

Discussing sensitive issues



Fact Sheet

Why it is important

Discussion of topics that relate to mental health and wellbeing can raise sensitive issues, including grief and loss, child abuse, mental illness or distressing life experiences. Many university students and staff may have unresolved issues in their lives, or may have had difficult personal experiences, so sensitivity is needed when managing these discussions. This can be an opportunity to model appropriate teaching strategies with your students, which will help prepare them for managing similar topics in their professional teaching roles.

This fact sheet has been designed with lecturers and teaching staff in mind. Students can be referred to the fact sheet: *Looking after yourself and others – for students* which is available on the Response Ability website.

Preparing and introducing the topic

If possible, advise students in advance when you will be discussing sensitive issues. Provide examples of the topics that might be discussed and acknowledge that these discussions may be uncomfortable or distressing for some people. Explain that the discussion will be informative and useful for their future career as a teacher, and will be conducted in a safe and supportive environment. Suggest that students speak with you beforehand if they feel uncomfortable about participating in the discussion and respect their choice not to participate.

Let students know what support is available if they become upset or distressed. This can be done in your verbal instructions in the introduction to the topic and in your written course notes, lecture slides and online learning management system. Options could include speaking with yourself or another staff member; seeking support from a university counselling or student support service; speaking with their GP, psychologist or counsellor; or accessing

telephone or online support and counselling. It may be helpful for you to make contact with the university counselling service, if you have one, to let them know about the forthcoming session and invite their input.

Managing the discussion

At the beginning of the session, involve students in setting ground rules for the discussion that create a supportive environment where sensitive topics can be discussed safely. Explain that a tutorial is not an appropriate place to disclose distressing personal experiences, because this could impact negatively on others in the group or on the person who talks about their experience.

Emphasise the need for respect, confidentiality, sensitivity and the recognition of diversity in people's backgrounds and experiences. Many people use humour to deal with uncomfortable situations, but negative stereotypes and jokes about mental illness or other sensitive issues may be upsetting for anyone with first-hand experience and should be avoided. Be vigilant about challenging inappropriate comments.

Using the 'one step removed' approach can be useful. This is done by using hypothetical situations that give students the distance and space to think about a situation clearly from all angles, and reduces the probability of personal disclosure or vulnerability. For example, rather than a potentially confronting question like, "What would you do?" you might say, "Suppose this happened to someone ... what could they do?" This is also a useful opportunity to model this technique as a teaching tool for students to use in their professional careers.

During the discussion you may sense that a student is about to disclose something personal. You could use 'protective interrupting' techniques to interrupt the story in a respectful way that acknowledges the person's input. For example, "It sounds like you have some interesting insights into this issue. For the moment we'll move back to more general perspectives, but we can talk more about this after the tutorial." This also gives you the opportunity to follow up with the student later to check that they are okay. If personal disclosure does occur, remind students in the





group to treat this with respect and confidentiality by not discussing it outside the session.

Keep observing your students for any signs of distress. If someone does become distressed, respond to the situation as calmly and quietly as possible without drawing extra attention to the student. Give the student an opportunity to leave the room for a time so they can take a break or collect their thoughts and feelings; try to send a friend or companion with them.

When discussions have become emotionally charged or intense, bring students back to a more positive feeling by the end of the session. Case studies and hypotheticals should also be brought to some point of resolution, to promote a sense of closure.

Providing support and information

If you do observe any of your students showing signs of distress it is important to follow up with them as soon as possible after the class, preferably in person rather than by telephone or email. When you speak to them, acknowledge the person's feelings and listen with empathy. Try not to react emotionally or in a judgemental way to anything they may tell you, even if what is being discussed is not consistent with your own values or cultural background.

Try not to become too emotionally involved yourself; instead provide them with information on where to find additional help if they need it. Face-to-face options include making contact with your organisation's counselling service (if there is one), visiting a GP or talking to a mental health professional. Some people find telephone support useful in times of distress or crisis; while others may prefer to access support online.

Where to go for support

Lifeline: 13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au

Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 www.kidshelp.com.au

SANE Australia: 1800 18 7263 www.sane.org

beyondblue: 1300 22 4636 www.beyondblue.org.au

headspace: www.headspace.org.au

Sources and Links

R U OK? www.ruokday.com

Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University. (2014). *Teaching Guides: Difficult Situations*. Retrieved July 3, 2014 from: cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-situations

Centre for Teaching & Faculty Development, San Francisco State University. (2009). *Top 10 tips for addressing sensitive topics and maintaining civility in the classroom*. Retrieved July 3, 2014 from: www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/top-10-tips-for-addressing-sensitive-topics-and-maintaining-civility-in-the-classroom