

SECTION FOUR

Disaster Spiritual Care

IN LONG TERM RECOVERY

Summary

Spiritual care has an important role during the long term recovery phase following disaster. Assessing and providing for the spiritual needs of individuals, families and communities can kindle important capacities of hope and resilience. Specific strategies for spiritual care during long term recovery can bolster these strengths.

Disaster Spiritual Care in Long Term Recovery



THE TRANSITION FROM RESPONSE to the long term recovery phase can be painful and confusing for a community. Disaster impacted persons will naturally and quickly build a view of the community after disaster with reference to the many agencies and organizations that have appeared during the response phase to help.

Some agencies that specialize in response may have visibly different roles during long term recovery. Some people who responded initially may not be replaced when they finish their deployments. While disaster response agencies provide important long term recovery assistance, nevertheless, the transformation to long term recovery may be accompanied by feelings of abandonment in the community. This is an

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THE SCHOOL GYMNASIUM WAS PACKED. Alan and Helen sat near the back waiting for the Memorial Service to begin. The massive room hummed with conversation and scrape of chairs, but Alan didn't hear anything.

He was remembering the stream of days since the storm. So much had happened. So much still needed to be done. He recalled late nights driving back from the hospital visiting his sister. He smiled when he thought of the Rabbi who continued to greet him by name.

When the service began, Helen looked out at her many neighbors. Some she had known her whole life; some had moved to town quite recently. The day was, Helen thought, when everybody in town went to one of three churches. But that had all changed. The many newcomers had brought a great variety of backgrounds with them. Helen was glad that the service would be encompassing and welcoming for everybody.

The names of the dead were read. The words stung Alan's heart. Most things could be replaced, but people can never be brought back. A hushed stillness covered the room.

especially important time for spiritual care providers to attend to such feelings.

While a disaster may have initially evoked feelings of rage, dismay and shock, the transition to long term recovery may involve feelings of exhaustion, confusion and despair. During both response and long term recovery, spiritual care providers serve individuals, families and the community in many of the same ways. Yet, during long term recovery particular attention is focused on transforming feelings. Some key spiritual care activities that can focus the needs of this phase include:

- Community Spiritual Assessment⁹
- Spiritual care interventions to kindle hope
- Attention to emotional and spiritual issues around anniversary times
- Organized community services of memorial and remembrance
- Retreat opportunities for spiritual care providers



One Holy Reading was shared at the service. It spoke for many as they struggled to make sense of what had happened to their community.

“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”



COMMUNITY SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT

The transition to long term recovery in a disaster can be a fitting juncture to consider performing a Community Spiritual Assessment. The principle behind a Community Spiritual Assessment is simply to identify spiritual needs for which the community may not have ready assets. It will help to identify these needs in a concrete way that can be articulated while designing the long term recovery plan. Numerous agencies and organizations with an interest in spiritual care will endeavor to meet these identified needs.

An inter-disciplinary group made up of community faith leaders, disaster response personnel and community volunteers could perform a Community Spiritual Assessment. They could meet to discuss the community's needs and assets around the following dimensions of concern:

SPIRITUAL CARE DIMENSIONS OF CONCERN

Public Health Dimensions

Has the disaster involved injury or death? Was there an interruption in food supplies? Has the disaster threatened the community public health? Has the disaster jeopardized safe water supplies?

Psychological Dimensions

How intensely is the community traumatized by the disaster? Are there adequate numbers of mental health professionals in the area? Were the mental health professionals in the area adversely affected by the event?

Psychosocial Dimensions

What are the key material and personal resources that this community possesses? Is the economy of the community threatened by the disaster? Were large numbers of people unemployed by the disaster?

Neighboring Community Dimensions

Do the neighboring communities possess resources that can assist at this time? In what ways are neighboring communities also affected by this disaster? Are there adequate numbers of volunteers? Are the volunteers taxing the resources of the community?

Ethnic and Cultural Dimensions

In what ways does the community's ethnic make-up affect the way various groups perceive the disaster and response? Do any of the ethnic groups present in the community require special consideration?

Societal Issues Dimensions

How do class, ethnic, gender, language or educational barriers affect the way this community perceives the disaster? Are there populations that may feel they don't have a voice?

Community Leadership Dimensions

How equipped to handle the demands of disaster recovery is the community's leadership? Have they worked through similar events in the past?



SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

Beliefs and Meaning

Are there predominant religious expressions in the community? In what way do minority religious expressions need special consideration? Do the various religious communities interpret disaster in distinct ways?

Vocation and Consequence

Does this community have a vision for itself distinct from this disaster? Has the disaster threatened, bolstered or altered that vision?

Community History and Story

What themes are prevalent in this community's history? Are there previous challenges, setbacks, disasters?

Courage and Growth

Are courage and altruism being exhibited during this disaster? Is there a sense of transformation present?

Ritual and Practice

Has the community organized corporate ritual experiences during the disaster? Is there a plan for continued ritual expression, e.g. anniversaries?

Community Cohesion

Does the community seem cohesive and unified during recovery? Are there significant groups or persons external to community cohesion?

Spiritual Leadership

How equipped are spiritual leaders to handle the demands of disaster recovery? Have they worked through similar events in the past?¹⁰

The Community Spiritual Assessment can identify areas in the community's spiritual life that have assisted during the disaster as well as areas that may benefit from further development and attention. Numerous agencies and organization have the ability to attend to these areas through training, consultancy, deployable personnel and other resources.



SPIRITUAL CARE INTERVENTIONS FOR KINDLING HOPE

The concept of hope may be as difficult to explain and define as the concept of spirituality. This may be the case because the two are somehow connected. Hope seems to be a capacity to hold—in a present time of struggle—a sense of wholeness and strength that rests in a transcendent force. For some people, this force may be a sense of the Divine. For others, this force may be a sense of the strength of community. It must be somehow transcendent from the “self.” Gabriel Marcel described hope this way:

Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me.

and further:

There can be no hope that does not constitute itself through a we and for a we. I would be tempted to say that all hope is at the bottom choral.¹¹

Hope is the central capacity that contributes toward personal and communal resilience. It enables individuals, families and communities to endure great hardship with courage. The maintenance of hope during times of struggle is a central priority of spiritual care providers. The loss of hope is despair.

Despair is one of the most crippling human spiritual conditions. It can adversely affect many other areas of physical, mental and spiritual health. Despair can begin to take root when tasks seem insurmountable and conditions seem unsolvable. Therefore, some of the most powerful interventions that can be performed by spiritual care providers are interventions that specifically stimulate a sense and experience of hope in individuals and communities.



Seeking opportunities to appreciate a form of beauty is one powerful intervention. Both natural and created beauty can infuse our spirits with a sense of strength and energy that transcends temporal concerns. Especially when times are hard and burdens are heavy, people must take time to enjoy sunsets and flowers, music and meaningful personal interactions.

Here's another powerful spiritual care intervention. A spiritual care provider can facilitate a guided conversation around specific themes with an individual or a family. People are encouraged to verbalize tangible examples of successes during other periods of difficulty in several areas, including:

- **Personal**—One's personal life history
- **Family**—The broader history of one's parents, grandparents and ancestors
- **Cultural**—The experience of one's nation, ethnicity and culture
- **Spiritual**—The history of one's faith group or spiritual perspective

These arenas represent concentric circles of existence and meaning in life. Remembering examples of success in the face of adversity is powerful. A renewed and bolstered sense of hope emerges that can sustain an individual, family and community throughout the current crisis.¹²



ATTENTION TO EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL ISSUES AROUND ANNIVERSARY TIMES

Anniversaries of disasters require special concern for emotional and spiritual care providers. Even long after the initially strong feelings of fear, anger and pain have passed, an anniversary of the event can trigger these feelings again. This may be true both for victims of the disaster and for volunteers and staff of disaster response agencies who responded to the disaster.

Community spiritual care providers and faith leaders should be attentive to the special care that may be helpful for members of their houses of worship and for themselves during these times. Community memorial services can be helpful in giving voice to and space for some of the strong feelings prompted by an anniversary.

Management and leadership of disaster response agencies should consider planning emotional and spiritual support for their volunteers and staff. It is equally important to communicate that such support is available to all who find themselves experiencing overwhelming feelings associated with the event or its anniversary.

ORGANIZED COMMUNITY SERVICES OF MEMORIAL AND REMEMBRANCE

Public community gatherings to mark transitions and anniversaries are crucial to long term healing following a disaster. These events can punctuate the feelings of a community and speak aloud that which can be hard to articulate.

Tremendous care and sensitivity must be taken when planning for public community services of memorial and remembrance. The language used and images and symbols invoked must be appropriate for a multi-faith audience. The representative and leaders who take part must represent the broad diversity of the community. The format must be accessible to people from diverse religious backgrounds, especially those who may not be accustomed to public religious gatherings.

Successful and appropriate services involve the community members, survivors of the disaster, and local faith leaders both in the planning and in the implementation of the event. These persons can speak to the feelings



that need memorializing and guide the planning in ways that lead to an event that the entire community embraces.

While anniversaries are important on a communal level, they are also important on individual levels. Spiritual care providers who provide long term care to persons who have lost loved ones may pay attention to anniversaries, holidays and other milestones in life—recognizing that these can be tender times during a grieving process. Even verbal acknowledgement that these times can be challenging can bolster the spirit of a grieving person.



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RETREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREGIVERS

In the next section, we will cover the personal and spiritual risks to which spiritual care providers may be vulnerable in disaster. One valuable spiritual care provision for the care providers themselves is the availability of retreat opportunities during long term recovery. This may be especially important for local community faith leaders and local political leaders who are tempted to endure long working hours for extended periods of time at the expense of their own self-care. Several disaster response agencies have experience sponsoring and offering these opportunities. The retreats can include education about self-care and coping with the needs of the long term recovery phase, but they best center on providing a time of quiet rest and replenishment for the participants.

We have seen that all along the disaster response continuum, spiritual care has an important role in providing for the needs of individuals, families, disaster response personnel and communities coping with difficult times. In the next section we will examine the importance of self-care for the caregiver.