



Self-Care for Religious Leaders

TIP SHEET

09

“Self-care involves the need to develop a vision for one’s life and then develop a plan that allows one to live out that vision. It involves ‘caring for the whole’ – body, mind, and spirit. It involves understanding that before we can be effective in caring for others we must be effective in caring for ourselves.”*

Self-care begins before a disaster occurs. The normal daily lives of religious leaders can be very stressful, and during times of disaster, responsibilities and pressures multiply. Religious leaders will be caring for family, congregants, staff, and others in the community who are likely facing loss, disruption, and chaos. Often, this is a very rewarding but also challenging and exhausting endeavor, especially considering that disaster recovery can last for years. Lack of self-care may impair your decision-making and coping skills. Learning the tools and practices of self-care before a disaster occurs can help your overall well-being and health on a daily basis.

COMMON BARRIERS TO SELF-CARE AND WELLNESS

- Lack of time to focus on personal well-being
- Loss of time for personal prayer and theological study
- Substance abuse
- Participation in violent or abusive relationships
- Lack of energy, tiredness
- Lack of money for resources
- Guilt – feeling that others are more important
- Belief that self-care will not work, can’t be done
- Lack of knowledge
- Fear
- Feeling of weakness
- Ego

MAKE A PLAN FOR SELF-CARE AND PRACTICE DAILY

Develop a plan for self-care that you can use daily and that includes identifying tools and routines that work for you. These tools and routines will then be available to you during times of disaster, and help you manage high stress levels.

Self and Family

- Improve self-awareness.
- Know your areas of strength and vulnerability.
- Learn to recognize signs of stress in yourself, family, and others.
- Look for signs of compassion fatigue.
- Identify stress management techniques that work for you.
- Practice a healthy diet and regular exercise.
- Help, and take care of, your family. Taking care of your family and ensuring they have their needs met will help you better take care of yourself and your congregants. Family can include those people whom we love and with whom we live, as well as those people with proximity to our lives, whether it is a traditional family, a colleague, or a roommate.
- Develop support structures in your life.
 - Talk to other religious leaders and develop peer support.
 - Share emotions when appropriate and communicate openly with friends, family, and colleagues.
- Avoid risky behavior – practice a balanced lifestyle.
- Monitor use of self-soothing behaviors (i.e. alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes and food consumption).
- Avoid prolonged or excessive use of substances, which can aggravate stress, if abused.

Professional Life

- Learn skills in reconciliation and conflict resolution, and also stress and time-management techniques.
- Limit work hours – set boundaries and take time off.
- Define clear purposes and goals.
- Attend to your own spiritual life.
- A spiritual leader must manage expectations of others and self:
 - Be realistic about what you can and cannot do.
 - Recognize the different roles people look to you to fill during times of disaster.

*Ausma O. Mursch (former Executive Director, Lutheran Counseling Center of New York)

Professional Life (Continued)

- Assess your administrative and spiritual care capabilities
 - What are your competencies and expertise?
 - What types of care are you trained to provide?
 - Do you have any physical, emotional, or cognitive considerations that would impact your work?

KNOW ABOUT COMPASSION FATIGUE AND RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS

People who are in helping professions are particularly susceptible to “compassion fatigue.” This occurs with individuals who are caregivers and have constant exposure to the suffering of others. It comes from secondary stress or trauma experience from hearing of the suffering of others. Some of the signs of compassion fatigue include:

- Sleep disturbances
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Lack of focus during worship/study/spiritual practices
- Intrusive thoughts
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Depression
- Avoiding intimacy or seeking excessive or inappropriate intimacy/sexual expression
- Increase in ineffective and/or self-destructive behaviors
- Diminished sense of purpose/enjoyment with vocation
- Decreased functioning in non-professional situations
- Loss of hope

SEEK HELP

Seek professional advice as needed. Normal stress reactions will often reduce after days or weeks following the disaster. However, if stress symptoms persist for over a month and begin to interfere with normal daily activities, this may be a sign of a sustained traumatic reaction, and it may be necessary for you to seek professional mental health services, for yourself or those you are serving. Your faith community may provide chaplains or pastoral care staff to support religious leaders too.

Most communities and states offer a crisis hotline. In New York City, you can contact a counselor via NYC Well, for free, confidential mental health support. They are available 24 hours day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year in more than 200 languages. For more information see their website <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/> or contact them for help by:

- Phone: 1-888-692-9355
- Text: Text WELL to 65173 (message and data rates may apply)
- Chat Online: <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/get-help-now/chat-with-a-counselor-now/>

OTHER RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control — Coping with Disaster and Trauma: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/index.asp>
- Church World Service — Emotional/Spiritual Care Webinar: <https://bit.ly/36MUtp0>
- NVOAD — “*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 the previous edition of this guide: <https://bit.ly/2FeUzvF>
- National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Tip Sheets for U.S. Religious Leaders : www.n-din.org
- National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Disaster Chaplain Training: www.n-din.org
- NYDIS Tip Sheets: “Disaster Spiritual Care” and “Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health”
- NVOAD— Points of Consensus on Emotional & Spiritual Care: <https://bit.ly/3kewhB9>
- NYDIS (New York Disaster Interfaith Services) — “*The NYDIS Manual for New York City Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response and Recovery*”: <https://bit.ly/3m5hNFk>
- ICISF — COVID-19 Resources: <https://icisf.org/covid19-resources/>
- Vibrant Emotional Health— Staying in Balance: Healthy Solutions for Managing Workplace Stress: <https://bit.ly/3m8NHRk>
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration — Self-Care Tips for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers and Other Resources: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>
- BOOK — *Creating Spiritual and Psychological Resilience: Integrating Care in Disaster Relief Work* by Daniel Bush, Grant Brenner & Joshua Moses
- BOOK — *Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional & National Tragedy* by Co-Editors: Rabbi Stephen Roberts & Rev. Dr. Willard W. C. Ashley

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