

The Faith Community as Intermediate and Long Term Caregiver:

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STEPPING FORWARD IN A DISASTER

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Introduction

At the time of a natural or human-caused disaster, we count on the response of emergency services including police, fire, and medical services. Increasingly, the faith community also has stepped forward to respond to the initial impact of disaster as well as the protracted recovery period that follows. Every disaster—September 11, 2001, the devastating hurricanes that swept across Florida in 2004, the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in 1995—has its unique context, circumstances and set of challenges. Complex, catastrophic disasters create great emotional and spiritual upheaval for survivors and victims, as well as for their families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Understanding these complexities and building an awareness of appropriate responses and interventions are important for faith leaders, who not only need to prepare for an immediate response to disaster but also need to know how to strengthen the possibilities for positive outcomes over the long-term recovery process for those who have been traumatized by disaster.

Trauma comes from the Greek root for “wounded.” Psychologists and sociologists have put forward a variety of definitions. According to Bessel A. Van der Kolk, trauma occurs when “one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences. This results in a state of helplessness, a feeling that one’s actions have no bearing on the outcome of one’s life.” Trauma also results when individuals experience an extraordinary event that actually threatens survival and shatters assumptions about safety, meaningfulness and a benevolent world (Schachter 2003).

The Faith Community as Immediate and Long-Term Caregiver

Special care professionals – particularly chaplains and leaders of religious traditions – including laypersons – are generally viewed as accessible caregivers who occupy positions of trust and offer safe space for pastoral and crisis intervention. Further, the faith community is:





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- viewed as being particularly capable of offering the language of faith, hope, and spiritual reinforcement when individual, family, or community face sudden tragedy or spiritual crisis;
- viewed as being able to mobilize material, social, and spiritual resources over the long term for those affected by disaster;
- viewed as being a voice for the voiceless when needs are still to be met for those recovering from the disaster; and,
- generally committed to caregiving responsibilities for long-term recovery without expiration dates, as opposed to timeline-driven governmental resources.

PREPAREDNESS PHASE

The Faith Community and the Importance of Preparedness

The faith community is usually prepared to assist individuals, families, and communities that have faced losses from local disasters like fire and flood. In general, it is less prepared to face the challenges of a catastrophic disaster in which there are mass casualties and significant loss of property or both. Preparing in advance can make both a quantitative and qualitative difference in both the immediate and long-term outcome for those individuals, families and communities affected by catastrophic events. Advanced preparation takes into account the following key points:

- Caregivers from the faith community will find that their caregiving responsibilities will last weeks, months, and even years.
- Caregivers, in general, are more prepared to provide short-term recovery efforts and are less well-equipped to address extended recovery periods or recovery following particularly complex disasters.
- Caregivers from the faith community will find that meeting the emotional and spiritual needs of disaster survivors is vital in any long-term recovery process. Helping to find new meaning and purpose are critical spiritual and emotional care objectives.
- Caregivers from the faith community increasingly face complex, catastrophic

- disasters. As a result, they will require more extensive awareness about the appropriate interventions and desirable applications for restoring emotional stability and spiritual renewal. Caregivers can minimize the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout with greater awareness and intentional preparation.
- Caregivers benefit from information and knowledge about viable intervention applications based upon best practices and previously tried positive examples. Acquisition of skills and use of best practices to provide spiritual and emotional support are beneficial to affected individuals.
- Caregivers from the faith community maximize their performance, mobilization, and delivery of resources when they are aware of the laws and policies of governmental and regulatory agencies.

Faith Community Preparedness for the Life-cycle of a Disaster

There are discernable differences between the physical, material, and emotional and spiritual phases of recovery following a disaster. This is particularly true when there is extensive loss of life. For example, when a fire destroys a school dormitory and claims the lives of students, the material reconstruction of the physical edifice will be completed much sooner than the emotional and spiritual recovery of the victims' parents and relatives. Such recovery can take a lifetime as the grief process is particularly profound for parents who lose a son or daughter.



Emotional and spiritual recovery are deeply affected by the nature, scope, and complexity of the disaster.

The phases of material and physical recovery include:

- The **emergency phase** in which first responders—family, neighbors, and local emergency response personnel (firefighters, police, and emergency medical services)—get people to safety, administer emergency medical care, and restore order. Basic human needs such as provision of food, water, shelter, medical care, clothing, and transportation are met.
- The **short-term or stabilizing phase** incorporates, in addition to the provision of basic physical needs, the organization of volunteers and other established and specialized services (such as debris removal or specialized security). In major disasters, when local resources cannot meet these needs, state and federal governmental assistance often becomes a part of the response. Faith-based disaster response organizations may also play a significant role in this phase.
- The **long-term recovery phase**, which can take months or even years, not only entails a combination of local, state, and federal response programs, but also includes the full involvement of faith-based disaster response agencies that address unmet needs and provide long-term intervention designed to assist individuals, families, and communities to make a full recovery.

The **emotional and spiritual phases** of recovery are much less predictable. Emotional and spiritual recovery are deeply affected by the nature, scope, and complexity of the disaster. The outlook for long-term recovery is profoundly impacted by loss of life, significant loss of property, or both. Trauma resulting from a catastrophic incident causes immeasurable pain, suffering, and loss.

The cycle of emotional and spiritual recovery encompasses

- profound uncertainty about the loss of security and how to return to what was normal before the incident; and
- emotional reactions, including traumatic stress, that overwhelm basic coping mechanisms (common reactions to trauma may include feelings of being overwhelmed, withdrawal from usual activities, recurring intrusive memories and/or memory loss, and phases of anxiety, panic, fear, anger, hostility, and/or depression).

Spiritual reactions include:

- a crisis of faith in which there are feelings of being abandoned by God, finding it hard to pray, no spirit of thankfulness;
- despair, loss of hope, and a prolonged state of hopelessness;
- disengagement from religious practices and interaction with faith leaders and faith communities;
- the need to perpetually ask “why” a compassionate God would allow such suffering and pain to happen; and,
- a search for continuous reassurance that God will provide safety and security, and re-establish goodness in life.

Overall, many of us are more comfortable giving thanks in our prayers than crying out the pain and suffering we feel following a disaster or tragedy.



The process of recovery from a trauma will vary from one incident to another and will be significantly influenced by the nature and scope of the disaster...

GUIDELINES AND INTERVENTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

In the short term, the primary purpose for pastoral and crisis intervention with both individuals and families is to offer security and safety. Over the long term, the primary purpose is to assist and facilitate the restoration of faith and hope, and to help find meaning in life following a disaster, particularly when there has been a loss of life.

RESPONSE PHASE

At the time of crisis, the religious leader will want to:

- **Offer Security.** Above all, disaster victims need assurance about their safety. Offer hospitality (“Do you need anything? A drink of water, food, a blanket? Do you have shelter?”). Some houses of worship have opened their premises as shelter accommodations, feeding centers, distribution centers, and/or day care centers. They have also partnered with ecumenical or inter-religious groups to implement emergency preparedness plans that had been developed prior to the disaster.
- **Listen Carefully and Provide Support.** Assist the disaster victim to express him or herself and allow the victim or survivor to accept the reality and experience the pain of loss. Listening carefully usually accomplishes more than talking to the victim. Listening with an attentive ear but providing attentive language when appropriate, as well as supportive language and open-ended questions, will help reduce the shock and produce conversation during which interventions for support are possible. Presence with the bereaved and affected individuals and families is the most important reassurance that religious leaders can offer at any time of disaster.

- **Avoid “Fixing.”** Religious leaders can only assist victims and survivors. They cannot do everything for the victim or survivor, nor can they fix what is not fixable. Religious leaders can not bring back those who died as a result of the disaster, but they can assure the family that the faith community will be there to help them through the pain and loss; they can also commit to helping victims find new hope and purpose in life. Religious leaders can commit to accompaniment over the long term.

- **Focus on the Needs of the Survivor.** Constant review is important in the context of ensuring that the needs of the victim or survivor are being met. Such review should take care that the focus of the religious leader remains fixed on meeting the needs of the victim and not those of the caregiver. “Whose needs am I trying to fulfill here?” is a key question that should be constantly re-assessed.

RECOVERY PHASE

It may take some time after a crisis for the initial shock to subside. The process of recovery from a trauma will vary from one incident to another and will be significantly influenced by the nature and scope of the disaster—for example, whether or not it was a natural event (such as a flood, tornado, hurricane, winter storm, heat wave, or earthquake) or a human-caused incident (such as a hazardous materials incident, nuclear power plant disaster, school shooting or terrorist act).

In general, trauma stress specialists agree that suggesting the use of ritual in trauma recovery can be helpful and meaningful for many victims and survivors. Ritual can assist in reestablishing hope. According to Lisa Schirch, Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) faculty, ritual is:



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- **A unique social space, set aside from normal life.** For example, houses of worship made parlors available for the surviving spouses, partners, and loved ones of September 11th victims to gather regularly following the terrorist attacks. Bereavement groups were established, special summer programs for children and youth were organized by religious institutions, and recreation equipment in school grounds in memory of the deceased was created.
- **A way to communicate through symbolic actions using body language, senses, emotions, and symbols rather than words.** Examples are prayer groups, support groups using cultural practices such as established meals together, and the establishment of new religious traditions such as prayer circles, Wednesday night sacred texts study groups, or healing-music events. All such activities are aimed at bringing the members of houses of worship together during difficult times.
- **An experience that marks and assists in the process of personal and relational change or transformation.**

PREPAREDNESS PHASE

Why Prepare?

As disasters have become more complex and grown in scope, the need for preparedness has become more apparent. Disasters of varying scale have occurred in the New York City area for decades. These have ranged from house and apartment fires to large-scale disasters such as those of September 11th. Emergency services have increasingly become both more sophisticated and coordinated—particularly governmental services. The faith community continues to struggle to develop a similar level of sophistication and coordination but there remains a need to prepare further.

Such preparation is paramount if survivors, victims, and their families are to recover from devastating disasters. The ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and heritage diversity of the New York City area adds to the challenge of developing appropriate responses to meet not only the immediate physical and material needs of those affected, but also the demanding emotional and spiritual needs of the long-term recovery process. The faith community can contribute significantly by learning more about the nature and scope of disasters from an emotional and spiritual perspective, as well as by building on the best practices already developed by those who have experienced previous disaster responses.

The resources listed in the resource section of this chapter will help build further awareness, understanding, and knowledge about appropriate responses. Take time to learn more about the phases of recovery and the emotional and spiritual dimensions of preparedness – and remember to include other services in the care you provide, as appropriate.

Editor's Note: the resources and websites provided here are provided by the authors as resources for issues raised in this chapter. For a list of all the resources provided in this manual, please refer to Chapter 10, just before the Reference Section.

RESOURCES

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Books and Articles

Church World Service, *Bringing God's Presence to Trauma Victims*. Order from www.cwserp.org

Church World Service, *Cooperative Faith-Based Disaster Recovery in Your Community*. Order from www.cwserp.org

Church World Service, *Guide to Disaster Ministry in Your Congregation*. Order from www.cwserp.org

Ehrenreich, John H., *Coping with Disasters: A Guidebook to Psychosocial Intervention*.

Download from www.mhwwb.org/copingwithdisaster.pdf

Harbough, Gary, *Act of God, Active God*. This pocket guide addresses spiritual understandings of faith questions arising from natural disasters. Order from www.augsburgfortress.org

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books, 1997. A classic that provides valuable information on trauma and the stages of recovery.

Joseph, Judith C., *A Chaplain's Companion*. This pocket-sized booklet describes the major faith traditions and rituals helpful to working in a hospital, nursing home, hospice, or long-term care facility. It also provides prayers appropriate to those faith traditions when operating in an inter-religious setting. It is particularly aimed for chaplaincy work.

Contact: www.conexuspress.com

Melander Rochelle, & Eppley, H., *The Spiritual Leader's Guide to Self-Care*, Bethesda, MD. The Alban Institute, 2002. This resource is a companion for religious leaders, lay leaders, and others who would like guidance about how to make changes in their personal life and ministry with regard to vision, work, relationships, and spiritual and intellectual needs.

Internet Resources

The Alban Institute provides a listing of resources available from the Alban Institute for laity and ordained. www.alban.org

The Centering Corporation provides resources for pastoral care to bereaved individuals as well as pastoral resources for responding to grief as a result of a death or other non-death related loss. www.centering.org

Church World Service provides an introduction to some of the stressors, defines stress and trauma, describes symptoms, discusses what to do after you experience a traumatic event, offers aids to the management of cumulative stress, and offers links and on-line resources to further resources. www.churchworldservice.org/hr/self-care/stress-tauma/index.html

The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation provides a bookstore listing of reading materials useful for crisis intervention. www.icisf.org

The Sidran Institute provides suggested essential readings in understanding trauma, treatment issues, trauma and memory, and provides links to training opportunities. www.sidran.org/essential.html

Preparedness and Training Information

The Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists provides a broad range of useful, published resources, including resources for training and study. www.atss-hq.com

Church World Service posts training opportunities for disaster preparedness as well as post-disaster training for ecumenical and inter-religious participants. www.churchworldservice.org

Eastern Mennonite University provides information about training opportunities in the New York area, as well as information on the trauma awareness and resilience training offered on the EMU campus through the STAR (Seminars on Trauma Awareness and Resilience) Program. www.emu.edu/ctp/star_intro.html

The Federal Emergency Management Agency provides current information about FEMA assistance programs, meetings, training events, and other useful up-to-date information on recovery assistance and disaster preparedness. www.fema.gov
Of particular interest is the FEMA “Are You Ready” guide prepared for citizen preparedness, which can be downloaded from www.fema.gov/areyouready/why_prepare

The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation provides an abundant resource reading list on crisis intervention and stress management techniques. <http://www.icisf.org>

New York Disaster Interfaith Services provides information about training events in the Greater New York Area. www.nydis.org