

Basic Trauma Information for Congregations

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DELAYED REACTIONS TO DISASTER AND TRAUMA

- The full emotional impact of disaster is often delayed three to ten months or more after survivors get a handle on practical matters and begin to realize the permanence of some of their losses. The knowledge sets in that the recovery and grieving process may be very long.
- While persons less directly affected by the disaster or traumatic event go on with normal routines, direct survivors often report a sense of telescoped time, i.e., they feel as if the event occurred more recently or much longer ago than it actually occurred.
- During new traumatic events, we frequently “re-visit” earlier ones. “Trigger events” (such as future storms for storm survivors or news reports of violent crime for crime survivors or even a familiar sight, sound, or smell can bring up earlier traumas for years to come.

AVOIDANCE and MINIMIZING

- Survivors of disaster and other traumatic events and those who emotionally support them (including pastors) may minimize and mask ongoing pain in the name of “busy-ness” and “doing.”
- In the stress of recovery, thinking may be clouded and persons may avoid their normal support systems. This is especially important for congregations to understand.
- Survivors sometimes minimize their pain or the damage their families received. Common statements (which could be either honest positive coping or minimizing) include, “Others are so much worse off than we are” or “It could have been much worse.”

SHAME AT NEEDING HELP and FRUSTRATION WITH THE LOSS OF CONTROL

- Those displaying clear signs of depression and stress disorders often hesitate to ask for help.
- Please remember that, in spite of our proclamations of grace and acknowledgment of human frailty, we often find it very difficult to admit we’re not doing fine.
- One of the most pronounced frustrations among trauma survivors relates to a loss of control. This is especially difficult and painful as persons who have prided themselves on their self-sufficiency find themselves needing help.

SECONDARY REACTION

- Trauma reactions are often contagious. Persons who did not directly experience a disaster or traumatic event but who work closely with survivors can suffer from secondary traumatization or “compassion fatigue” which mimics posttraumatic stress symptoms.

AMPLIFIED PROBLEMS

- Trauma exacerbates difficult situations present before the event. Family, group dynamic, employment, and other personal difficulties may become more pronounced in the coming months. Churches most closely connected to this disaster may see increased stress related conflict.

THEOLOGY in DISASTER

- Religious statements that we might consider disturbing often surface. Compassion is more important than correcting theology. As persons struggle to make sense of this tragedy, religious themes tend to center around issues of the will of God, the degree of permission persons give themselves to be angry at God, and God’s control over the events.
- Our culture has come to “honor” survivors of trauma or disaster. Although most survivors would not seek this honoring, it does seem to help survivors by legitimizing their experiences.