are supposed to keep us safe? These questions and more may be on students’ minds—and there may be a blame game in the works. Try not to get defensive and just hear them out. Then, provide students with true, clear information about what’s being done on your campus to ensure their safety.

It Reminds Us of Columbine...

The 1999 shootings at Columbine High School that left 12 students and a teacher dead, plus the two gunmen, became a defining moment in the lives of many traditional-aged students. They were on the cusp of middle and high school themselves—and school didn’t feel so safe anymore.

Discussing the incident at Virginia Tech may naturally evoke reminders of Columbine, whether it rekindles feelings of fear, dread or profound sadness. Students may want to talk it out as they—and the media—ask: Why does this keep happening?

- **We All Need Reassurance.** When something as awful as the Virginia Tech shootings occurs, we need reassurance that we’re safe. Stress to students that your campus is made up of well-trained, caring individuals who are there because they want to work with students – and to help keep them safe and sound.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

People who have experienced a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a car crash, child abuse, rape, assault, or war may have flashbacks, nightmares, or a numbing of their emotions. They may also feel depressed, irritable, angry and easily startled or distracted.

- **It May Stir Up Difficult Memories.** Unfortunately, many of our students have experienced trauma of some kind. And an incident such as these shootings can trigger reminders, fears and concerns. If you suspect that someone may be experiencing a type of post-traumatic stress (see box), connect him or her with the counseling center as soon as possible.
- **There are Going to be Crude “Jokes.”** For some reason, there will be students who take what happened at Virginia Tech and turn it into insensitive remarks and jokes. It may be a coping mechanism. It may be unthinking action. Whatever it is, addressing these types of comments privately and calmly can help the student see how he/she is impacting the greater community. Be prepared.
- **Some May Seem to Brush It Off.** We all have different ways of coping and some students may exhibit bravado, like what happened at Virginia Tech is no big deal. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are heartless; it could just be their way of making sense of what happened. Or some students may not be ready to recognize the magnitude of the incident so they keep their emotions under wraps, not letting themselves “go there.” Keep an eye on these folks as they’ll likely need support when the reality does sink in.

All the best as you work with students to help them through this.

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