

US DISASTER PROGRAM

Self-care for Church Leaders During COVID-19



Self-care during disasters

Almost everyone will be directly or indirectly affected by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. During this period of prolonged and acute stress, church leaders can play a lifesaving role by helping people stay connected to community, cultivating a sense of hope and referring congregants to essential services.

This work exposes church leaders to lots of grief and heartbreak, so they are at high-risk of developing secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma, in addition to personal stress and losses. We encourage all caregivers to reflect on their spiritual, emotional, physical and relational well-being to help ensure that you are able to continue caring for your community for years to come.

RESILIENCE

Everyone has a finite amount of spiritual, physical, relational and emotional energy. It is impossible to shoulder the enormity of the pandemic's grief by yourself, and it is essential that you implement some self-care strategies to help sustain your caregiving work.

Self-care conversations are almost always framed as taking on additional activities (e.g. *sleeping more, eating more fruits and veggies, watching a movie or taking a bath*). Those additional practices can certainly be helpful. Caregivers can also guard their energy by limiting particularly draining activities and putting down work. Consider postponing non-essential projects, delegating tasks and lengthening timelines.

TRAUMA STEWARDSHIP

One of the ways caregivers can preserve their emotional energy is by being very mindful of their exposure to traumatic content, or "trauma stewardship." Trauma stewardship may be practiced in many ways. Here are some examples:

- Limiting your consumption of news and social media
- Putting boundaries on your social conversations (e.g. discussing a book or playing a game rather than talking about the pandemic)

LIFE CYCLE OF DISASTER

Due to the necessary period of self-isolation and economic disruption, it is likely that many will experience a prolonged period of disillusionment. This phase in the disaster life cycle is often marked by increases in conflict, mental health crises, substance abuse, divorce, family violence and suicide. It is likely that circumstances will get harder over the next couple of months, so it is important for caregivers to pace themselves. Caring for your community during COVID-19 is a marathon, not a sprint.

Everyone will be processing the events of the pandemic in their own way on their own timeline. Do not be surprised if you feel anger at people not taking recommended steps to prevent infection and possibly even anger at those getting ill who you might be asked to minister to.

- Ask for help in completing emotionally draining activities
- Working on emotionally draining activities for a set amount of time each day (e.g. seven hours a day instead of 12+ hours a day).

AMBIGUOUS AND COMPLICATED GRIEF

One of the aspects of this pandemic that is very challenging is that it produces high amounts of ambiguous and complicated grief. In addition to grieving illness and death, many are also managing emotions about not knowing when you will be able to hug your kids or grandkids again, financial insecurity, postponing or cancelling major plans, and feeling out of control. The inability to resolve these situations can cause pain, confusion, shock, distress and often a feeling of immobilization. Tending to ambiguous loss is an ongoing process. It can be helpful to:

- Label what you are experiencing as ambiguous loss
- Work with your loved ones to identify how your coping mechanisms align or diverge
- Know that conflicts are inevitable, but manageable
- Seek support from trusted sources
- Recognize and honor your emotions
- Trust that God can hold all of your emotions and prayers even if they conflict

GRATITUDE AND AGENCY

Disaster research tells us that expressing gratitude and making meaningful decisions are two powerful ways to help positively shift outlook during a disaster. Take time in your day to feel thankful for something, even something very small. It's also helpful to commit to making conscious decisions about how you structure your time and unplug at the end of the day. This can be as simple as selecting macaroni and cheese instead of a sandwich for lunch or opting to sit by the window instead of on the couch.

OVER AND UNDERFUNCTIONING

It is common to either over function or underfunction during times of disaster. This stems from your body's fight, flight or freeze response. Neither response is ideal for long-term wellbeing.

- Sabbath time, even if it is just a morning or afternoon off, is essential to help you recharge and do your work.
- Listen to your body.
- Try to rest, eat and hydrate.
- Be very careful when driving or biking. Adrenaline and grief can affect your attention and reaction time.

Watch for red flags in yourself, spouse and parishioners: If you or someone you love is exhibiting destructive or worrying behaviors, please seek help right away. Listen to the people you trust when they express love and concern.

CRISIS NUMBERS

National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Helpline 1-800-662-4357

AA Meeting Locator 1-844-334-6862

National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-8255

RESOURCES

[Emotional Life Cycle of a Disaster](#)
[CDC Guidelines for Responders](#)
[Vicarious Trauma](#)

ADDITIONAL READING

Resilient Clinician by Robert Wicks

Healing through the Dark Emotions by Miriam Greenspan

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman

Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional and National Tragedy Edited by Roberts, Rabbi Stephen B. and Rev. Willard W. C. Ashley Sr.