

Self-Care for Religious Leaders

TIP SHEET

07

“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, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. They have a staff of mental health professionals that speak a variety of languages and can help those suffering with emotional or substance abuse problems.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control (CDC) — Coping with Disasters and Trauma: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/>
- Church Disaster Mental Health Project: churchdisasterhelp.org
- Church World Service — Community Arise/Spiritual Care: <http://communityarise.com/CMEmoandSpirit.htm>
- 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 this guide: www.nvoad.org/articles/light_our_way_links.pdf
- 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
- NDIN Tip Sheets: “Disaster Spiritual Care” and “Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health”
- NVOAD— Points of Consensus on Emotional & Spiritual Care (In the Resource Library): www.nvoad.org
- NYDIS (New York Disaster Interfaith Services) — “*The NYDIS Manual for Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response in New York City*”: www.nydis.org
- ICISF — Pastoral Crisis Intervention I & II : www.icisf.org
- UMCOR — Spiritual and Emotional Care: Care for the Care-Giver: www.new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov/Matrix/matrix_disaster.aspx for extensive lists of resources on disaster mental health topics.
- U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration — Self-Care Tips for Emergency and Disaster Response Worker: www.samhsa.gov/
- 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