

For more information, contact
Association of Professional Chaplains
1701 E. Woodfield Rd., Suite 400
www.professionalchaplains.org
847.240.1014



Guidelines for Coping with Disaster and Mass Casualty

The Association of Professional Chaplains has prepared the following guidelines to assist individuals and organizations in coping during times of crisis.

Asking Why

When a disaster or a mass casualty impacts a community, one of the first and most natural questions is to ask “Why?” While we might think that asking “Why?” is a search for facts and information that will aid our understanding, it is important to embrace it as an emotional response as well. Sometimes this is a question of faith and is directed at the Supreme Being you worship. At other times, the question is felt most strongly toward the ones causing the tragedy. These suggestions are provided to help you as you ask “Why?” in the event of the tragedy.

- Realize that asking “why?” is a normal part of healing. As human beings we are meaning-makers and naturally try to make sense of the events in our lives, even ones that seem senseless. It is our nature to try to understand and interpret both the good and the bad about what happens to us.
- Image that your questions about “why?” come from your heart and say as much about what you are feeling as they do about the answer you are seeking.
- Imagine that your questions about “why?” mean you need someone to show their care and love for you, rather than someone who will provide the answer.
- Know that there is seldom an answer to the question of “why?” that is truly satisfying. In reality, even if we do gain some understanding about why an event occurred, the pain and grief remain and must become the focus of healing.
- You may find it helpful to find people around you who will listen to the “why?”s and not seek to simply answer with easy, pat answers. Seek out a friend who will sit with you and not be threatened by your doubts or your anger. Open up to the friend, counselor or clergy who will let you talk openly about your confusion and your feelings.

Listening and Caring for Others

Our world is more unpredictable than in decades past and almost anyone can find themselves in the position of listening to someone affected by disaster, whether a natural disaster or one created by violence. Teachers, counselors, clergy, friends and family members may all be approached for a listening ear. Consider these suggestions when someone comes to you for help in the wake of tragedy.

- Be patient. A victim of tragedy needs to talk to someone who will not rush them or try to fix the problem.
- Listen twice as much as you speak. Resist any urge to tell someone how they feel, what they should do, or that you know what they are feeling. When you do respond, do so with honesty and humbleness.
- Cultivate the ability to simply sit in silence with someone while they gather their thoughts and words.
- Do not let yourself be threatened by one’s anger or doubts. These are a normal step in the healing process and people need a safe place where they can be honest about all of their feelings.
- When someone asks “Why?” seek to understand where the question is coming from. Is someone expressing a feeling, or is there a genuine need to know some piece of factual information? Don’t mind saying, “I don’t know the answer.”
- You do not need to answer all of the questions a person has. Horrific events rarely produce satisfying answers.

Don't push someone toward any kind of resolution. Instead, be with them where they are.

- While hope is important, don't over-emphasize tomorrow's hope when one is living in today's hurt. Instead of offering answers like, "I know everything is going to be all right," or "This is God's will," focus instead on the person, saying, "I believe you can make it through this one step at a time."
- For persons of faith, encourage them to open all of their feelings, even the angry ones, to the one they worship and utilize their own prayer and rituals as a means of seeking comfort. Faith is one of the greatest resources for hope. Encourage people to connect with their faith and others from their faith community.

Know that isolation is the greatest danger in a time of crisis. Help people find comfort and strength by reconnecting with their family, friends, faith community and other places of support.