

# The Counseling Center

## Hours:

Mon., Wed., Thurs.,  
8am-6pm  
Tues., 8am-7pm  
Fri., 8am-5pm

## Services:

- Individual short-term counseling
- Group counseling
- Couple's counseling

For reasonable accommodations, please call 813-974-9271.

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## Taking Care of Your Emotional Health after a Difficult Event

### **EACH POSITIVE ACTION YOU TAKE CAN HELP YOU FEEL BETTER AND MORE IN CONTROL.**

Tragedy can bring about significant stress. This is especially true if you have experienced a previous difficult event. The good news is that many people have experience coping with stressful life events and are naturally resilient—meaning we are designed to bounce back from difficult times. Here is some information on how to recognize your current feelings and tips for taking care of the emotional health of you, your family and your friends.

### **What you may be feeling now**

When we experience a disaster or other stressful life event, we can have a variety of reactions. Many of these are common responses to difficult situations. These reactions can include:

- Feeling physically and mentally drained.
- Having difficulty making decisions or staying focused on topics.
- Feelings that are intense and unpredictable.
- Frustration occurring more quickly and more often.
- Arguing more with family and friends.
- Feeling tired, sad, numb, lonely or worried.
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or sleep patterns.
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches, nausea, or chest pain.

Most of these reactions are temporary and will go away over time. Try to accept whatever reactions you may have and take small steps toward recovery. Some suggestions are listed below.

### **Counseling Center**

813-974-2831 • [usf.edu/counsel](http://usf.edu/counsel)  
SVC2124



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## Taking Care of Your Emotional Health after a Difficult Event

### How to Feel Better

**Take care of your safety.** Find a safe place to stay and make sure your physical health needs and those of your family are addressed. Seek medical attention, if necessary.

**Eat healthy.** During times of stress, try to maintain a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.

**Rest.** With so much to do, it may be difficult to have enough time to rest or get adequate sleep. Giving your body and mind a break can boost your ability to cope with the stress you may be experiencing.

**Limit your exposure to the news.** Repeatedly exposing yourself to upsetting photographs and videos can make it more difficult to recover.

**Stay connected with family and friends.** Giving and getting support is one of the most important things you can do.

**Be patient with yourself and with those around you.** Recognize that everyone is stressed and may need some time to put their feelings and thoughts in order. Journaling can be very helpful.

**Set priorities.** Tackle tasks in small steps.

**Gather information** about assistance and resources that will help you and your family members meet your disaster-related needs.

**Stay positive.** Remind yourself of how you've successfully gotten through difficult times in the past. Reach out when you need support, and help others when they need it.

### If you still don't feel better ...

Many people have experience coping with stressful life events and typically feel better after a few days. Others find that their stress does not go away as quickly as they would like and it influences their relationships with their family, friends and others. If you find yourself or a loved one experiencing some of the feelings and reactions listed below for 2 weeks or longer, this may be a sign that you need to reach out for additional assistance.

- Crying spells or bursts of anger
- Difficulty eating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Losing interest in things
- Increased physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches
- Fatigue
- Feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless
- Avoiding family and friends

For additional help, you can contact the **Counseling Center 813-974-2831** located at **SVC 2124**.

Please seek immediate help if you or someone you know is feeling that life isn't worth living or if you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others. You can also contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or [SuicidePreventionLifeline.org](http://SuicidePreventionLifeline.org).

Adapted from Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services. (2013). A Psychological First Aid Guide for Ohio College and Universities: Supporting Students, Faculty and Staff After a Crisis or Other Emergency. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Department of Mental Health.

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## Faculty and Staff: Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy

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### HOW TO HELP YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS COPE

#### **On the first day back**

##### ***Take time to talk as a group.***

Provide a brief opportunity at the beginning of a class to acknowledge the tragic event and suggest that it might be helpful to share personal reactions.

##### ***Have students discuss “facts” first, then shift to emotions.***

People are more comfortable discussing “facts” and the details of the event than feelings. After facts have been discussed, you can shift the discussion toward sharing personal and emotional reactions.

##### ***Invite students to share emotional, personal responses.***

You might lead off by saying something like: “Often it is helpful to share your own emotional responses and hear how others are responding. It doesn’t change the reality, but it takes away the sense of loneliness that sometimes comes with stressful events. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share.”

##### ***Respect the way each person copes with the loss.***

Some will be more vocal or expressive than others with their feelings and thoughts. Everyone is affected differently and reacts differently.

##### ***Be prepared for blaming.***

When people are angry or upset, they often look for someone to blame. If the discussion gets “stuck” with blaming, it might be useful to say: “We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and that’s not unusual. It might be useful to talk about our fears.”

##### ***Understand that it is normal to seek an “explanation.”***

We often believe if we can explain event we can prevent it from happening again. We want to comfort ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future, if only we could explain it. However, tragedies are difficult to explain. Uncertainty is very upsetting, but sometimes inevitable.

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## Faculty and Staff: Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy

### ***Thank students for sharing and remind them of resources on campus.***

When ending the discussion, you can remind them that people cope in a variety of ways. Campus resources that might help include campus ministries, residence life staff, and the Counseling Center, among others.

### **In the following weeks**

#### ***Make contact with students who appear to be coping in unhealthy ways.***

Examples of unhealthy coping include too much isolation, excessive alcohol use, or uncharacteristically throwing themselves into work. We can assist in getting help for the student.

#### ***Find ways of memorializing the loss, if appropriate.***

It can be especially difficult if someone known to your student was a victim. After the initial shock has worn off, it may be helpful to find a way of honoring and remembering the person in a way that is tangible and meaningful to the group.

### ***Be flexible.***

Many who are directly affected by the tragedy may need temporary changes in their workload, living arrangements, and expectations of themselves. People usually have a hard time functioning as well when dealing with an emotional situation.

### ***Give yourself time to reflect.***

Remember that you have feelings and thoughts about what occurred, too. They should be taken seriously, not only for yourself, but also for the sake of your students. Some find it helpful to write down or talk out their thoughts and feelings.

### ***Come back to the feelings as a group at a later time.***

It is important to acknowledge the adjustments people have made. Just because everything seems to be back to normal does not mean that everyone has finished having feelings about the loss.

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## Working Through Grief

### **GRIEF IS A NATURAL AND NORMAL REACTION TO LOSS.**

Grief can bring a wide range of emotions: From numbness to deep sadness or anger. It is difficult to predict how you or another person will respond to a death or a traumatic event. How you grieve may depend on many factors, including life experience, culture, faith and personality. There is not a “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. It is important to allow yourself permission to respond in your own way. There are many healthy ways to cope with grief and resources if you need them.

#### **Common grief reactions:**

Here are some common feelings and responses that you may experience. Often, reactions may come and go in the grieving process.

#### ***Shock and Disbelief***

This is a typical first reaction after learning of a loss. It's nature's way of protecting you from the impact of the loss for a while. You may:

- Have trouble believing the individual is gone.
- Feel numb or like you're on “auto-pilot.”
- Have a sense of being in a dream.

#### ***Anger or Resentment***

This is common, even if there is no one to blame for the death. You may:

- Feel like a great injustice has been done.
- Be angry at doctors, teachers, friends, relatives and others.
- Resent the individual for leaving you.

#### ***Guilt***

It's normal to regret things you did or didn't say, do or feel. Some people may regret or feel guilty for:

- Not doing something (or not doing more) to prevent the death.
- Not saying goodbye.
- Having arguments with the individual while he or she was alive.

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# Working Through Grief

## **Fear**

A death can cause you to feel worried, panicky or helpless. You may:

- Feel unable to handle new responsibilities.
- Worry that you're losing your mind.
- Have fears about your own death or others close to you.
- Have difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

## **Deep Sadness**

Sadness may be a constant presence or hit you in waves. It's common to feel:

- Lonely, like there's a hole in the center of your life.
- A deep yearning, like you are reliving all the sadness you've ever had in your life.

## **Physical Problems**

Grief can cause a variety of physical symptoms, including:

- Headache and extreme tiredness.
- Upset stomach and loss of appetite.

## **Coping with grief can bring hope and personal growth.**

In time, the future begins to look hopeful, even though you may still ache for your loss. Working through your grief may give you new strengths and insights. You may find it helpful to:

- Reach out to people that you trust.
- Keep a journal to express your thoughts and feelings.

- Practice good nutrition and regular exercise.
- Rest your body and mind with relaxation and good sleep.

## **Know when to ask for help.**

Seeking support is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign that you are taking responsibility for your recovery.

## **Get help if:**

- You want to make sure your grief responses are normal.
- Your grief feels like it's too much to bear.
- Your grief is causing problems at school, work, in a relationship or in other areas of your life.
- You feel "stuck" as if the sadness and anger is not going away.
- You use -- or feel the urge to use -- alcohol or other drugs to cope with your pain.
- You begin withdrawing from family and friends.
- You have any thoughts of suicide. Please seek immediate help if you or someone you know is feeling that life isn't worth living or if you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others. You can also contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or [SuicidePreventionLifeline.org](http://SuicidePreventionLifeline.org).

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