

Virginia Tech students shine in the face of tragedy

by Dr. Linda Miles

The Virginia Tech students, faculty, and staff are giving the Nation an education on how to COPE with tragedy. They have taken us to school on how to handle grief. Television and newspapers are providing exemplary examples of caring, courage in facing pain, and a unity of community.

Soon after the shootings, I was asked to provide guidelines to help students, parents and people everywhere deal with their grief.

I suggested we use the COPE model which is described below. It is a synthesis of my experience working with people in crisis for over thirty years as a psychotherapist.

In the past two days I have watched in awe as young students have demonstrated a remarkable ability to demonstrate the COPE principles with fortitude and grace as they handle crisis as a community.

Here is what they are showing us:

C stands for CARE: Self-care is very important and often neglected after a trauma. A young sophomore who was in one of the classrooms when shootings happened described how friends and family swooped down and made sure he had healthy food to eat and a place to rest. Since many could not stay in dorms, safe places were provided where students could rest, and maintain contact with supportive friends and family.

Initially, it is important to make sure the students have a safe and protected environment, given support, and allowed to express their feelings. We also need to identify those students that might be at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder.

O stands for opportunity. After a tragedy people need to be reminded they will get through it. The expression of hope for the future helps people avoid sinking into depression. The Chinese have a character for the word "crisis". It is a combination of the words, "danger and opportunity".

The Virginia Tech students remind one another that they will persevere as they sing of hope and chant, "Hokies". At the candlelight vigil they spontaneously began singing, "Amazing Grace".

P is for pain. It is important after loss to feel the pain and go through rituals to say good bye. In addition to attending the funeral, visitation, etc, it often helps to develop individual rituals to honor the person.

It is important to distinguish between pain and suffering. Pain is real, and based upon loss.

Suffering is negative self talk, such as, "I knew this guyâ€•I should have seen this comingâ€• or, â€œThe world is dangerous and evilâ€•why bother?â€•

Learn to recognize the difference in yourself and others. Remember emotions are contagious.

Virginia Tech has held numerous ceremonies and encouraged students to express thoughts in writing to honor lost friends and faculty. There is a unity of community. Students in such a supportive environment are less likely to dwell on negative self talk. They are part of something greater than themselves.

The Virginia Tech poet and professor Nikki Giovanni galvanized the group with her spirited poem inspiring school unity. She instilled a sense that the students can move forward with new depth, wisdom and a fuller appreciation of life. Like many of the faculty, staff and students she modeled facing fear and choosing to lead a meaningful life based on love and strong values.

After a tragedy people can get bitter or better. Hold a ceremony of your own and choose to heal.

E. is for empathy. It is crucial after a tragedy to feel empathy for your self as well as for others. After the tragedy a young woman at Virginia Tech, wrote on the monument for her lost friend, "Love will go on".

The loss of family or a friend can be one of the most traumatic events that we experience in life. Feel the pain others are going through and let yourself experience the richness and depth of your feelings. You will become a better person.

Recovery is a process. For the students of Virginia Tech those that were in the classroom or had friends die will be most affected. The Nation and the World are impacted by this event. This is a time for reflection on how we can better cope with future uncertainty.

Grief is a process. Schools and families should consider providing ongoing opportunities to help students deal with this tragedy.

We do not have a choice about feeling the pain of this event but we do have a choice about how we live the rest of our lives.

“Education is a companion which no misfortune can depress.” (Joseph Addison)

Let us choose to move forward and do what we can to help each other.

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