

When a Student Cries

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"If you look closer," sang Smokey Robinson, "it's easy to trace the tracks of my tears." Clearly he never experienced the flow of tears at the end of a semester.

Whenever midterm and final exams loom, students' tears during faculty office hours become as commonplace as requests for extra credit and do-overs. Low grades produce desperation and despair. In deciding how to respond, professors first must identify the reasons for the crying because not all tears are equal.

Some students cry because they lack the necessary skills to succeed in the course. Others are dealing with the stresses of life and, particularly if they're young, haven't developed coping mechanisms. There are tears from students who are dealing with the very real traumas of microaggressions, racism, homophobia, rape, and the failure of their institutions to recognize those pressures or listen to their voices. And there are tears that surely produce less empathy — from the grade grubbers crushed by a B or the slackers who simply didn't do the reading but know how to turn on the waterworks.

It's often hard to tell if the emotions are real or if you're being played. Much depends on the type of rapport you have with the student. Likewise, not all faculty are adept at displaying empathy, support, active listening, and holding space. Most of us haven't had the professional training to know how to articulate a helpful response to a student's personal crisis.

In my own case, if I feel a student has honestly broken down, is vulnerable, and is looking for help, I let them know I'm willing to listen. I do my best to reassure those students that there are places on campus they can go to talk to about their problems with trained counselors. Yet when a student cries while telling me about a trauma or family difficulties, I cannot help but feel there is a reason that person has opened up to me and not someone else. Yes,

helping those students involves extra work for faculty, and a lot of responsibility, but it also speaks to the importance of treating our students as people.

Hoping to understand how best to respond in teary situations, I interviewed several professors. Their responses ran the gamut — from showing deep sympathy and empathy, to dutifully assuming the role of the rigorous professor who holds fast to high academic standards.

'The Holy Text'

"I teach writing and I'm asking students to tap into their feelings on a daily basis," says Angela Jackson-Brown, an assistant professor of English at Ball State University. "Crying is a given."

How she responds varies from student to student. "I try to give the student the opportunity to share his or her feelings, but then we go to the syllabus," she said. "It is the holy text. I spend weeks leading up to the semester writing it for moments like that. No matter what the student is offering up as explanation for not doing the work, there is something in the syllabus that would have helped them deal with said situation in a proactive manner."

Her advice to other faculty: "Cover your butt early so that those tears don't dissuade you from following the rules of the university and your course." When faced with an emotional student, she shows empathy if warranted but, as a black woman professor, she will "shut it down if I feel I'm being Mammied."

Coping with students' emotional outbursts is "tricky," says Sara P. Díaz, an assistant professor at Gonzaga University. "More often than not, tears in my office are about deeply wounding experiences of harassment, sexual assault, and bullying. For these students, I may be the only one they trust with their tears. And as much as the emotional labor isn't valued in tenure and promotion at my institution, in those human moments I give it freely. But yes, it depends on the reason for those tears."

David J. Leonard, a professor of race and gender studies at Washington State University, said he was not formally prepared for this aspect of the job. "Graduate school doesn't do a good job of training you how to deal with student emotions," he says.

And the burden falls unequally on professors. While students may seek out women of color for mentorship and a shoulder to cry on, those same students keep an emotional distance from white male professors like him. "What does this say about the failures of white male professors to break down these barriers?" he wondered. "If students don't seek us out for this emotional labor, but instead our colleagues of color, we should look at how we are presenting ourselves as inaccessible, as impersonal authority figures, as experts capable of talking and not listening."

Tough Love

"I want my students to think I'm Superman," says Mark Naison, a professor of history and African-American studies at Fordham University. "I am 70 years old, I have had two hip replacements and a torn Achilles. I am never absent and never late. I answer their emails in less than 24 hours, and always get their work back on time!" He makes his policies clear up front. "I tell them the first day of class that history is not therapy. I am not here to make you feel good about yourself. I am here to expose you to things you didn't know and squeeze more work out of you than you want to do. There's no crying in academia!"

Naison sees crying as part of the customer-service mentality in academe. "Students think that everyone is there to serve you but not challenge you. They want you to turn teaching into therapy. ... Learning is painful. But because my class is fun, most of them stay and work their asses off."

Student tears are a weakness, says Kimberly Joy Chandler, an assistant professor of communication studies at Xavier University of Louisiana. She finds this generation of students "severely immature when it comes to handling

everyday challenges. They've been handicapped by their parents and secondary education. When they experience us, it's like running into a brick wall at 100 miles per hour. They have very little, if any, frame of reference for real life. They are dumbfounded that they actually must do hard work, figure out solutions to problems, and be responsible and accountable for their behavior."

When students do cry in her office, "I just hand them the tissues and encourage them not to miss this teachable moment. The sun will rise tomorrow. Another day, another chance to get it right. Sit with your discomfort and decide if this is who you want to be. Move forward based on your answer. However, the grade you earned will not change."

Context Matters

Gayatri Sethi, a instructor of education at Agnes Scott College, calls herself "uber compassionate. "Empathy doesn't cost me my professional authority," she said. "I teach because I care. I'm open to the possibility that they need to cry and share, before we can come with actions and solutions. Sometimes there is no plan. Just tears. Sometimes we can't fix it."

Our sharply divided political culture nowadays makes it even more important for professors to have the requisite skills to properly respond to student tears. "We have found in this post-Trump world that we are being called on to attend to our students' emotional needs now more than ever before," said Karsonya Wise Whitehead, an associate professor of communication at Loyola University Maryland. "I am constantly thinking and rethinking my position on how I should respond and how I can adjust it so that I am taking care of myself as well. I only have a limited amount of emotional energy to spend and I have close to 40 advisees, as well as being a club adviser and being an unofficial adviser to the students of color."

Whatever the source of the problem, there are some best practices that will help you — and your students — as you navigate the rivers of tears. When your students cry, try to:

- Maintain a professional distance. If you're in your office or classroom, keep the door open. Offer the students a tissue and a listening ear. Give them time to regain their composure.
- Ask questions to determine the nature of the emotional outburst. If they are experiencing trauma unrelated to your class or curriculum, offer reassurance but refer them to the appropriate resources as soon as possible.
- It's OK to express sympathy or empathy, but remain as calm as you can. Speak in a measured voice and do your best to lower their emotional volume. When they're done crying, say to the student, "Would you like to put words to those tears?"
- If their tears are related to your class or curriculum, go over the syllabus with them to reiterate your expectations and requirements. If it's late in the semester or they're trying to persuade you to change a grade, be firm in letting them know that their tears will not change the results of the choices they made during the semester.
- Maintain your boundaries and protect your energies as much as possible. Your professional duties are already demanding. Nobody benefits when you take on the additional stresses and pressures of helping students navigate their emotional lives.

[Stacey Patton](#) is a former reporter at Vitae. Currently, she is an assistant professor of multimedia journalism at Morgan State University.

Follow her on Twitter at [@DrStaceyPatton](#).

