Together in the Face of Crisis: How to Get Through Difficult Times?

In the light of the recent tragic events that took place at the University Hospital in Kraków and on campus of the University of Warsaw, the academic communities of the Jagiellonian University and the University of Warsaw are in mourning. Attacks on individuals performing their daily duties in places that should be safe – such as hospitals, associated with saving lives and health, and universities, which symbolize knowledge, culture, and humanistic values – evoke deep shock, a sense of injustice, and incomprehension.

Students, PhD students, and all members of the Jagiellonian University community – even those not directly affected by these recent tragedies – may experience them as crisis or even traumatic situations.

Why does this happen?

Loss of a Sense of Safety

Tragic events – especially acts of violence or sudden death in spaces like hospitals or universities – can abruptly disrupt the fundamental pillar of our daily existence: a sense of safety. For many of us, these places are associated with safety and the possibility of receiving support. We use these spaces daily without considering that danger might arise. Acts of violence are perceived as unpredictable and unreal. Simultaneously, there arises a fear for one's own safety or that of loved ones.

Loss of safety can manifest in various ways, such as:

- increased vigilance, tension, anxiety, difficulty concentrating or sleeping,
- disruption of routine (study, work, leisure),
- avoiding previously neutral places (e.g., certain university buildings),
- ruminations ("could this have happened to me?"), worrying ("what if it happens again?"),
- need for control: seeking blame, immediate explanations,
- avoiding conversations, downplaying the event's significance.

Lack of Understanding of the Situation

Acts of violence are often perceived as deeply incomprehensible and contrary to our worldview. In response, many people seek immediate explanations or motives that might help "make sense" of the event. This is a natural psychological mechanism: rationalization helps reduce fear, restore a sense of control, and maintain the belief that the world – despite everything – is predictable and somewhat safe. For others, the opposite mechanism takes over: catastrophic thinking, e.g., the belief that the world is becoming increasingly hostile or that "the end is near."

The human mind dislikes "information gaps" – uncertainty is hard to bear, which is why we often feel a strong need to fill that gap with meaning – even if it's not based on facts. This may include:

- accepting oversimplified explanations (e.g., "it happened because of the mental illness," "it's the fault of politics or economics") – remember to honor the memory of the victims first and foremost,
- interest in conspiracy theories that offer a false sense of coherence,
- increased social media use – which can both inform and misinform, reinforcing fear.

Although understandable, these reactions can lead to polarization, stigmatization, and deepening collective anxiety. Therefore, in crisis situations, it's crucial to ensure access to reliable information, open conversation, and psychological support – which help face uncertainty in a safe and constructive way. **Instead of rushing to find answers, try to:**

- pause – you have the right to withdraw, you don't have to act as if "nothing happened,"
- allow yourself to feel emotions like fear, sadness, anger, helplessness, or uncertainty – without judgment or minimizing them,
- ask yourself: "What is the hardest part for me in all of this?" – "What affected me?"
- limit your information intake to certain times of day and trusted news sources,
- instead of reading online comments – talk to someone close,
- maintain at least one daily ritual (walk, workout, meeting, etc.) – this helps rebuild a sense of security and manage stress and tension.

Lack of Meaning

The lack of understanding is also linked to a lack of meaning. As human beings, we seek meaning in events that happen to us and to others. When that meaning is difficult to find—because an act of violence seems random or unmotivated—it leads to a sense of discomfort. In an effort to reduce this discomfort, we begin to search for explanations, read various analyses of the situation, and try to quickly fill the gap with some form of meaning, even if it is not grounded in reality. The issue of searching for meaning in events that appear meaningless is addressed by **Jolanta Brach-Czaina** in her essay *Nietykalność*, found in the collection *Szczeliny istnienia* (*Cracks in Existence*). She writes: ***Truly tragic suffering has no justification; it is absurd*** (p. 134). It is important to ensure that our personal search for meaning does not result in further harm to others. Try to „presse pause" - in today's media-driven world, where information appears and disappears in the blink of an eye and aims to provoke strong emotions, it is important to approach news with caution. Try to reflect on what you do and why you do it, so that your actions align with your values and contribute to your personal growth.

Identification with the Academic Community

For many, a university campus or academic workplace is much more than an educational space – it's a social environment where we develop our identities, build relationships, collaborate, and function within a rhythm that typically provides predictability and stability.
It's also a symbolic space full of values such as freedom of thought, cooperation, trust, and mutual respect. As students, researchers, and doctoral candidates – regardless of our university – we build our **academic identity** on these shared values. Events that severely violate these principles – especially those happening within university walls – can cause a deep sense of shock, disbelief, and disorientation. When violence or sudden death occurs in such a setting, it shatters the fundamental belief that the world is a safe and rational place.

Identifying with the academic community may lead us to take such events very personally, even if we were not directly involved. This may result in:

- a sense of threat: “this could have happened to me or someone close to me,”
- empathetic co-experiencing: “those could have been my peers – lecturers, classmates, someone I know,”
- fear for the future and loss of trust in institutions that once provided safety.

At the same time, this identification can be a source of strength – a foundation for reinforcing a sense of community and a symbolic "defense" of humanistic and social values that shape and connect us. **In times of crisis, gestures of solidarity, empathy, and care become not only forms of help but also actions that restore a sense of meaning and agency.**

Therefore, it's worth:

- offering support to those most affected by these events,
- engaging in grassroots and community initiatives that provide real assistance and strengthen bonds,
- sharing reliable information about available psychological and emotional support – for yourself and for others.

First Aid (Self and Others) in a Crisis

1. **Allow yourself to feel**
   Even if you weren’t directly involved, you may feel fear, sadness, helplessness, anger, or confusion. These are natural reactions to a potentially traumatic situation.
2. **Limit media exposure**
   Set specific times to check news updates. Avoid unverified sources and social media comments – they can increase stress and disinformation.
3. **Talk – you don't have to go through this alone**
   Talking about your emotions and experiences is one of the most effective ways to reduce tension. Even if you need solitude, try to maintain contact with loved ones.
4. **Take care of the basics**
   In a crisis, it’s easy to forget: sleep, regular meals, movement, hydration – all of these help restore mental and physical balance.

5. **Find meaning in community action**
   Helping others, participating in university initiatives, creating spaces for conversation and reflection – all of these help others and support your own well-being.
6. **Use professional support**
   If you've previously experienced mental health issues or are under psychological/psychiatric care, pay extra attention to your emotional state and seek help without delay if needed.
7. **Find personal methods of relief**
   For one person, it might be a walk, for another journaling, conversation, drawing, prayer, listening to music, or meditation. These moments allow for pause and regeneration.

Some (Self)Therapeutic Tools

When you feel anxious, fearful, or uncertain, try:

1. **Grounding Exercise**
   - Name 5 things you can see
   - 4 things you can touch
   - 3 things you can hear
   - 2 things you can smell
   - 1 thing you can taste
2. **STOP Technique**
   - **S**top – Pause, interrupt what you're doing and take a short break
   - **T**ake a breath – A deep inhale and longer exhale. Focus on breathing
   - **O**bserve – Tune into your body and emotions. What are you feeling and where?
   - **P**roceed with values – Remember that you can feel difficult emotions and still act in line with your values
3. **Circle of Influence**
   - Create a circle showing what you can control, what you can influence, and what is out of your control

Psychological Support Hotlines

If the recent events are especially difficult for you and you feel sadness, anxiety, or depression but have no one to talk to – there are places where you can find support:

- **116 111** – Helpline for Children and Youth (24/7, free, anonymous)
- **800 108 108** – Grief Support Line by Fundacja Nagle Sami (Mon–Fri, 2–8 PM, free, anonymous)
- **116 123** – National Crisis Helpline for Adults (2–10 PM, free, anonymous)
- **800 702 222** – Crisis Support Center for Adults (24/7, free)
- **800 119 119** – Helpline for Children and Youth (2–10 PM, free, anonymous)
- **12 421 92 82** – 24-hour crisis intervention number for Kraków Crisis Intervention Center

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