

## Setting up group counseling sessions & how to encourage maximum participation<sup>1</sup>

After a traumatic event, group counseling can be a good way to come together as a community. This is especially important in programs where students are directly enrolled in local institutions and not at the program center on a regular basis. As autonomous as students may seem, and even if they have proven themselves to be very self-reliant, an extraordinary event will necessarily impact their equilibrium. Proximity to the event, worried parents and friends, and the disruption of their daily life will all contribute to an inevitable increase in stress.

Program staff will be dealing with their own reactions and stress after an incident, and there will be many plates to keep spinning; at such a time, support from outside sources can considerably lighten the load. Consider providing additional counseling for staff separate from your students if possible for your institution.

### Plan ahead:

Before ever needing to ask for assistance, inventory your resources.

Ask yourself: Do I have a regular counselor on call for emergencies? Can I contact this person at any time for assistance? If a wellness coordinator or on-call therapist is not already part of your team, it is a good idea to find someone in the mental health community who can provide advice and referrals and intervene if necessary.

If you do not, find a way to establish a relationship with someone who can advise you (whether it be for traumatic events and emergencies or for individual mental health crises, for referrals). There are many professionals in the field and usually someone can be found to play this supporting role. The APUAF has provided a list of counselors on our website.

Negotiate fees: counselors may propose to bill you an hourly rate for their intervention (group or individual) as needed, or you may decide on a set fee for up to X number of hours of assistance. If your home institution or higher administration does not provide a budget for this, and does not consider it indispensable, citing the importance of best practices in the field (and competition from programs who do have such an infrastructure) can be a good argument.

### Setting up a session:

Discuss the possibility of a session with the counselor before you ever need to organize one, in order to have the groundwork in place.

What will it cost? Will any materials be needed for the discussion or activity?

Can they find you someone else if they are not available or will you be on your own? If they will not commit to finding a replacement, you should have a second person who can step in. Do not risk being unable to locate someone at the last minute!

Do not worry that students may feel we are treating them like children or being intrusive. They may be our “clients” but acting in their best interest is not an offense. We are held accountable, which comes with a great deal of responsibility, so we should feel confident about the decisions we make.

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<sup>1</sup> **Contacts APUAF :**

MaryAnn Letellier (CUPA Paris): [maryann.letellier@cupa.paris.edu](mailto:maryann.letellier@cupa.paris.edu)  
Anna Shoemaker (IES Abroad Nantes): [a.shoemaker@ies-nantes.fr](mailto:a.shoemaker@ies-nantes.fr)

When announcing a group meeting, a few recommendations:

**1 - Timing:** There are advantages and drawbacks to scheduling sessions too soon or not soon enough. Some institutions will request that sessions be organized immediately to provide assistance as soon as possible. Others will allow more flexibility. In our experience, if the incident occurs over a weekend, greater impact can be achieved by waiting until Monday to hold the session. Holding the session too soon can also mean students will be hesitant to leave their housing, fearing public transportation could be a target.

**2 -** Encourage all students to be present, explaining that you feel it is an important step in starting to process the incident/situation. Whether or not the session should be optional is debatable. Some institutions will not allow you to make the session mandatory, others will. A mandatory session will undoubtedly reach a greater number of students and make a greater impact.

**3 -** Present the meeting/session as a way to come together as a community; it is best not to label it a group therapy session. Use "we" not "you". ("We will be meeting in order to..."). Do not say "a therapist" will be present but actually identify the speaker or facilitator, when announcing the session, and provide info on who they are, what their background is.

**4 -** Mention that students can also see someone privately if they wish and make that help available. If possible, include two therapists so that one can be available for individual counseling apart from the group if needed. Sometimes students can be overcome during the session, and you will need someone to counsel them individually.

**5 -** The psychologist/therapist/coach you bring in will probably have a set of questions for you so they can learn more about the public with whom they will be addressing/working. If they do not, make sure to brief them about who your students are: the type of program they are on, how independent they are or seem, reactions so far, what the students may have experienced (their proximity to the event/incident...). If possible, do this briefing the day before the session, if not, ask the therapist to meet with you at least 40 minutes before the start of the meeting. In any case, allow for a few minutes before the session to meet. This can be a time for you/staff to interact with the therapist to express how you have been handling the event.

**6 -** During the session: depending on how comfortable you feel doing so and the nature of the incident, feel free to participate in order to create a sense of a shared experience; it often breaks the ice and encourage student participation.

**7 - Follow up:** Do not consider that students who do not attend do not need any help. Reach out to them. Offer to schedule a second session or individual counseling. Provide the option of one to one discussion with a staff member but do not feel you have to play therapist or let the student consider you as such. Know your limits and the limits of your role. Consider providing drop-in meetings with a counselor at your offices in subsequent weeks to lighten staff loads. In the following weeks, consider organizing a session with an academic expert to help address student questions concerning the political, social, and historical aspects of the situation. Students might not be aware of the full context, which can lead to greater fear in the weeks after the event.