

Dealing With Tragedy in a Culturally Competent Way

By the Editors of DiversityInc

© DiversityInc 2007 © All rights reserved. No article on this site can be reproduced by any means, print, electronic or any other, without prior written permission of the publisher.

The mass killings on the Virginia Tech University campus yesterday remind us how suddenly people can be thrust into tragedy. And people communicate—and grieve—in different ways and with different rituals, depending on their religious and ethnic backgrounds.

How can we know how to help people in a culturally competent manner? We asked diversity experts, and here's their advice.

Universities and colleges, as well as corporations, across the nation must take a look at the cultural competence of their crisis response and prevention tactics, says Weldon Latham, a discrimination-law attorney and senior partner in Davis Wright Tremaine's Washington, D.C., office.

"Universities and colleges must make sure they have in place emergency protocols to deal with these kinds of crises so they're not in a position of making it up as they go along," says Latham.

Latham says university officials should have processes in place to communicate with students in emergency situations and should have ongoing relationships with student groups that represent the different races, ethnicities and interests that comprise the student body. This same advice certainly applies to corporations, which should use employee-resource groups for this purpose.

Grief counselors should be intimately aware of the different methods of grieving among students or employees of different ethnicities, races and nationalities in order to competently help them cope.

"A failure on the part of colleges and universities to consider these problems before they occur could result in massive financial liability to the school from parents of students injured or killed in these circumstances," says Latham.

Attempting to answer the questions of "why" and "how" is part of the grieving process, as is ascribing blame. But the grieving process must not get bogged down in blame, diversity experts say. It must focus on taking care of one another—and when the victims come from many different religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds, that means reaching out to and understanding those differences, without playing into stereotypes.

For example, some cultures dress the deceased in elaborate clothes to send them to the next world, while others prefer the barest of attires. The colors both the deceased and the mourners wear are important, and they vary, depending on the culture. Some people bury their dead quickly, while others wait many days. In some cultures, flowers are appropriate for mourning; in others, they are forbidden.

What's most important is to be compassionate and caring, and to understand the people who are grieving and their customs.

"We all have a heart and we all bleed the same blood so we can all share each other's pain," says Myrna Marofsky, president of the diversity consultancy ProGroup. "There is a fear on my part that people will assume some stereotypes, and that's the trap we have to be careful about," she adds.

Linda Stokes, president of PRISM International, says people should look to the Amish response to the senseless murders of five Amish school girls by a lone gunman in October.

"The Amish ... actually reached out to the shooter's family and that helped with the healing," says Stokes.

More from Today's Diversity News

[NEXT ITEM >>](#)

