

Where do you start? Holding space during difficult times

Description: This resource focuses on helping health care professionals locate effective ways to support each other in response to campus wide, local, national, and/or global incidents that might impact the health, well-being, and functioning of faculty, staff, trainees, and students you teach, mentor, advise, and/or supervise.

Understand your role. Because many national and global crises stem from longstanding historical issues and tensions, it's tempting to try to offer solutions. While gathering some basic information through credible sources might clarify some things for you personally, the most salient concern is being present for our Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian faculty, staff, trainees, and students.

Express awareness. Acknowledge you are aware something challenging, disturbing, tragic, etc. has occurred, describe the situation briefly, and share your concern that it might impact our Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian faculty, staff, trainees, and students.

Hold space. Offer to either designate space (e.g., during faculty/staff meetings, clinic huddles, during a work shift, etc.) in the moment for faculty, staff, trainees, and students to express concerns about the issue. Alternately, you could assess interest and need in offering space a standalone meeting.

Recognize the different lenses of your team. If you decide to offer a space for conversation recognize that your team might bring different perspectives based on race, nationality, gender, and disciplinary interests, political beliefs, among other areas. These might inform how well-versed they are about a situation and/or the nature of their response. What's important is to avoid presuming all faculty, staff, trainees, and students are informed of or have a context for the issue. And this should not discourage us from engaging in these difficult but necessary conversations.

Establish expectations for the discussion. Be prepared to establish some clear parameters for the discussion so it is supportive and promotes a safe space for our Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian faculty, staff, trainees, and students. You might consider having break out discussions for structurally marginalized and non-marginalized people.

Follow up and be flexible. This unjust reality is unfortunately systemic and ongoing, so treating it as such is important. One way to remain engaged with your team is to continue to hold those spaces open after the initial discussion reminding your team that you are a listening.

Ask yourself: Is this a teachable moment? Even if the incident falls outside of what your academic or professional role addresses typically, it might offer a unique opportunity for engagement. You could share, for example, how your field or profession has wrestled with challenging issues through initiatives launched by professional associations.

Adapted from the Office of the CAS Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion (Boston University). Please email vlstephe@bu.edu if you are interested in sharing it with colleagues outside of Boston University.