Effectively Managing Critical Situations Related to Loss and Grief among Ukrainian University Students

Instructor:

Tetiana Svatenkova, PhD in Psychology
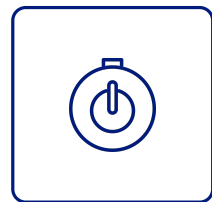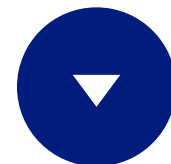
INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

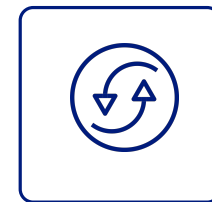# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOSS AND GRIEF – KEY CONCEPTS & FRAMEWORKS

Understanding Loss and Grief

LOSS

GRIEF

Loss is more than death: Includes losing one's home, community, or sense of security – symbolic losses that can deeply challenge identity and stability
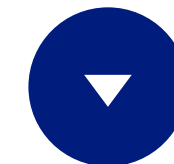
Grief = natural response to loss: Manifests in sadness, anger, guilt, or numbness. In students, grief may appear as difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal, or academic burnout.

Grief is universal yet personal. There is no single "correct" way or timeline to grieve – everyone copes differently

Kübler-Ross Model - a classic model of grief, but remember that people do not always progress neatly through these stages – grief isn't strictly linear

Kübler-Ross Model (5 Stages): Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. A classic model of grief, but remember that people do *not* always progress neatly through these stages – grief isn't strictly linear

DENIAL   ANGER

ACCEPTANCE   **5 STAGES OF GRIEF**   BARGAINING

DEPRESSION

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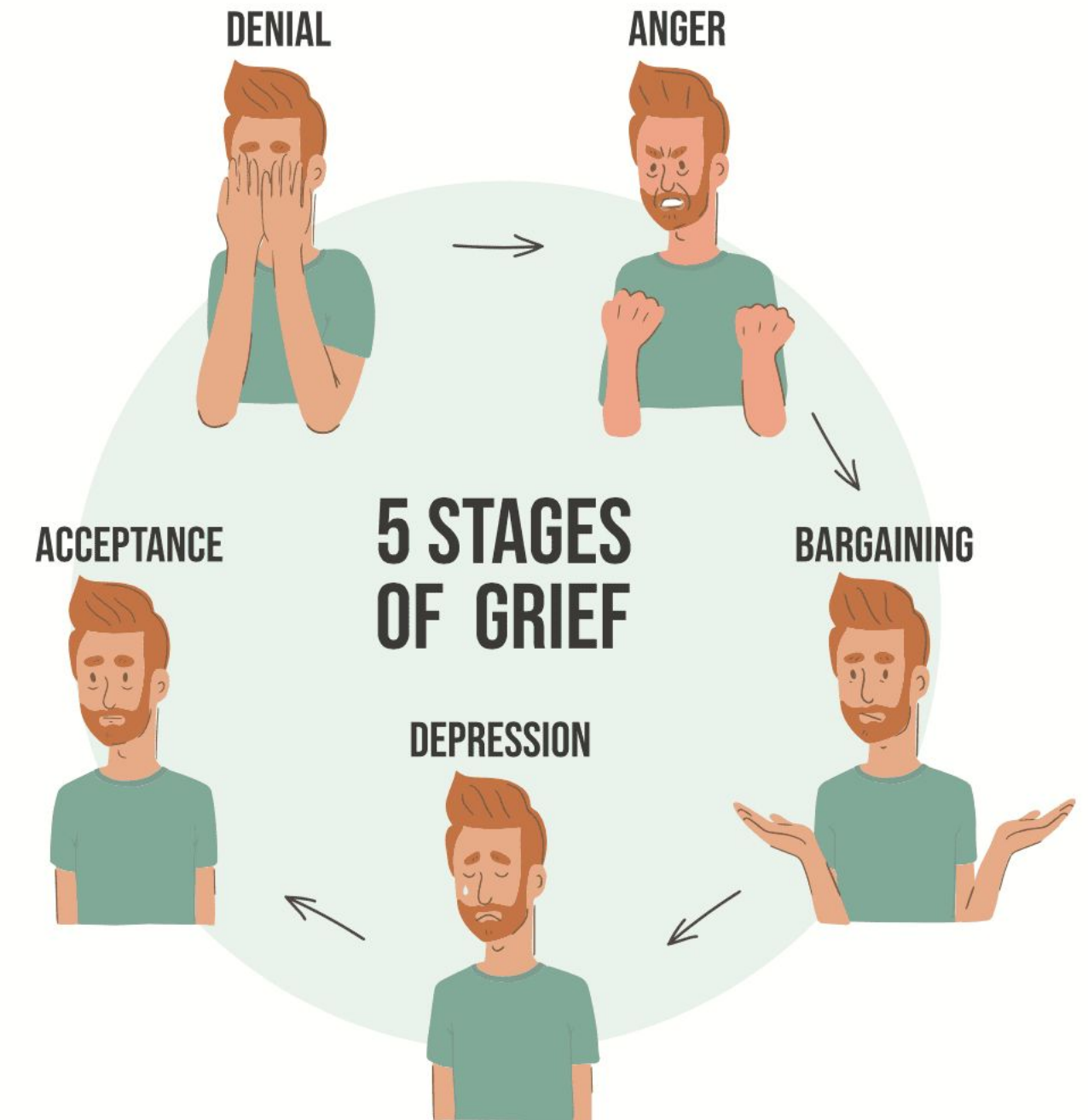
Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

01

Accept the reality of the loss

02

Experience the pain of grief

03

Adjust to life without the lost person/thing

04

Find an enduring connection while moving forward

Emphasizes active adaptation, especially relevant in supportive educational settings

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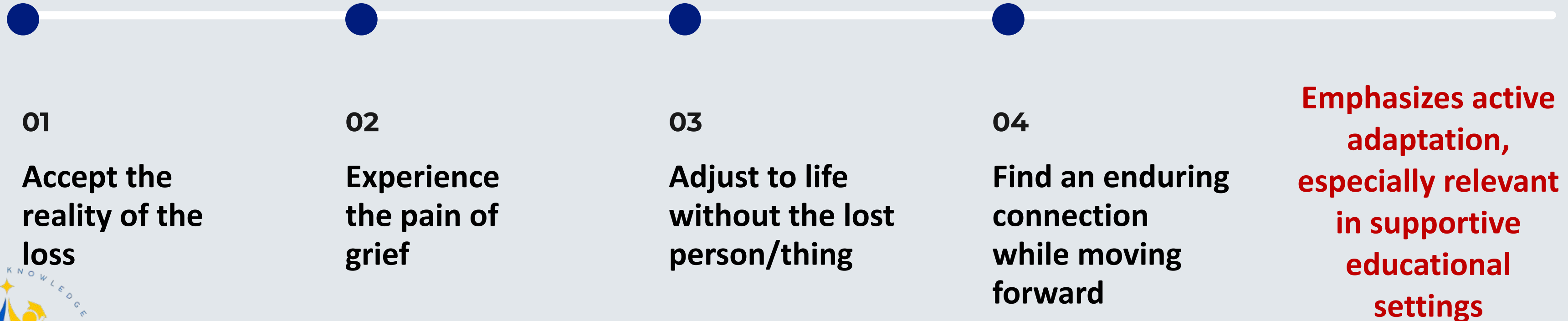
Collective Grief & Growth

Collective grief
In war and displacement, entire communities grieve together. Ukrainian students often carry both personal losses *and* a shared national grief shaped by the trauma of conflict and upheaval

Cultural expression
Shared rituals (memorial gatherings, communal meals like *pomynky*, songs and poetry) help transform pain into connection. These traditions remind students that they are not grieving alone, fostering solidarity and hope

Post-Traumatic Growth
After deep loss, people may develop new strengths, empathy, or purpose.
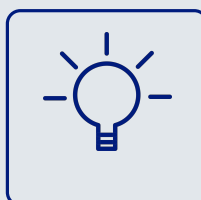
Recognizing this potential for growth offers hope without minimizing the pain – it shows students and educators that even the hardest experiences can lead to resilience and insight

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THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT OF GRIEF – COLLECTIVE & INDIVIDUAL DIMENSIONS

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Shared trauma history

Ukrainians have endured collective tragedies (wars, repression, famine). This history of hardship means grief is often a *shared* experience, woven into cultural memory and identity.

Community mourning

Grief in Ukrainian culture is expressed collectively through rituals and remembrance. For example, communal funerals or memorial events, folk songs of loss, and national days of remembrance turn individual grief into shared support and meaning.

"Survival with dignity"

A legacy of resilience runs through Ukrainian society – enduring loss with quiet strength and communal support, which influences how young people today cope with trauma.

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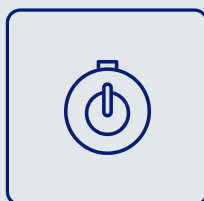
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LOSS

Personal losses during war. losses of family members, friends, homes, or hometowns.

Survivor's guilt & ambiguity. Students who found safety might struggle with survivor's guilt – guilt for being alive or safe when others are not. Others face ambiguous loss (e.g. a missing relative or an inaccessible home) where there's no closure but ongoing pain.

Invisible wounds. A student who seems disengaged, forgetful, or withdrawn might not be "lazy" – they could be carrying unspoken grief.

Cultural norms on grief. Ukrainian culture often prizes emotional restraint and perseverance ("strength in silence").

Supportive environment. The key is offering understanding and presence. Even if students don't openly share, knowing that tutors *care* and will listen without judgment creates a supportive atmosphere where healing can begin.

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Signs and Manifestations of Grief among Students

EMOTIONAL & COGNITIVE SIGNS

Emotional reactions
- waves of sadness, anger, irritability, guilt, anxiety, or profound apathy.
- hopeless or emotionally numb at times.

Cognitive effects
Grief can cloud the mind. Students may struggle to concentrate in class, forget deadlines or details, and have difficulty making decisions. Some may express confusion about their identity or purpose.
What looks like inattention or procrastination might actually be the mental fog of grief disrupting their focus.

BEHAVIORAL & PHYSICAL SIGNS

Behavioral changes
- skipping classes, avoiding friends, losing interest in hobbies or campus activities.
- some may overcompensate by working excessively hard.

!!! Every behavior is communication – even silence, irritability, or avoidance can be a cry for help or a coping mechanism.

"I've noticed you seem quieter lately – I'm here if you want to talk or need any support"

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
- constant fatigue
- headaches
- frequent illness
- weaken the immune system

Tutors and lecturers should stay observant for patterns over time:
Has a typically active student become quiet and isolated?
Has their academic performance suddenly dropped?
Noticing these shifts early can make a big difference.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A **helpful framework** (from SAMHSA, adapted to education):

Realization – Understand how trauma affects individuals and communities.

Recognition – Be able to identify the signs of trauma or distress in students.

Response – Respond in ways that actively resist re-traumatization and promote safety and empowerment.

Respect – Maintain dignity, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in all interactions.

**Resilience** – Help students build coping skills and confidence (focus on strengths and growth).

Relationships – Foster trusting, supportive student-teacher connections (a caring relationship can be healing).

A trauma-informed tutor "realizes" the widespread impact of trauma, "recognizes" its signs, and "responds" with "respect," while fostering student "resilience" through supportive "relationships."

TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM PRACTICES
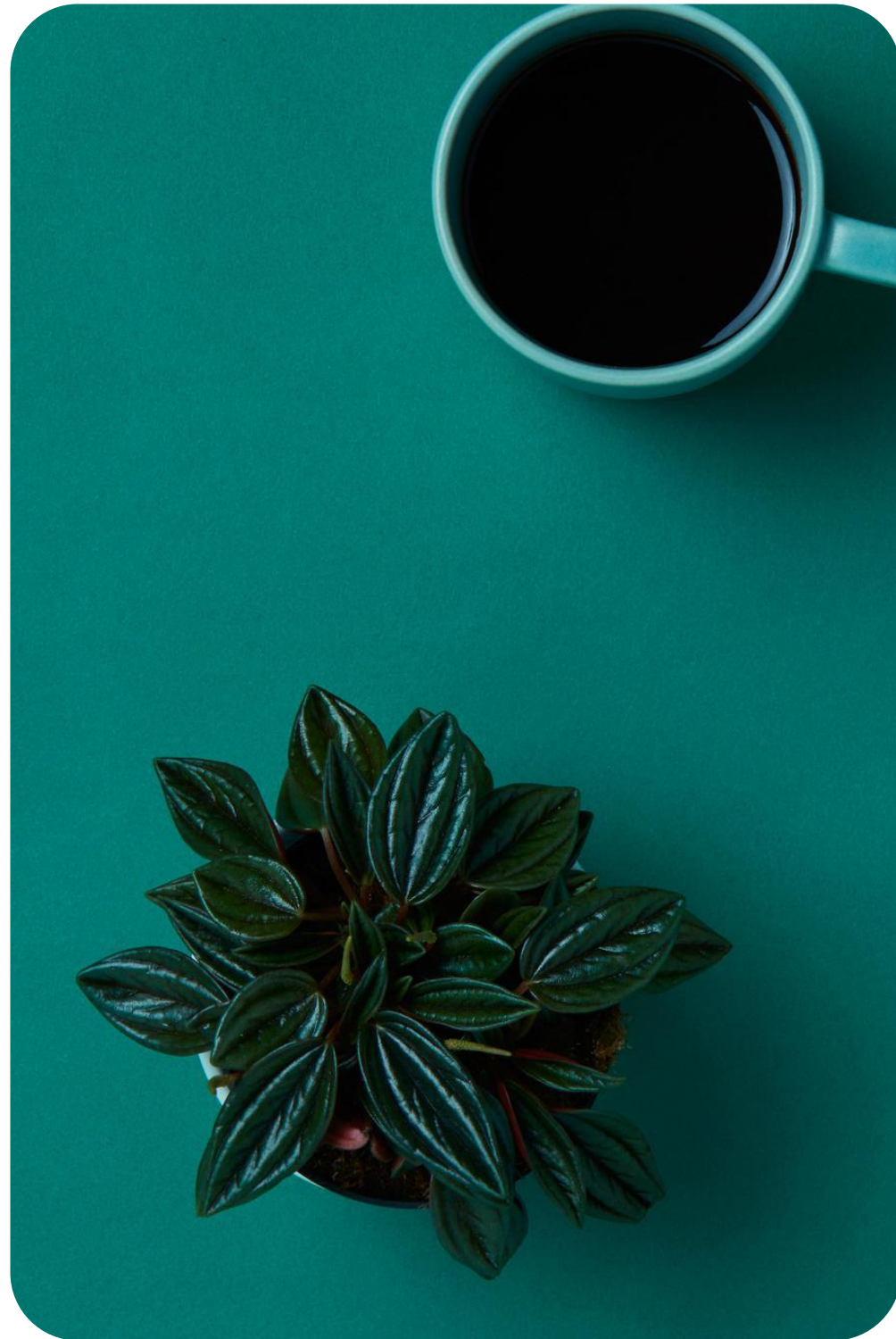
- **Empower through choice**

- **Predictability & safety**

- **Calm, non-judgmental communication**

- **Self-care for educators**

- **Safety first**

Trauma-informed teaching is about creating a learning space where every student – especially those touched by war or loss – feels **safe, seen, and supported**. When students feel safe, true learning can happen.

Safety isn't just physical; it's emotional

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COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION IN TIMES OF LOSS

Principles of Compassionate Communication

• Presence over solutions

• Listen deeply

• Validate, don't minimize

• Respect boundaries
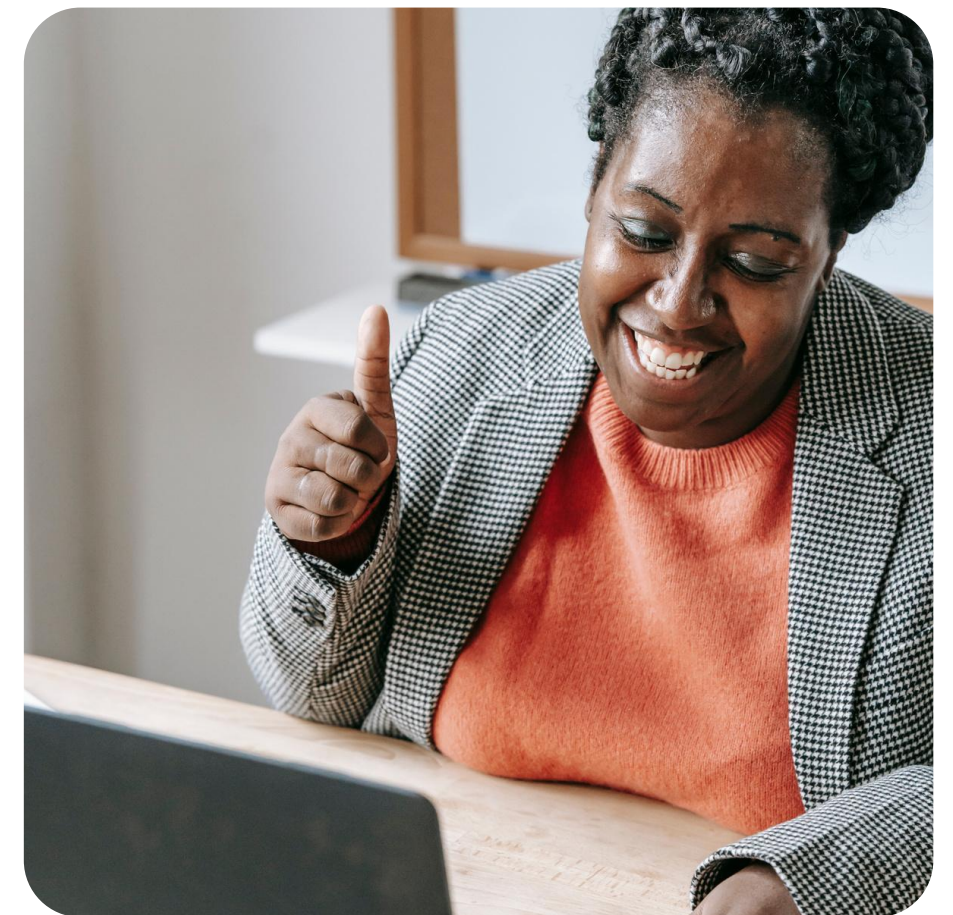
Communication that Heals

Mind your non-verbals
Don't fear "saying the wrong thing"
Set limits & get help when needed
Words as a lifeline

*You're not there to **fix** their grief, but your kind words and understanding ear remind them they aren't alone in carrying it*

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Peer Support Networks

and Mentoring Systems

Let's do it

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Building Effective Peer Support Systems

TRAINING PEERS

SUPERVISION AND SAFETY

EASY ACCESS

BUDDY SYSTEM

PEER SUPPORT CIRCLES

INSTITUTIONAL BACKING

Peer networks turn empathy into action on campus. When students lift each other up, they not only survive tough times – they build a resilient community. Through peer support, compassion becomes a shared responsibility across the university

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THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC STAFF AND UNIVERSITY SERVICES IN CRISIS RESPONSE

RECOGNIZING & REACHING OUT

Campus as community
Professors, tutors, and staff are on the front lines of noticing when a student is in trouble. It could be sudden absences, a drop in grades, extreme withdrawal, or even emotional outbursts in class – these can all be red flags.

LEVEL 1

Gentle approach - If you notice a student struggling, approach them privately and compassionately

Listen and observe - When a student does share, listen without jumping to fix things.

Know your resources - Every staff member should be familiar with the support services available on campus

LEVEL 2

Provide support & refer - If a student confides a serious issue (loss of a loved one, severe anxiety, etc.), your

role is to **contain and refer**. *Contain* means providing a calm, supportive presence and not letting the situation

escalate, while *referring* means looping in the professionals.

LEVEL 3

Coordinated crisis response - In a **severe crisis** – such as a student having a panic attack in class, expressing

suicidal thoughts, or showing aggressive behavior – immediate action and teamwork are vital. Follow the

MAKE SURE
You know
The University's Crisis protocol

REMEMBER:
Privacy is important, safety comes first

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ETHICAL AND CONFIDENTIAL HANDLING OF SENSITIVE SITUATIONS

CORE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

✔ **Trust is everything**

✔ **Respect dignity**

✔ **Do good & do no harm**

✔ **Confidentiality**

✔ **Boundaries**

✔ **Be transparent**

"You are safe to share, and I will honor your story."

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PROMOTING EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

TRANSFORM PAIN → STRENGTH

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BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience = adapting after adversity

Pain can stay; progress continues

"Ordinary magic" — everyday supports (Bonanno)

Keys: support • flexibility • self-compassion • purpose
Tutor: model calm; praise small wins

FOSTERING POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH (PTG)

PTG = growth with grief (Tedeschi & Calhoun)
Not "trauma is good"
Self-efficacy: small goals, celebrate wins
Micro-practices:
This could be starting class with a one-minute deep breathing exercise, or ending a week by having each student name one positive thing (a "small win") that happened. You could suggest keeping a gratitude journal or taking mindful walks. These small habits (breathing, gratitude, recognizing small wins) are scientifically linked to improved coping. They remind students that even amid grief, there are moments of peace and progress.

CREATIVE AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICES FOR HEALING

CREATIVE OUTLETS FOR GRIEF

- ❖ Art journaling
- ❖ Music and rhythm
- ❖ Movement and body awareness
- ❖ Photography projects

PRACTICES FOR MEANING-MAKING

- ❖ Journaling & free-writing
- ❖ Guided reflection prompts
- ❖ Mindfulness and relaxation
- ❖ Peer sharing
- ❖ Role of the educator
- ❖ Linking to learning
- ❖ Healing beyond words

When using creative or reflective activities, set a tone of **non-judgment**

DESIGNING INCLUSIVE AND SAFE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENTS

Fostering an Inclusive Culture

An inclusive university is one where every student, regardless of their background or trauma history, feels they **belong**. For Ukrainian students who have faced war or loss, feeling a sense of belonging and safety on campus is foundational for both healing and academic success. Inclusion is more than having diverse people present – it's about ensuring each person feels valued and protected.

Psychological safety

Cultivate *psychological safety* in classrooms and campus life

Institutional policies that care

University leadership should implement clear policies that underline inclusion and mental health support:
- **Anti-discrimination policies**
- **Mental health support**
- **Academic flexibility**
- **Transparency**

"Psychological safety means individuals feel free to be themselves and voice concerns without fear of embarrassment or punishment"

Amy Edmondson

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INCLUSIVE PRACTICES – CLASSROOM & CAMPUS

IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers set the tone.

Simple inclusive practices include greeting students by name, encouraging questions and praising effort/improvement.

Foster collaboration over competition.

Incorporate materials that reflect diverse perspectives (for example, include Ukrainian authors, examples or case studies relevant to their context) and avoid stereotypes.

An inclusive curriculum shows students that their culture and experiences are respected in the academic conversation.

Safe physical spaces
Create "safe zones" on campus. These could be quiet rooms or corners where students can go to decompress, meditate, or talk privately with a counselor or friend.

Community-building events
Host events that build community and mutual understanding.

Train the community
Ensure that not just academic staff, but also administrative and support staff receive training in cultural competence and trauma awareness

Lead by example
University leaders and faculty should openly champion inclusion and mental health.

Continuous improvement
Finally, make inclusion a continuous effort

You belong here. You are safe here

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INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR CRISIS

PREPAREDNESS

& MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

PREVENTION & EARLY INTERVENTION

Proactive rather than reactive

Well-being monitoring

Preventive programs

Accessible help

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CLEAR PROTOCOLS & INTEGRATION

Crisis response protocols

Emergency contacts

Roles and responsibilities

Communication plan

Follow-up

Practice drills

Integrate mental health into campus life

Academic policies that reflect care

Cross-department collaboration

SUSTAINABILITY & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Long-term partnerships
Train new staff & students
Feedback and evaluation
Leadership and funding

Education + care = inseparable
A university that is ready for crises and promotes mental well-being sends a powerful message: **learning and care go hand in hand**.

Guardians of hope
You are guardians of hope for your students

Together, through compassion and commitment, we can build university environments that **heal, include, and empower** all students – even in the face of loss.

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