

Discussing sensitive issues - for trainers



Fact Sheet

Sometimes discussion of topics that relate to mental health and wellbeing raise sensitive issues including trauma, loss and grief; child abuse; mental illness; or distressing life experiences. Many students have unresolved issues in their lives or may have had difficult personal experiences, so sensitivity is needed when managing these discussions.

This fact sheet provides you with information on how to prepare for and introduce difficult topics; manage discussions; respond to students experiencing distress; and provide information for further support if required.

Preparing and introducing the topic

If possible, advise students in advance when you will be discussing sensitive issues. Explain that the discussion will be informative and useful for their professional role as educators, but must be conducted in a safe and supportive environment. Provide examples of the topics that might come up and acknowledge that these discussions may be uncomfortable or distressing for some people. Suggest that students speak with you beforehand if they feel uncomfortable about participating in the discussion and respect their choice not to participate. Before discussing sensitive issues, think about who can provide your students with support if the discussion does raise difficult reactions, and let your students know who these people or services are in advance.

National Support Options

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

Online learning

Not all learning is face-to-face. If your organisation provides training online, you will need to consider how to tailor your approach and the presentation of information to account for barriers imposed by the lack of face-to-face communication. For example, you may wish to consider:

- Moderating comments in online discussion groups;
- Offering follow-up support and checking in with students regarding the impact of the content;
- Posting your contact details for students who want to talk to you about the content;
- Including support information on electronic learning systems or with distributed materials; and
- Making sure students know how they can access additional support if needed.

Managing the discussion

At the beginning of the session, involve your students in setting some ground rules. Explain that class discussions or student forums are not appropriate places 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. Some 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 any inappropriate comments.

In general, use the "one step removed" approach by using hypothetical situations that give students the distance and space to think about a situation clearly from all angles, and reduce the probability of personal disclosure or vulnerability. For example, rather than using a potentially





confronting question like, “What would you do?” you might say, “Suppose this happened to someone ... what could they do?”

Monitor the discussion and if you sense that a student is about to disclose something personal, you could use the ‘protective interrupting’ technique. This involves interrupting the story, but doing so in a respectful way that acknowledges the person’s input and gives you an opportunity to follow up with them later to check that they’re okay. Then move the group discussion into another area. For example, “It sounds like you have some interesting insights into this issue. For the moment we’ll move our discussion back to a more general focus, but I’d like to talk with you some more later.” If personal disclosure does occur, remind students in the group to treat this with respect and confidentiality by not discussing it outside the session.

During the discussion, observe your students for any signs of distress. If someone does become distressed during a teaching session, 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. Similarly, case studies and hypotheticals should also be brought to some point of resolution, to give students a sense of closure.

Providing support and information

Make sure to follow up with a distressed student 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.

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-subpages/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

This fact sheet has been designed with children’s services teachers and trainers 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.