

Bonni [00:00:00] Our students sometimes experience losses during their college years but most of us can never imagine having experienced during that season of our lives. In today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed, caring for grieving students.

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Bonni [00:00:23] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni [00:00:51] In past episodes of Teaching in Higher Ed we've spent a lot of time talking about things that might get in the way of learning. Maybe it's something that we're doing as far as being the professor and having that role that's hindering our students learning.

Bonni [00:01:05] Or sometimes it might be the end of our students things that they might be tempted to do that might hinder their own learning without them even realizing it.

Bonni [00:01:14] Well one of the things we haven't really addressed yet until now and this episode is those things that are outside of anyone's control outside the professor's control outside the students control.

Bonni [00:01:26] But of course could have a big impact on their learning and that is some kind of a significant loss during their college years. This is Episode 43, caring for grieving students and if you'd like to contribute to the conversation and share experiences that you've had or suggestions you have that go beyond what I will share today go to teachinginhighered.com/43.

Bonni [00:01:52] I want to start out with just some advice that you've probably heard before but it's not probably a good idea to have this conversation without bringing it up first and that is that we want to respect confidentiality to a point when asked to provide it.

Bonni [00:02:07] But that point is anytime somebody makes some sort of an indication they may want to harm themselves or harm others or is making some kind of a report where they either are indicating they've been harmed or might harm others.

Bonni [00:02:20] There are legal implications to this I am not a lawyer and I'm also not giving legal advice. You've probably heard this on your campuses before but I think we want to frame the conversation just around the ethical obligations that we have as professors and also the legal obligations that we have to only respect confidentiality to the point that we're obligated to do so.

Bonni [00:02:42] And that's the bottom line is going to be again a threat to harm oneself or harm someone else. And I don't actually often get it where students will ask me to hold something confidential when they tend to share it tends to be almost a sense of relief that they have either someone else more likely someone else that they can share that with.

Bonni [00:03:02] And it's not necessarily something that students have asked me to keep confidential but I always have the in the back of my mind if they were to that I always bring that up front so that I would never break their trust.

Bonni [00:03:12] They would know that I needed to share what they had shared with me if they brought something like that and one of the things that I have found helpful to care for students that are going through some kind of grief is to point them toward their resources.

Bonni [00:03:25] I did this after I have listened to the story and ask questions and I certainly don't want to interrupt the conversation and rush to this but I never want to leave a conversation with a student who's grieving without pointing them toward their resources.

Bonni [00:03:39] Every college campus that I'm aware of has a counseling center in it and those are where licensed a psychologist or at least supervised on their way to becoming licensed psychologists provide free counseling services to our students.

Bonni [00:03:53] And I have found that just depending on someone's family dynamics that may be a place that they already know is a welcome place for them to go to process through some of this or it might be a case where someone hasn't had that and their family they haven't had that kind of experience and they might just not know that that's a resource for them.

Bonni [00:04:14] There may be some sort of shame in seeking out that sort of resource. And I will often share the example that so many of us do that if I were to break my arm then I would take my arm in a cast on it and have a doctor look at it.

Bonni [00:04:28] And when things get broken in our lives there are professionals who can help us process through them and heal the brokenness in us and help us along that journey toward healing and sometimes just that little bit of of guidance can help them do that.

Bonni [00:04:45] I think that one other thing that is helpful is to not help them by lowering the expectations for the class. I have seen this happen unfortunately more than I would like to where we start to feel sorry for them.

Bonni [00:04:58] The sympathy becomes greater than our overall sense of what the course requirements are and what learning needs to be measured in order to show that someone passed a course and that's not going to really help them in the long run.

Bonni [00:05:16] I have a dear friend who when she was in college her dad passed away and when she shares about this experience I mean here she was a 21 year old whose dad unexpectedly passed away and that was quite quite normally a very shocking experience.

Bonni [00:05:34] And there were a number of classes that she didn't pass that semester and it wasn't until some years later that she was able to go back and make those classes up and the professors worked with her through that.

Bonni [00:05:47] And now when she looks at her degree she knows that she earned that degree. Nobody gave that degree to her because they felt sorry for her. Nobody said oh gosh I'm so sorry about your dad. Here let us let us sort of coddle you. Coddle is probably the wrong word but she can take pride knowing that she earned that degree and she can have pride in her accomplishment and in her resilience. And of course I've had a lot of students. It's sort of strained just.

Bonni [00:06:15] I actually had prepared the notes for this episode a few days ago and as I record it just this morning I had another student share with me that her dad had passed away a few months ago and I just it's staggering to me this semester seems to just that's unfortunately a theme.

Bonni [00:06:33] Students can respond to these things in so many different ways. It doesn't always mean failing classes it doesn't always mean sort of dropping out and coming back in a different time in their lives. There are lots of normal reactions to a significant loss like this.

Bonni [00:06:47] And in some cases the staying in school and staying focused on classes is actually going to be part of the healing process of some sort of healthy ability to separate oneself from the grief in the seasons that they're in the classroom that type of thing.

Bonni [00:07:02] So one of the things that we want to make sure that we do is recognize the pain and something that Edward bridges coined as the neutral zone.

Bonni [00:07:16] And I said Edward Bridges I'm having one of those days where I keep myths because it's William Bridges. William Bridges wrote a great book called Transitions and his entire career was all framed around helping people go through all different kinds of transitions from transitions in their careers transitions in their lives.

Bonni [00:07:33] And even if it's a good transition he talks about it might be a really happy change where we got a new job and we're moving on or we're now getting married and you know that's an exciting moment for us in our lives that there even in those positive changes they're still going to be a part of that change process that he coined the term the neutral zone.

Bonni [00:07:57] And he talks about beginnings every beginning begins with an ending. There are things that we have to let go of of how things used to be and then in the neutral zone he talks about well we're not quite to the new stuff yet we don't have a new normal yet.

Bonni [00:08:11] We're kind of in the in-between. We have more of a sense of ambiguity and there's some real downsides to that because it's hard for us to live in ambiguity.

Bonni [00:08:21] But there's also some positive sides that can come out of it if you can recognize seasons in your life when you have been in that in-between space something ended and you began something.

Bonni [00:08:31] But it's not all subtle dad kind of things are still up in the air as to what this new normal is going to look like. You might have also experienced extreme an extreme heightening of your creativity and he talks about that I know for myself in my career when it took a big turn and I was laid off from a company I had worked for for over ten years.

Bonni [00:08:52] Oh I can remember the significant loss and devastation that I have felt but also the exhilarating creativity I had all these ideas as I was doing all sorts of consulting with companies and I just I lay awake just thinking about ideas that I could have of just this whole new life.

Bonni [00:09:07] But it was still a scary life for me and I was still processing things. But boy just had lots of creativity that was sort of a fun part of a difficult season in my life.

Bonni [00:09:18] One of the things we want to be careful of is to avoid and we talked about this in past episodes we want to avoid personalizing any parts of what might come out of a student during the time when they are grieving so we almost want to keep our selves at a little bit of a distance from what's happening in the sense that we don't want to become entangled in it.

Bonni [00:09:38] And I suppose back to when I talk about pointing students toward their resources recognizing that we aren't licensed can't counselors and that yes we can be a listening ear but that listening ear really is going to be best served if it's pointing them toward getting help that's going to be from a licensed professional and some of them won't ever get there.

Bonni [00:09:58] But some of them, us supporting them to within some sort of limit is going to be helpful for them to make sure that they're getting the real support that they need in the long run and keeping ourselves at somewhat of a distance that can help a little bit to say gosh this would be really important for you to talk about with someone that's equipped to be able to help you and that's what they they do professionally.

Bonni [00:10:19] And that is a difficult thing I think sometimes to do and not seem like you're necessarily trying to be cold. But that really ultimately can help that

student I've written about this next piece of advice in the past and that is to avoid making assumptions if at all possible.

Bonni [00:10:37] We make them all the time. We would assume that if someone lost a parent for example we would assume that that was just absolutely devastating. But families look different.

Bonni [00:10:47] There can be where yes this person is related to me but we haven't necessarily been close. There can be some brokenness and relationships. So when hearing about a loss we can't process that loss as what that would be like for us if it happened to us.

Bonni [00:11:04] We want to remain a little bit just in the mode of asking questions if we're comfortable with doing that by the way and not just assuming that we understand the loss.

Bonni [00:11:14] And even after we think we understand the loss and we have some parts of the puzzle put together the very best thing that we can do for anyone who is grieving not just our students is to be fully present for them.

Bonni [00:11:27] And as I said we're not being present for them as a council we're recognizing our limitations and that but we can be present for some time in our offices and have the clinics in there and just allow them some space to talk about it without someone trying to fix them without someone trying to minimize their grief in some way.

Bonni [00:11:47] I will never forget that I had a dear dear friend who has shared the story of when her brother passed away and going into the church that weekend for the services. The number of times that she shared that people came up to her and said Don't feel bad about your brother dying. He's with Jesus now.

Bonni [00:12:08] For anyone listening. Whether or not you are a person who believes in Jesus or doesn't that you can picture that's not necessarily going to be the most helpful or best response to someone who has experienced that kind of a significant loss.

Bonni [00:12:21] So it's human nature to try to fix it where we try to fix it perhaps with our faith beliefs or we try to fix it with some sort of well if you have another brother or son. So whether whether or not we frame these things from the

spiritual perspective or whether or not we frame these things from some other paradigm if it can't be helpful as we try to fix.

Bonni [00:12:42] It's only helpful if we give that gift of just being fully present and allowing that person to be.

Bonni [00:12:48] Those are a few thoughts that I have around caring with for students who are grieving. I would love to hear from you though I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers and as I mentioned it's just been rattling around in my head so much this semester because I have so many students who have suffered such a significant loss and as I get the pictures of them in my head right now as I'm speaking to you.

Bonni [00:13:11] Wow. Every single one of their stories is entirely different and they have entirely different needs an entirely different things that they're experiencing. And quite frankly I couldn't have predicted any of them.

Bonni [00:13:23] I knew the people before these events happened so I couldn't have said oh that person this is how they would process that. I mean it's just such a mystery how we're even able to get through these things at all.

Bonni [00:13:34] Sometimes it's one of the things where I just think about the resilience of these individuals and the real beauty in their grief that I catch little glimpses of as I get to spend time with them. Hopefully this is helpful advice and hopefully some of you will be able to provide some thoughts and advice of your own.

Bonni [00:13:50] And as you know at the end of every episode I give recommendations and my recommendation to you and really to all of us is to process our own grief if there is something that's happened in our lives that we haven't quite gone through and processed either with a professional or with a trusted friend.

Bonni [00:14:09] It depends on what we need and the kinds of resources we're going to need to best support us through that healing perhaps the situations with your students I see some individuals who just really are so so terribly uncomfortable with the pain that the students are experiencing that they want to really keep their distance and not even really be in a room with them and have any conversations at all.

Bonni [00:14:32] Sometimes that can be an indication I'm not saying in every instance but in some instances that might be a little tag that says there's something that hasn't quite got processed for yourself and that would just be my recommendation to you I know through different seasons of my life when I have had difficult times. I have sought out a professional therapist and it has been such a gift to me to be able to process through things and I think those experiences that I had had in those environments have helped me be more present for my students.

Bonni [00:15:04] Thanks once again for listening to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I would love to hear your thoughts on supporting our students as they are grieving. You can do that at teachinginhighered.com/4.4 This is the 44th episode.

Bonni [00:15:20] If you have any overall feedback for the show. Episode topics or guests you'd like to suggest you can do that at teachinginhighered.com/feedback.

Bonni [00:15:30] And once a week I send out an email with all the links that we talk about in these shows and all the recommendations we have as well as an article on teaching or productivity.

Bonni [00:15:39] And you could be having one less thing to remember to go look up the links that you thought might sound really relevant to you. You can do that at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe and when you do that you'll get a free copy of Ed Tech Essentials: 19 tools to help you use technology to facilitate learning. I'll see you next time.

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