

What to Do Tonight: Preparing for the Return to Class

This week, instructors will be resuming their classes after the tragic events on August 28. Below are recommendations for immediate steps to take ahead of the first class meeting.

Communicating with Students

Prepare and distribute a brief email indicating your support and plans for the next class meeting. This will give students a clear understanding of what to expect. Consider including:

- An acknowledgement of the events
- Review of available resources
- Review of syllabus and plan moving forward
- Timeline for returning to instructional content

Sample Email Language: General*

“Dear Students,

I am writing to you with a heavy heart. I want to extend my sincere concern for you, your friends, and your family as we all cope with the tragic news this week. I have been thinking about our class and of each of you as I process the many thoughts and feelings I’m experiencing. We are just beginning to build our community this semester, but I hope you will find these new connections a source of support in the coming weeks.

We all process and experience such news in different ways depending on our histories and our current situations. My hope is you will grant yourself compassion knowing there is no right way to feel and respond. Whatever helps you to feel supported, connected, and safe is what is needed most. Please know that I care very much about you, and if you are feeling in need of support, I am available with a listening ear. I encourage you to reach out to one another to check in. The following resources are available to you:

- [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) are available to any students who need to speak with a mental health provider. CAPS can be reached via 919-966-3658 or caps@unc.edu.
- A University hotline is available for the entire Carolina community at 919-918-1999.
- The University’s website, unc.edu, will continue to share information about this tragic event as it becomes available, along with mental health resources.

As we prepare to return to the classroom, I look forward to being together soon. During our next class meeting, we will dedicate time to processing our grief together, although this discussion will be optional for those who are not ready to share their feelings with others. I am holding you in my thoughts.”

* Adapted with permission from: [Strategies for Supporting Our Students](#) by Carolyn Schuyler at the University of Virginia

Additional Language for Courses that Sheltered Together

“Being together in such frightening circumstances on Monday was certainly not the way we planned or hoped to begin our semester, but I hope you will find these new connections a source of support in the coming weeks.”

Additional Language if You Are Ready to Share Updates to the Syllabus

I am adjusting some of our course deadlines and policies to provide needed flexibility for us all as we cope. I ask that you extend patience and grace to me and to your classmates in adopting the following changes:

- *[Indicate course policy changes]*

What to Do Tomorrow: A 7-Step Approach to Returning to Class After a Tragedy*

As we return to class for the first time after the recent tragic event on campus, there are many considerations and concerns. Below are recommendations for how to structure the return to class for your students and yourselves, with trauma-informed considerations and best practices.

1) Before Your First Class Back

Before your first class back, prepare and distribute a brief email indicating how you plan to run class when you return. This will give students a clear understanding of what to expect. Consider including:

- An acknowledgement of the tragic events.
- Review [CFE Guide](#) on What to Do Tonight: Preparing for the Return to Class
- Review of the syllabus and the modified plans for moving forward.
- Emphasis on flexibility and choice. Inform your students of the intention to return to the classroom, and that students have the option of coming to the initial class. Provide information about any other flexibility that you are going to offer (e.g., will students have the opportunity to attend class remotely if they choose?).
- Move to continuing instructional content.

2) Beginning the First Class Back

At the start of your first class back, begin by thanking students for coming to the classroom space as they are.

- Approach the beginning of class with grace, humanity, and humility.
- Example Language: “Thank you all for being here today. I imagine it may be hard for some of you to be here right now, whether that’s in person or on Zoom. I know it is hard for me, as well. Today, we’re going to do the best we can, even if that’s messy.”

3) Acknowledge the Tragedy

Acknowledge the tragedy in plain, direct terms.

- Example Language: “Today, we’re back in class after the tragic and horrible events earlier this week. I want to just take a moment and acknowledge the loss of a fellow Tarheel. This loss will be with us in this class, and on campus, for the rest of this semester and beyond. I just want to recognize that, and that many of us may be having a range of feelings about that.”

* Adapted with permission from the Center for Teaching & Learning Innovation at [Michigan State University](#) | Written for the Spartans by Jason Moser, Jon Novello, Mark Patishnock, Joshua Turchan, Karen Stanley-Kime, and the University Health & Wellness departments.

4) Acknowledge and Validate Reactions

Acknowledge and validate that there are various reactions to trauma, and they have different trajectories over time for different people.

- There is a wide range of reactions that people may have to traumatic events, including anxious rumination, focused attention on studies, humor, to shutting down.
- By naming this in class, you let your students know that you are aware that whatever they are dealing with is okay.
- Let people know that no matter what reactions they are having, that if they need someone to talk with about this, top lease reach out to someone to get help.

5) Provide Information

Provide information and links to UNC resources and external supports

- [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) are available to any students who need to speak with a mental health provider. CAPS can be reached via 919-966-3658 or caps@unc.edu.
- These links describe common reactions and healthy habits to do/keep doing, leaning on ways one typically copes in positive ways (e.g., being with friends and loved-ones, social engagement, exercise, prayer)
 - [Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting](#) | American Psychological Association (apa.org)
 - [Tips for Survivors: Coping with Grief After a Disaster or Traumatic Event](#) | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (samhsa.gov)
 - [College Students: Coping After the Recent Shooting](#) | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org)

6) Frame a Discussion You Can Handle

Do not invite your students to have a discussion about their traumatic reactions if you do not have trauma-informed training or do not feel prepared to do so for any reason (e.g., the size of the class, students directly impacted).

Instead, consider the following:

- Invite/ask permission to shift to the educational/discovery content planned for the day
 - Example Language: “Now that we are all here in this learning space together, if you are ready, we will shift to the learning content for the day.”
 - Acknowledge how strange or difficult this sounds right now, while also giving permission for people to not be as focused or able to really learn right now as they might typically be able to be.
 - Example Language: “It might be hard to learn right now because of distraction or stress or other trauma-related symptoms, and that’s okay.”
 - Let students know that they can feel free to take a break if they want to or leave at any time.
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7) Demonstrate Grace

Demonstrate grace, humanity, humility, and flexibility with class attendance, coursework, and so on, in line with university guidance. Again, try to recognize that everyone is trying to cope right now, and that some students won't be at their best for some time.

Final Considerations

We know that humans experience a variety of emotions following traumatic events. These feelings can include shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief, and others. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating, or remembering even simple tasks. This is common.

There are several ways that students, and everyone, can take care of themselves that help to facilitate healing. This is called **natural recovery**. The following factors are thought to help with natural recovery:

- **Social support**, including:
 - Believing that other people care about you and will be there if you need them
 - Being able to talk about the trauma and your reactions to it with supportive people
 - Having supporters who avoid reacting in unhelpful ways when told about the trauma
 - **Getting back to one's life**, including:
 - Returning to your routine, such as going to work or school, doing chores and maintaining a sleep schedule
 - Not avoiding reminders of the trauma
 - Staying connected to friends and other important people
 - **Making meaning of what happened**, including:
 - Finding helpful and realistic ways to fit the trauma into the way you think about yourself, other people, and the world
 - Noticing unhelpful thoughts that get in the way of making meaning, such as self-blame, and finding more helpful thoughts
 - Looking for examples of ways that you did your best or coped well
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What To Do Moving Forward: Strategies for Course Policy Modifications After a Crisis*

In addition to caring for your own well-being and openly acknowledging a tragic event with your students, there are a number of tangible ways instructors might consider modifying their syllabus or lesson plans immediately after a crisis on their campus. This resource contains examples of policies and adaptations you may consider. These strategies and ideas are not meant to be read as recommendations that every instructor should adopt, but rather as possibilities that instructors can individually assess and adapt to their own teaching context where appropriate.

When modifying your course policies or syllabus after a crisis, it is helpful to keep a few basic principles of trauma-aware pedagogy in mind. The overarching aim of these principles is to cultivate a sense of safety in the classroom, especially when this sense of safety may have been disrupted by traumatic events. Some key principles of trauma-informed teaching include:

1. **Empathy** – take time to understand what students are experiencing and allow them to process those experiences together.
2. **Flexibility** – be patient and forgiving with students if they can't progress through the course as you initially imagined they would.
3. **Autonomy** – give students choices about their engagement, work, and participation that can help them feel in control.
4. **Clarity** – reduce unknowns by over-communicating about what will stay the same and what will change as a result of the event.
5. **Transparency** – be transparent about why you chose to respond to the event in the way that you did.
6. **Consistency** – be as predictable and reliable as possible, perhaps leaning on existing classroom habits or routines to create a sense of familiarity.

Learn more about [Trauma-Informed Pedagogy](#) from the University of Michigan. Next, you will find concrete examples of ways you might consider embedding these principles into your class.

Modifying the Course Content & Timeline

- If classes are canceled due to a crisis, communicate to students where you plan to pick up after classes resume in terms of content and activities.
- Consider pushing the course plan back a week rather than asking students to prepare for two weeks at once (e.g., the week that was missed and the current week). Then identify content to skip later on, if possible.
 - Explain to students why you chose to cut that section and provide a few resources for them to study on their own if they're interested.
 - Revise assessments accordingly so that students aren't evaluated on material not covered.

* Adapted from: [Course Policy Modifications After a Crisis: Practical Strategies for Returning to Class](#) by Michael McCreary at Michigan State University | Creative Commons BY-NC-SA

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- Review your course learning goals and think about what is truly necessary and what can be left out this time. Students' cognitive load will be reduced after a crisis and class time might be better spent focusing on a few key topics rather than trying to get everything covered.
 - Reduce the quantity of readings and other work required for students to prepare for class where possible.

Modifying Assessments

- Consider emphasizing low-stakes formative assessments like in-class activities and discussion posts over high-stakes summative assessments like quizzes and exams. This could be done by allowing students to choose to weight their formative assessments more heavily or by making certain summative assessments optional.
 - Reduce anxiety of high-stakes tests by making them take-home, or allowing students to choose a certain number of questions or problems on an existing exam to respond to as opposed to taking the entire thing.
- Consider grading certain assessments pass/fail.
- Make sure to revise assessments to ensure they don't evaluate students on material that may have been skipped or not covered in detail due to an altered schedule.
- Consider giving students options about how and when to complete existing assessments.
 - For example, allowing them to work individually or in groups. Or allowing them to submit in various formats (written, video, audio, creative, etc.)
 - Create new deadlines for existing assessments in conversation with students.
- If using grading rubrics, consider how to adjust expectations in light of the situation, and communicate any changes to students.

Modifying Late Work Policies

- Consider removing late work penalties, where possible. Ask students to stay in touch with you if they need an extension.
- Give students the option to throw out a certain number of assessments, or for certain assessments to be graded pass/fail.

Modifying Attendance and Participation Policies

- Consider dropping or loosening any required attendance policies. For example, increase the number of days that can be missed before incurring a penalty. You may decide to ask students to email you or their TA, when possible, if they need to miss class. Make explicit that they do not need to provide a reason for missing class.
 - Clearly explain to students what they need to do to make up for any classes they may miss. Try to be respectful of students' cognitive load as you create this policy so that work doesn't pile up when they miss class.
 - Consider giving everyone full credit for the "participation" score of their grade, or provide students with a variety of options about what will count as participation, especially for those who do not feel like speaking in class.
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What to Do for Yourself: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself During Stressful Times*

1) Stop, breathe, and tell yourself “This is hard and I will get through it one step at a time.”

During an unexpected event or crisis, we are faced with dealing with a new reality and it takes time to incorporate what happened into our everyday lives. Identify the steps you need to take first, write them down, and focus on each step one at a time to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Remember you can only do one thing at a time, so help yourself focus exclusively on that one thing.

2) Acknowledge to yourself what you are feeling.

All feelings are normal. Accept whatever you are feeling. Once you recognize, name, and accept your feelings, you may feel less out of control. You can then find a comfortable place to express your feelings. During periods of extreme stress and grief, it is very hard to hold back your feelings, particularly your tears and anger. This is normal, so describe this as grieving or sadness or anger. You are not falling apart, you are grieving or feeling angry-sadness. It is important during this time of intense feelings to own your feelings and not hurt yourself or lash out at someone else.

3) Find someone who listens and is accepting.

You don't need advice. You need to be heard. Sharing your story is how you begin to accept whatever happened and integrate it into your new reality. It may be that you need to let go of your expectations of how things should be. Talking about your feelings and beliefs is the beginning of that process.

4) Maintain your normal routine as much as possible.

Familiar activities like making everyday decisions, getting dressed, doing dishes, or going to work, for example, may give you a sense of control and feels comforting. Be realistic with what you can do and remember that everything will take you longer than usual to complete. Avoid making major decisions based on the stress you feel right now.

5) Allow plenty of time for a task.

During periods of extreme stress, prolonged stress or after a crisis, your ability to concentrate and focus on tasks is diminished. It will take time for your concentration to return, and you will not be as productive as you normally are. Accept how much you can do right now and recognize it will not be this way forever. Give yourself extra time and be gentle and accepting of yourself and what you can do, especially when it comes to preparing course materials and grading student work. Be patient with yourself and give yourself extra time for these instructional activities.

6) Take good care of yourself.

Remember to:

- **Get enough rest and sleep.** Sleep is how our body heals and strengthens our immune system. Consider your normal sleep patterns and ensure you aren't sleeping significantly more or less than usual. If you are having difficulty sleeping, listening to peaceful, slow music and/or do progressive relaxation just before you go to sleep. If you have a lot of tasks on your mind, write a to-do list for the next day before trying to go to bed.
- **Eat regularly and make healthy choices.** Skipping meals, particularly breakfast, contributes to fatigue, mood swings, and poor concentration. Be mindful of how your mood may be affecting your dietary decisions, and try to stick with your normal routine.
- **Know your limits and when you need to let go.** Some problems are beyond our control. If something cannot be changed, work at accepting it for what it is. Resist the urge to fix the unfixable or try to control the uncontrollable. Sometimes a mantra helps: "It is what it is, I just need to accept it." For things within your control, remember that change takes time. If you are holding on and need to let go, journal about what you are feeling.
- **Identify or create a nurturing place in your home.** A rocking chair, a nice view, and soothing music are important components to a nurturing place. Twenty minutes of rocking in a rocking chair reduces both your physical pain and anxiety. It is like giving yourself a hug. Music and nature sounds nurture our being and lifts our spirits.
- **Practice relaxation or meditation.** Go to your nurturing place and listen to guided relaxation tapes. Time spent in meditation or prayer allows your mind and body to slow down and let go of the stress. Take a mental vacation in the midst of stress by relaxing your body, shutting your eyes and visualizing yourself in your favorite vacation spot or quiet haven.
- **Moderate your use of social media.** Be mindful of the effects of engaging with particular platforms. Are you able to use them to find connection, community, and support, or are they creating more stress and anxiety at this time? If the latter is true, seek healthier alternatives like meditation, time with friends, reading, movies, or exercise.

Additional Resources

For UNC employees, the [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP) has counseling support available online through GuidanceConnect. Log on to guidanceresources.com with a username and password or register with Web ID: TARHEELS. You may also call 877-314-5841 to make an appointment with a counselor. Support is free and confidential.

Explore additional support for [Well-Being](#) available through UNC's [Faculty Support Hub](#).
