

## Responding to the Fire in the Classroom: Short-term Response

The Camp Fire has shaken the very core of the campus community. Students, faculty, and staff alike have suffered devastating loss. As the campus continues to respond to the needs of the community, many of us are beginning to wonder: How will I address this in the classroom?

As a faculty member in the Psychology department and Marriage and Family Therapy program, as well as a licensed therapist, I've compiled the following information as a resource for faculty navigating these vulnerable moments in our classrooms.

The first few days back on campus may feel tense. For many students, this will be their first time returning to campus and the greater community. The temptation to jump directly back into course material and learning is noted. All of our courses have missed multiple days of instruction, and the desire to "make-up lost time" is understandable. Furthermore, it might seem advisable to help students cope by proceeding with "business as usual," however, I caution you from moving too quickly back into course material without a period of intentional transition. For some students, diving back into course material might be a welcome distraction, while for others, this might devalue or overlook their experience. Although no one expects faculty to be the frontline providers for treating deeply felt emotional distress (more on that later), as professors, we are given the privilege of influence over our students. Thus, developing an intentional plan of how to transition back into the classroom will not only demonstrate care and compassion for your students, but set them up for eventual success in your class.

Here are some tips for navigating through that first class back:

*(Note: Adapted from information provided by the CDC: Psychological First Aid program, APA and HHS publications)*

- 1. Talk:** Students will be unsure how to respond to this event in the classroom or lab. Many will be expecting to immediately move back into course material and assignments. One way you might consider facilitating a conversation is by starting with your own experience of the fire. This is not to make the conversation about you, but rather to model for students that class will be an open and safe space for discussion about the fire. I recognize too that all of you are also dealing with your own feelings of loss and/or experiencing other strong emotional reactions. If opening up to your students about your own experience isn't comfortable, let them know that, while simultaneously asking for their responses.
- 2. Listen:** Allow students the space to discuss their feelings and concerns regarding the fire. Listen, empathize, and let their questions/comments be the guide. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected. Dissuade students from getting caught up in "blame" oriented discussion (i.e. who started the fire or who is liable); these might be valuable later on, but for now, it is more important students feel safe to speak from a personal place.
- 3. Connect:** Again, no one expects your classroom to become the primary space of healing from this trauma, however, you are in a position to help connect students to resources that may prove useful in their recovery. Below I will outline some typical and atypical responses to trauma, and when it might be advisable to encourage students to seek further help. Beyond counseling, you might consider taking the time to familiarize yourself with campus

and local resources available to students in need. Furthermore, encourage students to connect with one another in healthy ways during this difficult time. Our greatest strength right now is each other.

**If you haven't already, familiarize yourself with the [Wildcat Rise](#) campus initiative and encourage your students to do the same.**

Recognize, too, that students will be coping with this event well into the academic year, and reserving time and space in the first class alone may be insufficient.

In an effort to help better understand our shared experience, I have include some basic information about trauma.

### **Understanding Trauma**

According to the American Psychological Association, **trauma** is a response to a life-threatening or distressing event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Individuals may experience intense responses to trauma for weeks and months following the incident. **Responses to trauma range widely, but can include:**

- Feeling anxious, sad, or angry
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping and/or relaxing
- Continually thinking about what happened (ruminating)

Responses to trauma are natural and expected, and do not necessarily represent problematic symptoms. For most, these responses reduce over time, and are aided by the implementation of healthy coping behaviors. You can encourage your students to be intentional with coping behavior as well as staying away from unhelpful coping (i.e. using drugs or alcohol).

As noted, experiencing trauma itself does not guarantee the development of PTSD or problematic emotional/behavioral responses. However, faculty should be aware of when of warning signs for potentially hazardous responses to trauma that may indicate the **development of a post-traumatic stress response:**

- Excessive/obtrusive worry
- Crying often
- Trouble thinking clearly
- Reliving the experience (flashbacks)
- Excessive anger
- Nightmares and/or difficulty sleeping
- Avoiding places or people that bring back disturbing memories and responses.
- Headaches, nausea, or other somatic responses.

Furthermore, the National Association of School Psychologist recommend looking out for the following potential **warning signs of serious emotional trauma:**

- Disruption in peer relationships (little or no interactions with friends, significant increase in conflict with classmates or friend).
- Strained family relationships (high degree of misbehavior, lashing out against family members, refusal to participate in normal family routines).
- Significant decrease in school performance.
- Ongoing physical complaints with no apparent cause.
- Use of alcohol or other drugs (or increase in comparison to previous behavior).
- Repeated nightmares and reporting strong fears of death, violence, etc.
- Repetitive play re-enacting the traumatic events.
- Low self esteem, negative talk about self (if this was not apparent prior to the trauma).
- General lack of energy and lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities.

If you encounter students who display these behaviors, please encourage them to seek further resources such as individual or group counseling.

For a more in depth look at one faculty's response to working with trauma in the classroom, read: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/04/07/how-professors-can-best-respond-when-students-experience-trauma-essay>

**References/Resources:**

<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx>

<https://www.donorschoose.org/blog/5-teacher-lessons-from-disasters/>

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/trauma/managing-strong-emotional-reactions-to-traumatic-events-tips-for-families-and-teachers>

<https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/mental-health-resources/trauma-disaster#>

<https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/mental-health-resources/trauma-disaster#disaster>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors>

<https://ct.counseling.org/2017/07/lending-helping-hand-disasters-wake/>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events/index.shtml>