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## **Facilitation tips for discussing tough topics, from *The Advisory Guide***

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Tough topics will arise. Maybe it will be about cliques in the advisory group, or a drinking and driving collision involving students, or a national event like a terrorist attack or going to war. Students know what is happening and their concerns can easily show up in their behavior or mood. Advisory is ideal as a forum to clarify information, name emotions, and receive support. If advisors have spent time building a sense of community and establishing positive norms, most of the groundwork will have been laid. Here are a few more specific tips for tough conversations. Please see Small-and large-group dialogues in the Formats section for additional suggestions.

- Be available; show that you are paying attention. Particularly during crises, whether they are personal, local, or global, students need to know that adults are available to talk to them and are watching out for them.
- Listen to students and invite their thoughts. When students are concerned or upset, it is helpful for them to know they are not alone. Feeling a sense of connection is more reassuring than hearing a sophisticated analysis.
- Encourage students to generate an array of questions and consider different perspectives. If complex events are handled as if they are simple, they can quickly lead to polarized debates.
- Facilitate the group so that it models the reassuring community that students are sensing has been shaken. Many techniques can help, such as:
  - Go-rounds, so that everyone, not just the loudest voices, can speak if they so choose;
  - Wait time between speakers or maybe even paper for jotting down thoughts, so more students will be able to contribute ideas, and those ideas will be clearer; and
  - A talking stick or other object (if students are nervous speaking publicly, holding something can help).
- Quickly intervene or defuse verbal attacking. Students who already feel anxious about a recent occurrence might express things strongly, but it won't do them or their peers any good if those strong expressions are personal.
- Check specifically with students who are especially quiet or acting in uncharacteristic ways. Some students will seek you out if they need to talk; others need proactive encouragement.
- As an advisor, you are a support, not necessarily an expert. Use the group as a resource; they can compare perceptions and find information. The advisory coordinators can supply a list of information or referral resources.
- Reflect on your own views and beliefs, and consider to what extent those are appropriate to contribute to the conversation. What is most important is showing students that you are listening, not lecturing.

Excerpted from *The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools*, by Rachel A. Poliner and Carol Miller Lieber, Educators for Social Responsibility, 2004