



## *Addressing Needs for Support During Diverse Trauma and Distress*

### **Background:**

Over the coming weeks, we can anticipate the possibility of substantial distress among staff, students, and faculty, especially those who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ+, and others vulnerable to varied injustices. Although the Chauvin verdict was seen as a step toward accountability, uncertainty as to appeals and sentencing as well as whether it will lead to meaningful change leave many deeply troubled. Additionally, re-traumatization from the trial may affect ourselves and our colleagues. More distress may also come from the killings by police of Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo, possible outrage over charges brought in those cases, and the killings in the Indianapolis FedEx. As all of these unrelenting events may unfortunately become politicized instead of sparking action by politicians, additional outrage and distress may emerge. All of this, of course, accentuates the stressors in our community emanating from finishing a semester amidst the broadly lethal and still rampant COVID-19.

Understandably, many of us already feel stretched to our limits. Nevertheless, supervisors, leaders of student groups, course instructors, department chairs and division heads, and other leaders can be helpful by creating opportunities for people to come together just to have an opportunity to share feelings and perhaps talk about things they can do to address their concerns. Addressing these anxieties, instead of ignoring the elephant in the room, may be a welcome relief in the days and weeks ahead.

**Key Observations:** When distress is shared and substantial, facilitating a supportive discussion requires little more than arranging time and venue. Participants will find what they want to say and share with little prompting.

### **Tips for How to Be a Friend**

**Simply providing your friends, classmates, or colleagues an opportunity to talk may be helpful.**

- Your role is to be a friend, not to have all the answers – you can even have questions! The point is to connect.
- Small gestures can mean a lot – texts or voicemails indicating you are thinking of folks and happy to talk if they like.
- If you are not part of the group that is suffering, your outreach may be best focused on your close friends. Those who are struggling may feel it intrusive to receive individual expressions of concern from those they don't know well and who may not have a good understanding of how they are feeling.
- Don't try to make wise comments about the significance or meaning of events. Those who feel violated or vulnerable need the opportunity to sort through their own feelings, not to feel pushed to adopt someone else's.
- Support people's feeling that events have really upset them and reduced their ability to get things done. Encourage them not to feel they must go on as if nothing has happened. If you are in the position to do so, make clear what kind of tangible support you can offer – time off, extension of deadlines, cancellation of meetings, etc.

Trying to reach out and be supportive can be intimidating. We want to make things better, not “say the wrong thing.” Give yourself some slack; you're trying your best so don't let it get you down. Your friends will appreciate your efforts, even if imperfect.

At the bottom of this document are resources you might find helpful on campus and in the community.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Extend the same help to yourself you would give to others:

- Allow yourself to experience and feel your reactions – give yourself time and literal or psychological “space” for this
- Don’t judge your feelings or try to squeeze them into what you may think is the right way to feel
- Recognize that the stressors or traumas you are experiencing may undercut your ability to get things done. Give yourself a break
- Feel free to tell colleagues or supervisors that you are struggling, that you will do your best but may need a bit of time to adjust or may not be up to your usual standards.

## Suggestions for Mutual Support within Departments, Schools, or other Units

- Don’t assume the opinions of people in attendance, especially political or spiritual views.
- Consider developing supportive listening sessions or support “Pods” for groups with shared concerns, e.g., African American or Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islander staff/students/faculty. You can access a more detailed set of instructions for initiating such a Pod on [our website](#).
- If you recognize that a group of staff, students, faculty, or combinations of these are feeling very stressed, use listservs or other channels to announce a drop-in Zoom opportunity (or other simple gathering) to get together and share feelings.
- You may want to co-facilitate or delegate the role to a trusted or natural leader of the group.
- For convenience, schedule perhaps as many as 2 hours. Consider also multiple time slots.
- Keep it very informal – videos optional.
- Encourage confidentiality – what’s said in the meeting stays in the meeting; don’t allow recording.
- If necessary, prompt discussion with simple questions or probes, e.g., “I know lots of us are deeply troubled...” “What are you all feeling?” “What concerns do you have, not only for yourselves but perhaps for your colleagues or families?”
- Depending on the group and perhaps how conversation emerges, you may want to set some ground rules, e.g.:
  - Assume motivations of all are sincere
  - Don’t challenge or attack each other
  - Give all a chance to speak and finish what they have to say.

## Possible Problems

- To avoid Zoom bombing, use a password for your meeting or consider registration for the Zoom link.
- If an individual is greatly upset, consider using the chat function to offer to talk with them individually after the meeting or, if a natural link appears, suggest that one of the other group members talk with them separately.
- If a conflict emerges, you will need to step in to keep things from escalating and keep individuals from feeling especially hurt or attacked. Here are some suggested ways to step in:
  - If you haven’t already, suggest some ground rules. If you have, re-visit the ground rules.
  - Suggest a cooling-off period for the whole group of a minute or so.
  - Ask someone who is not a party to the conflict to summarize in as neutral terms as possible what they see as the key concerns or differences that have emerged, or do this yourself.
  - If necessary, ask **both** conflicting groups just to listen for a few minutes and then come back to them to restate their concerns or feelings.
  - If necessary, you may need to ask someone to hold off on further comments or even to leave the meeting, but this is unlikely. Should it become necessary, tell them you will contact them afterward to hear them out and be sure to do so promptly.

## Resources for Further Support

- Students: CAPS 24/7 at 919-966-3658, [CAPS Multicultural Health Program](#), [Dean of Students team](#), the [Office for Diversity and Inclusion](#), or [Student Wellness](#)
- Faculty and Staff: [University Ombuds Office](#), [Employee Assistance Program’s GuidanceResources](#) counselors are available 24/7 at 877-314-5841 (for faculty, staff, and their family members)
- Well-Being Resources compiled by: [UNC Faculty Council for the UNC Community](#), [NAMI for Black individuals](#)