



Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health

Natural or human-made disasters are by definition disturbing and unexpected. Most people react to a perceived threat with stress. Stress reactions are normal in most cases but may differ depending upon the severity of the situation. This Tip Sheet includes guidance on identifying and coping with stress reactions, and making mental health referrals.

Common Stress Reactions to Disasters

It is common for people to experience different disaster stress reactions before, during, or after a disaster. It is helpful to be aware of these types of reactions in yourself and others. Reactions will vary among people. Some common reactions include:

- A concern for basic survival
- Difficulty understanding and accepting what has happened
- Grief over loss of loved ones and loss of valued and meaningful possessions
- Being unable to stop thinking about the disaster
- Domestic violence
- Being easily reminded of the event by things that are not entirely related
- Reliving the smells and sounds; seeing details of the incident
- Increased difficulty controlling emotions
- Being easily irritated or startled
- Fear and anxiety about personal safety and physical safety of loved ones
- Sleep disturbances, often including nightmares and imagery from disaster
- Concerns about relocation and related isolation or crowded living conditions
- Concerns about backlash and social alienation
- A need to talk about the events and feelings associated with disaster, often repeatedly
- A need to feel one is part of the community and its recovery efforts

Stress Reaction Category	Examples
Physical	Headaches, nausea, tremors, poor sleep, jumpiness, difficulty breathing
Emotional	Shock, numbness, feeling overwhelmed, anxiety, guilt, denial, feeling heroic
Cognitive	Confusion, indecisiveness, flashbacks, intrusive images, short attention span
Behavioral	Irritability, suspicion, withdrawal, increase/decrease eating, restlessness
Spiritual	Loss of meaning and purpose, anger at God, questioning beliefs
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict

Coping with Disaster Stress Reactions

Below are some steps you can take to cope with your stress reactions:

- **Talk it out.** Share your feelings and thoughts with family, friends and others in your community when you are ready. This may reduce the intensity of the feelings and help you feel less uncomfortable. You may also find that your loved ones are experiencing similar feelings and that you are not alone.
- **Know your limits.** Make time to relax and reduce stimulus and other reminders of the disaster.
- **Pay close attention to your physical health.** Keep medical appointments, get enough rest and exercise, eat nutritious meals, practice deep breathing, engage in fun and enjoyable activities, be gentle with yourself and take time to appreciate the joy and beauty in your life.
- **Avoid** prolonged or excessive use of substances such as sugar, caffeine and alcohol.
- **Reassure children** in your life about their safety. Help them to understand how they are protected. Answer their questions as honestly as you can. Remember that children often adapt their responses to those of adults around them; therefore it is important that adults model healthy responses.

Helping Others Cope with Stress Reactions

As religious leaders, turning to you may be the first step that an individual takes in getting help. In addition to encouraging others to consider the tips above, you can also help to:

- Identify concrete needs and sources of support, such as Assistance Guides (published after a disaster occurs)
- Reinforce the importance of establishing a “normal routine”
- Educate others on common stress reactions and coping techniques
- Identify ways to relax – suggest relaxation techniques

Recognize that children, the elderly, people with disabilities, the traditionally underserved, and those of lower social or economic status may be dealing with compound issues.

Continued on reverse

Referral for Mental Health Services

Working so closely with individuals who are coping with a disaster, spiritual care providers are in a unique position to help others identify mental health needs and to make referrals to services. A **referral** is the act of recommending that a person should speak to a professional who is trained to handle the difficulties and complexities of his or her needs.

When to Refer

You should refer an individual when you realize that an individual needs help beyond your capability and level of training. Some indications that a person should seek help from a mental health professional include:

- You have difficulty maintaining real contact with the person
- A person hints at or talks openly of suicide
- A person seems to be socially isolated
- A person presents imaginary ideas or details of persecution
- You become aware of child abuse or any criminal activity
- You see the development of persistent physical symptoms
- You become aware of dependency on alcohol or drugs
- You see the person engaging in risky behavior (showing carelessness towards oneself/others)
- You yourself become restless, confused, and have recurring bad thoughts or dreams about your interactions with an individual

How to Refer

- Before contacting a professional, inform the person concerned about your intentions
- Let him/her know that you care for him/her and then explain the reasons for the referral
- If possible, present different referral options to the person concerned
- Discuss matters such as fees, location, accessibility, etc.
- Assure the person that you will continue your support until the referral is complete
- You might offer to accompany him/her to the first visit with the professional

Resources for Referrals

As trusted figures, spiritual care providers can help encourage people who are not likely to reach out for additional support through the mental health system. During times of disaster, this may include referrals to:

- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) through an employer
- Health Insurance Providers
- Mutual Assistance Networks
- Disaster Mental Health Programs (established after a disaster)
- American Red Cross

In NYC, you can also access LifeNet™, a crisis hotline with counselors who are available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day and who speak a variety of languages. LifeNet™ is a program of the Mental Health Association of NYC, Inc. Visit the website at www.mhaofnyc.org or you can reach LifeNet™ by calling any one of the three toll-free, anonymous hotlines:

- English: 1.800.LifeNet (1.800.543.3638)
- Spanish: 1.877.Ayudese (1.877-298-3373)
- Asian Languages: 1.877.990.8585
- TTY: 1.212.982.5284 (for the hearing impaired)
- 911 in case of a mental health emergency

NYC Office of Mental Health Disaster Preparedness and Response at DOHMH

The NYC Department of Health and Mental Health Hygiene (DOHMH) created the Office of Mental Health Disaster Preparedness and Response to develop plans and trainings to meet the mental health needs of New Yorkers during times of disasters. To learn more about this office, visit the website at www.nyc.gov/health or call 212.219.5400.

RESOURCES

- **“The NYDIS Manual for Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response in New York City,”** published by New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS). www.nydis.org. 212.669.6100.
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration www.samhsa.gov/Matrix/matrix_disaster.aspx for extensive lists of resources on disaster mental health topics.
- The National Center for PTSD offers a Psychological First Aid Manual. You can find the document at www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/publications. It contains helpful guidance, tip sheets, and resources, in addition to the website www.ncptsd.va.gov/index.html.
- Take the time to review **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Self Care for Religious Leaders”** for suggestions on how to care for yourself and family before, during, and after disasters.

NEW YORK DISASTER INTERFAITH SERVICES

4 West 43rd Street - Suite 604, New York, NY 10036 ■ Tel 212.669.6100 ■ Fax 347.284.0054 ■ www.NYDIS.org

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR READINESS, RESPONSE, AND RECOVERY