How to Help a Student Who Has Experienced Trauma or Violence

1. **Know How Trauma Can Occur and What It May Look Like**

Trauma, in part, can occur from both direct violence and abuse as well as when a loved one or community has been violated, or experienced a traumatic event. Trauma can show up in a lot of ways, from difficulty doing schoolwork and isolating socially to having a change in behaviors as the person tries to manage the things that remind them of the violence or abuse they experienced.

2. **Respect the Trust It Takes for the Student To Confide in You**

If a student comes to you, know that it may be difficult for them to discuss what they are feeling. It takes courage for a person to confide in another - they may wonder if the person they are confiding in can sit with their story and listen to their pain without judgment. You can say something like, “Thank you for trusting me to hear your story.” Then, when listening, remember to breathe and stay focused on the person and their story.

3. **Listen and Empathize**

Listening is one of the best things you can do. Use active listening skills to demonstrate you care. Allow the person to share what they are comfortable sharing; don’t push for details. Also, you don’t have to try to fill in silence. Silence may mean they are gathering their thoughts or feeling an emotion. You may want to reflect how painful it must be for them. You don’t have to “fix it” or make the trauma go away. You may affirm that what they and their community are going through is difficult, and acknowledge that their feelings are valid.

4. **Stay Calm and Non-Judgmental**

Now is not the time to react to the trauma a person is sharing, nor to rush toward an action plan. Show genuine emotion, and stay calm and even. The important thing is to create a safe place for the student to share about their feelings. Non-judgmental, compassionate responses are the best way to promote safe space and reduce the potential for the person to feel shame about their trauma. You could say, “I’m sorry you/your community are/is experiencing this.” Remember that getting advice and opinions are not why a person shares a traumatic experience. Avoid comments like, “At least it’s not,” “It could be worse,” or “Why didn’t/don’t you do ______.”

5. **Consult When You’re Feeling Stuck**

Refer a student to Counseling Services or to other resources on campus as another source of support. You can also reach out to us if you’re noticing concerning behaviors or patterns or aren’t sure what to do. At Counseling Services, we’re here to support you – whether it’s about you or about another student - you can call 805-756-2511 any time of day. We can’t provide any information about a particular student’s treatment or use of services here due to confidentiality, but we can receive information from you, consult with you about your next steps, and get you connected to the support you need as a friend, roommate, RA, or partner.

6. **If You Are Experiencing Trauma Yourself**

Focus on daily routines that keep your basic needs addressed (e.g., eating well, staying hydrated, sleeping enough), as well as things that help you feel supported like talking with trusted friends or family. Don’t hesitate to call Counseling Services at (805) 756-2511 to talk through what you are experiencing. We are available 24/7.

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More resources are available here: https://chw.calpoly.edu/counseling/trauma-task-force