



# Disaster Spiritual Care

**During disasters, a diverse cross-section of people still seek spiritual care. Religious leaders will be challenged to support and offer an open environment with respect to social diversity, religious diversity, and unfamiliar cultural settings. Here are some tips to guide you as you help your congregants and the broader community recover from the impact of a disaster.**

## Guiding Principles for Providing Spiritual Care

- Offer a ministry of presence and hospitality
- Meet, accept, and respect persons exactly as they are
- Do no harm – never evangelize, proselytize, or exploit persons in vulnerable need
- Nurture and encourage every spiritual perspective to be a source of strength in difficult times
- Protect confidentiality
- Respect social diversity and cross-cultural settings
- Function at levels appropriate to your training and educational background
- Help to understand and normalize what has happened
- Know the available resources and assistance

## Spiritual Stress Reactions to Disaster

Many people will experience spiritual stress reactions after a disaster. Learn about these reactions, and how to recognize them in yourself and others. (See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health”** to learn about different types of stress reactions and coping practices.) Some common spiritual stress reactions include:

- Reconsidering core tenets of religious beliefs
- Questioning justice and meaning
- Feeling far from previously held beliefs
- Suddenly turning away from or to God
- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Sense of isolation from God and religious community
- Anger at spiritual leaders
- Familiar faith practices seem empty (prayer, scripture, hymns)

## Spiritual Care Practices: Supporting the Healing Process

Spiritual care providers can help provide a sense of support and hope. This is done through practices that validate an individual's experience and bolster/nurture the spirit. Some examples of such practices are:

- Understanding and normalizing what has happened
- Carrying-out a ministry of presence
- Identifying and solving immediate, concrete problems
- Encouraging people to talk about experiences and being an active and supportive listener
- Recognizing normal stress reactions and finding resources to address serious problems
- Supporting and paying attention to anniversaries and other important dates

## Disaster Spiritual Care Training

To be effective in the role of a trusted caregiver, spiritual care providers should become educated in various aspects of disaster response and recovery. Contact NYDIS at [www.nydis.org](http://www.nydis.org) or 212.669.6100 for more information on training opportunities. This is a type of counseling in which ordained spiritual leaders provide therapy services. Pastoral Counselors are subject to the standards of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling, and many are either licensed as a LPC or LMFT as well. American pastoral counselors are required to meet licensing standards, or be under the supervision of a licensed professional, before providing psychotherapy to clients. To learn more about pastoral counseling or licensing, visit [www.aapc.org](http://www.aapc.org).

## 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 training 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](http://www.nyc.gov/health) or call 212.219.5400.

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## Referral for Mental Health Services

While 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. **Referral** means 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.

For more information, see the **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health.”**

### 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](http://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

## RESOURCES

- NVOAD published **“Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster for Disaster Response Volunteers, First Responders, and Disaster Planners”** which offers great information and additional resources. Much of the information on this Tip Sheet was adapted from this guide. [www.nvoad.org/articles/light\\_our\\_way\\_links.pdf](http://www.nvoad.org/articles/light_our_way_links.pdf). 202.955.8396.
- Care for the Caregivers Interfaith Project [www.cccny.net/caregivers](http://www.cccny.net/caregivers). A program of the Council of Churches of the City of New York.
- **“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](http://www.nydis.org). 212.669.6100.
- Church World Service. [www.churchworldservice.org](http://www.churchworldservice.org), [www.cwserp.org](http://www.cwserp.org). 212.870.2061.

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