

RETURNING TO SCHOOL

Communicating and interacting with students after the incident

Purpose: To provide teachers with experiences and tools for communication with students (and colleagues) when returning to school and to provide information about resources for assistance.

Key recommendations for communication

1. Take care of yourself.
2. Prepare in advance.
3. Communicate empathy, acknowledgement of loss, cohesiveness, hope, and resilience.
4. Employ rituals.
5. Communicate the normality of reactions and the progressiveness and individuality of recovery.
6. Reduce pressure to perform temporarily.
7. Inform about specific resources and options for help.
8. Inform about ongoing support from the university.
9. Helping others helps us too.

Take care of yourself

To have the energy to support others, first and foremost, take increased care of your physical and mental health.

Communication skills

As teachers, you are **competent to communicate**, as many of you have already devised a way of talking to students when you first meet them. It may be in an individual face-to-face situation, meeting with a group, online communication, or communication when returning to class. The following advice can help you in your preparation. Preparing a few sentences you want to say in advance and writing them down is helpful.

Impacts and resilience

A large number of people are now affected by the event that occurred on 21 December at CU FA. We are facing a disaster that has affected students, teachers, families, academic communities, and the whole society. Some people are more emotionally and psychologically affected, some less; some directly, others indirectly. There are groups of people who are **more vulnerable or more resilient**. After assessing whether the level of distress was extreme, high or moderate, it is appropriate to take a tailored approach to individuals. Most people are resilient and **will recover on their own or with the support of a close social environment**. More severely affected people may benefit from specialist care focused on recovery from a trauma. Every individual can work on **strengthening one's own resilience**. We should try to make any **professional support available** to those in need.

Time

Most people will take weeks, other months, and some years to recover from the incident. Take into consideration people who are potentially **more vulnerable**. They may include survivors, friends of the victims, surviving witnesses, but also people who avoided the attack or people with other personal histories of trauma. You can offer support to those people.

Emotions

Individuality of experience; different people experience different emotions, all are normal. Identifying our emotions helps; that way, we can control them better. You can say, *“People in the present situation may feel sadness, worry, anger or other emotions; they are all normal and natural reactions. If we identify our own emotions, they become manageable.”*

Internal and social resources

We all have internal mechanisms and personal experiences that help us cope with stress. We should try to employ them now. Every one of us can reflect on our coping strategies and practices. Most people find it helpful to talk to others, to maintain the pattern of their everyday activities, and to maintain a healthy lifestyle. People also tap into spiritual resources within themselves or those around them. The key to recovery is accessible **social support, proximity to others, and sharing**. Activity is an antidote to feelings of helplessness, insecurity or anxiety. **Helping others** also helps us to cope with the consequences of the incident.

One's activity and helping others

An important strengthening factor is the **involvement of individuals or groups in shared activities**. Continuing with everyday activities, including studying and teaching, also helps. It is advisable to temporarily **reduce the demands on students' (and teachers') performance**; naturally, concentration, memory, and planning skills tend to become impaired for a shorter or longer period.

External sources of support

Below are listed appropriate professional resources guaranteed by mental health and trauma treatment professionals. Following the shooting at CU FA, a unified **online Help Centre** has been set up on www.nudz.cz. There you can find information and resources for help (phone lines, specialist centres, options for trauma therapy / online or face-to-face, individual or group and key recommendations in one place. Students and teachers may also find useful two mobile apps, **“První Psychická Pomoc”** (helping others) and **“Pohov”** (self-care, coping,

and resilience support). Many useful tips and resources can be found on www.opatruj.se (self-care, supporting others).

Mental health professionals and resources are also available within Charles University and CU FA, e.g.: psychologicka.poradna.ff.cuni.cz, centrumcarolina.cuni.cz.

You can also get specific services by sending an email at psych.pomoc@cuni.cz.

The longevity of psychosocial support

In mass disasters, individuals, families and communities cope with them gradually. In the immediate period after a disaster (usually the first 2–4 weeks), the Integrated Rescue System coordinates psychosocial support in the Czech Republic and also passes on the coordination of services for the medium- and long-term phase to other organisations (in this case to Charles University, which collaborates with the National Institute of Mental Health, non-profit organisations, and other experts in this field). The university is collaborating on a strategy for the next steps and **a system to provide long-term psychosocial support**, which should be active beyond the 1st anniversary of the event. The next challenge will be to learn from the disaster to strengthen **the resilience and mutuality of individuals and the academic community in the future**.

Other tips

Prepare yourselves before the meeting. It is helpful to have the outline and the main message written down at hand.

At the beginning of the meeting, expressing empathy, acknowledgement of loss, cohesiveness, and hope is helpful.

Normalise any emotional and other reactions that may occur; these are **normal reactions** of the human psyche to extreme stress. **Any difficulties will subside with time**. Experiencing and ways to recover are very **individual**.

When you first meet with students – whether it is an exam, an informal meeting, or your first class – please pay attention to the **memory of the victims** and the importance of active coping with the situa-

tion. **Rituals help**. You can light a candle together, commemorate the victims with a moment of silence, share what has helped us in these difficult days, or seek ideas for what else might help us and others. In this way, we contribute to the adaptation of colleagues and students.

Let us care about others and their needs.

The processing of an unpleasant experience may interfere with many people's ability to properly prepare for the attestations and fulfil their study obligations. We ask you to take into account the emergency of the situation during the upcoming exam period and be **accommodating to students** in this regard.

An important part of coping with traumatic events is the **ability to return to the place** where the tragic events occurred. Inform students of the importance of this step and tell them to support each other in a group rather than be alone.

Regarding possible psychological trauma and its treatment, we recommend seeking out those mental health professionals who **specialise in working with psychological trauma**.

Although the faculty will organise events to help facilitate a gradual return of students, it is advisable to allow students to take an **active role in their return**. **Bringing life back to the faculty** is a shared cause of every staff member and student, and thanks should be expressed for this effort.

Provide students with information about available sources of support.

Prepared by: PhDr. Štěpán Vymětal, Ph.D., from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, doc. PhDr. Radvan Bahbouh, Ph.D., plk. Mgr. Martina Wolf Čapková from the General Directorate of Fire Rescue Service of the Czech Republic, version as of 2 January 2023