

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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