

**Guidelines for Helping College Students
in the Aftermath of the Shooting at Virginia Tech**

No one could have imagined that this could happen. The magnitude of the shooting at Virginia Tech makes it difficult to know how best to support these young adults. This guideline is a starting place for parents of college students and adults who work with college students to begin to address how this assaults their sense of safety in the world. There are some over-arching issues that come into play.

College years are supposed to be when youth are really individuated from their parents. Yet events like this often bring young adults to need most of all to reconnect with family. This is a time to help students connect with those who are primary support. Depending on past history, the proximity to the event and many other factors, some may want to go home for a time and some may need reassurance over the phone more often.

Routine gives us a sense of security. Having something like this occur anywhere is terrible. Encourage these young people to do those things that provide a sense of routine and predictability in their lives.

Encourage them to turn off the TV! There is a psychological saturation that comes from watching news coverage of these events, and the healthiest way to take in information about these overwhelming events is to get the information from radio or reading, and then to discuss it with others. Brains function in a more openly receptive mode with no time between graphic images for critical thinking. The horror of the event reaches the parts of the brain most susceptible to nightmares and flashbacks when we watch television coverage. All of us need to limit our diet of television coverage.

Opportunities for youth to gather are crucial. All colleges would do well to offer both faith-based support and forums or other student gatherings. You don't have to have answers. You just need to show up for them. Bring them together. Allow them to have space to talk and know that you're really listening. It is very possible to frame these such that the focus isn't on blame, but on what troubles us and how we might address this. Some of the messages that might be helpful at forums could include:

- An administrator voices appreciation for students coming together at a time such as this.
- Make a statement of observation: This was just beyond what any of us believed would happen. The magnitude is great, and it hits close to home when it is another university.
- Normalize reactions: When things like this happen, some of us are shaken to the core, some are profoundly sad, some feel anxious, and some may be less bothered than others. There is a wide range of reactions we might be seeing in one another.
- Reinforce the value of community: These are the times we all pull together. These are the times that we lean on one another. We at the university want to entirely avail ourselves to you a time when we can all begin to look at why and how these things happen and how this impacts all of us. Even though we have no answers that can make it all better, coming together is the beginning of moving forward to a better place.
- If the group is small enough to have open discussion, you might frame it specifically enough that there is some focus, at least at first. There are often two categories of concerns that students voice. Some are problems that can be addressed and others are fears or anxieties with which we must learn to live. It is empowering if you can label those that are problems that can be addressed.. So a good place to begin might be: What can we do that can help you all feel safe right now? What troubles you in terms of campus life about which we could do something? Draw out their suggestions about whether they want extra security for dorms at night, etc.
- Then you might move into the other aspect: What is it about what happened today that troubles you most? For some students it might be existential - that there is such violence in the world. For others it may be closer to home, yet without a solution. How can I know if I can trust boys that I meet and might want to date? If it is possible to have counselors, chaplains and other adult support, students could break into small groups for this part and have it be more of a discussion, but it is probably best

for there to be some adult guidance or support in that process. It can still work well as a large group (or even auditorium level) discussion. Have cordless mics so students can be heard if in a large group. For many students, **this may be the first time they've been away from home and faced a major fear on their own.** Listen closely so you can help guide and support them, and normalize that it isn't unusual for the distance from home to feel greater at times like this.

Resist the impulse to always have an answer. We often feel that we need to have an answer or to take away the pain... to give hope when there is fear. Sometimes this is our own discomfort in seeing children suffer. Voice your belief that we get through these things together, and that somehow, we'll cope and recover.

Entertainment and diversion are helpful. It is really important to have breaks from the grieving, the worry, the event. Go out for pizza... go to non-violent, light and entertaining movies. Taking a break isn't disrespectful -- it allows us to recharge our energies. The bad news isn't going away. The breaks just give us time to regenerate so we can continue to cope. That means that parents need breaks, too.

How to get students to talk when they don't seem to want to? Often it is because we ask questions that are quite direct, like "Are you worried about a school shooting happening on our campus?" or "Are you fearful of sleeping in the dorm?" A way of asking those questions in a way that feels safer to answer is to ask for their insight. "What kinds of things do you think college kids are worried about? What do you think the our students would like us to know?" This strategy **gives them a full "step" of distance** from the question, making it less personal. By doing this, they can talk about their fears without feeling so vulnerable, because they are thinking of it as though they're speaking for others. **And a great question for students....** "What do you most wish adults understood about what it is like to be a college student today?"

The fastest way to keep kids from talking more once they open up is to give advice or try to take away their pain. Of course you want to take away the pain and fear. But the most empowering part of this is for kids to talk without interruption about how this is for them. Don't rush in with advice on why they don't have to worry. Ask questions like, "Can you help me understand more about that?" or "When you think about that, what is the next thing that comes to mind?"

Often emotions are so overwhelming that staying more cognitive is helpful. That means focusing on what students think instead of what they feel part of the time. Often emotions defy description and sometimes it makes us feel vulnerable to focus on feelings. Try asking some questions that are more cognitive than emotion-based, such as questions about what they think instead of what they feel, what anyone can do now that will help, how you can help them plan how to feel safer. This sometimes brings a sense of control that then allows children to talk about feelings more easily. Alternate focus on thoughts and feelings.

Reassure students that, although this was terrifying, it is extremely unusual for people to be so mentally upset and out of control that they will do this sort of thing. Although at some points in people's greatest desperation, many may contemplate what it would be like to do something hurtful, very few actually follow through. Help them discern the difference in "everyday anger" that we all have and how this is different. Don't make promises you can't keep, however, so don't promise it won't happen.

To some degree, students will do as well as the adults around them. Take care of yourself. Remember not to voice your fears to them; voice your concerns to other adults who can give you support, but don't feed them to your children! Voice confidence in their safety at college.

Visit our web site at <www.cmionline.org> and look on the home page in the lower right corner for the "free downloads" link. There are other helpful guidelines for parents and others on helping children cope at difficult times. And remember! Your children are lucky to have you as caring parents and concerned university staff. Together you can make a difference that neither of you can make alone. Reach out and be part of what brings support to all of the students. Really, all kids are "our kids."

