



Mental Health America of Franklin County

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Coping with Disaster Within the Faith Community

In the aftermath of disasters, people of every religious and spiritual tradition experience disbelief, grief, fear and even anger. Some may have lost family members, friends or work colleagues. Others have anxieties about the future. Nobody is unaffected.

The Mental Health America and the American Association of Pastoral Counselors have developed this information to assist people of faith and their communities in coping with the emotional and spiritual impact of tragedy.

Each person reacts differently to a disaster and a range of responses are normal and to be expected. Emotional responses to disasters can appear immediately or sometimes develop months later. Below is a list of common emotional and physical responses to disaster:

- Disbelief and shock
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Sadness and depression
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Intrusive thoughts; replaying events in our minds
- Excessive worry about safety and vulnerability; feeling powerless
- Irritability and anger
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Extreme changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Excessive use of alcohol and drugs

For many, the tragic events not only challenge the emotional and physical sense of well being, but also one's spirituality. People want to find some meaning in the tragedies. As a result, many people turn to their faith through prayer and meditation to try to cope with their feelings and seek support, reassurance and understanding during times of crisis.

While some people find turning to their faith helpful, questions and doubts may trouble others. They may have difficulty sorting out the ambiguities of life and faith. Questions and doubts at this difficult time are normal. What's important to remember is that trust, hope and strength are perhaps the most essential elements of all faiths.

TIPS FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH

Places of worship can be supportive environments for individuals. Here are some ideas on finding ways to cope within your faith community.

Connect: Spend additional time with family, friends and members of your house of worship. Reach out to others for assurance and support. We need to love and be loved. Connect with those you love and emphasize the importance of relationships. Draw strength from your faith.

Communicate: Recognize the importance of talking about what happened. By talking with others, you will relieve stress and realize that other people experience similar reactions. Share your feelings with your priest, minister, rabbi, imam, or other clergy. Parents should encourage children to discuss their concerns and feelings.

Act: Find activities that are positive for your spirit, mind and body. Consider doing things that contribute to others. Be intentional with your time and do things that impact positively on your life. Candlelight vigils and prayer groups are good ways to encourage togetherness and reassurance within the faith community. You may also want to help organize volunteer services such as food banks, clothing collections and blood drives.

Get Help: For most people, the negative feelings will decrease as time passes, but some may have difficulty coping with their feelings or resuming regular activities. If you have strong feelings that won't go away or are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help. People who have existing mental health problems and those who have survived past trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional.

For people of faith, pastoral counselors are a resource in helping to address both mental health and spiritual concerns. If you would like to contact a Certified Pastoral Counselor in your area, call the American Association of Pastoral Counselors Referral Service at 800-225-5603 or visit www.aapc.org.

Mental Health America of Franklin County has several resources available to help you and others cope with disaster and fact sheets on post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other topics. To get copies of these fact sheets or for a referral to a mental health professional in Franklin County, call 614-221-1441.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.