

Psychological First Aid

Spiritual Leaders and Practitioners

When Disaster Strikes

Your day-to-day routine is predictable in many ways. The challenges you encounter as a spiritual leader are familiar to you, and you find comfort in responding to the spiritual needs of those you serve. Then disaster strikes and wreaks havoc in your community. Chaos replaces order. Businesses, homes, and places of worship are destroyed. Family members are displaced and separated from each other. Many from your congregation are injured or dead.

In the immediate aftermath of disaster, the people you serve are struggling with their emotions and beliefs as they reconcile faith with reality.



Robert Kaufmann/FEMA Photo

They face difficult challenges, including finding places to stay, getting food and basic necessities, locating missing relatives, getting medication, and protecting and caring for their children. You are the person they seek out and the one they trust.

Psychological First Aid in Your Faith-based Organization

As you know from experience, attending to the basic needs of people in distress is essential. This is where Psychological First Aid (PFA) can be helpful. PFA is a way to give emotional support and help to people of any age, ethnic and cultural heritage, and social and economic background in the immediate aftermath of disaster.



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Project Director/Subject Matter Expert:
Jack Herrmann, MSED., NCC, LMHC

Reviewer/Subject Matter Expert:
Valerie Cole, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Designer/Writer:
Antonia Messineo

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- Encourage individuals to engage in physical activities and to combine these activities with useful tasks.

Take care of yourself.

- Get enough rest and eat healthy foods.
- Pay attention to your own stress responses.
- Seek out family and friends for support.
- Try exercising or other physical activity to relieve stress.
- Engage in helpful, productive activities that are satisfying and useful in the situation.
- Follow the advice you would give others.
- Manage your own reaction when faced with emotional outbursts from others by:
 - ▶ Remaining quiet and calm.
 - ▶ Avoiding the temptation to engage in a shouting match.
 - ▶ Acknowledging the person's point of view.
 - ▶ Disengaging and respectfully walking away from the person if you are being insulted or threatened.
 - ▶ Contacting law enforcement personnel if you feel that you are in danger.

For more information about Emergency Preparedness and Psychological First Aid, refer to www.ready.gov and www.ncptsd.org.



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PFA in Practice

Individuals, families with children and teens, and older adults bring such diversity to your faith community. Some are well-to-do with an abundance of resources; some are financially challenged. Some are blessed with emotional strength or physical health; while others suffer with psychological illness or chronic or debilitating health problems. These factors, along with the specific circumstances of the disaster will evoke many different responses from you and members of your community.

You can use PFA to meet the basic needs of people in stressful situations, no matter what the differences are among them. PFA will provide you with basic strategies to help people cope with their pressing concerns and needs in the days and weeks after the disaster.

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Reach out to those who need help and provide comfort care.

- Make certain that individuals are safe and out of harm's way.
- Offer immediate assistance to distressed individuals by looking for ways to keep them comfortable (e.g., providing blankets and water or directing them to a place to sit).
- Let individuals know you are concerned about them and describe how you may be able to help.
- Make eye contact and determine the person's comfort level with you as a helper. Be aware that some people are not comfortable asking for help.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and in turn, allow the person to speak without interruption.
- Protect the person's privacy by keeping your conversation from being overheard.
- Avoid making promises you will not be able to keep.
- Provide something for individuals to do; ask teenagers, adults, and older adults to help out where they can.
- Provide an interpreter or translator for individuals when necessary and be sensitive to cultural and ethnic needs.

Recognize basic needs and support problem-solving.

- Help people to find safe and secure shelter.
- Help individuals locate food and water.

- Direct individuals to places where they can wash-up and provide them with clean clothing.
- Be patient, especially with older adults, and be prepared to explain things more than once.
- Assume a position at eye level when you address children, and use words they can understand.
- Arrange activities that will keep children engaged so that parents can complete practical tasks.
- Identify what an individual's specific needs are and help him or her develop a plan of action.
- Be specific and concrete, and focus on one task at a time.

Validate survivors' feelings and thoughts.

- Listen and hear what survivors have to say by being fully present and attentive.
- Allow them to talk as little or as much as they care to. Try not to push too hard to get them to talk about what happened or how they are feeling.
- Avoid the temptation to judge the rightness or wrongness of their reactions.
- Remain open to an individual who is challenging his or her belief system.

Provide accurate and timely information.

- Provide accurate information in response to questions as soon as you can.

- Take the time to find an answer to a person's question.
- Refrain from sharing information that you have not confirmed.

Connect people with their support systems.

- Help survivors to find family members and confirm where their loved ones are located.
- Facilitate your community's spiritual practices as desired and requested.
- Contact medical professionals who can help with physical conditions and medication needs.
- Make referrals to mental health professionals, especially if individuals exhibit risky or dangerous behaviors or ask to see a counselor.

Provide education about stress responses.

- Help people to understand the stress they may be experiencing in response to the situation will lessen with time.
- Encourage individuals to seek help from a physician or mental health professional.
- Exercise caution that you don't minimize a person's reactions.

Reinforce strengths and positive coping strategies.

- Encourage individuals to get back to their routine activities as soon as practical.
- Suggest that individuals choose healthy foods and minimize the amount of junk food they eat.