

TRAUMA AND SPIRITUALITY

The one question that everyone asks in the wake of disaster is “Why?” – regardless of whether it was natural or human-influenced, people want to understand not just how a disaster occurred, but why it happened, as well. This reflects a need to attempt to make meaning or sense of something that in the short run makes no sense at all. In many cases, the root of this question is spiritual in nature. And while PFA priorities involve addressing physical and psychosocial needs, acknowledging spiritual needs can be an important part of any support provided in the aftermath of a disaster (National Organization of Victim Assistance, 2002).

Spirituality Defined. For the purposes of delivering PFA, a somewhat inclusive (and admittedly vague) definition of spirituality is suggested, and not restricted just to religious beliefs and practices. Rather, spirituality is interpreted as including an individual’s personal beliefs that help him/her connect with people, nature, the world around her/him, or a higher power. For some, a belief in God or Gods is at the root of their spirituality. A humanist’s desire to help others, environmentalism, or connection with nature may all constitute spiritual pursuits that do not involve a deity, depending on one’s values.

Spirituality Following a Disaster. Survivors or victims often feel spiritually vulnerable following a disaster, searching for the answers to many questions:

- Why did God(s) let this happen?
- How can people be so cruel?
- Why did nature turn on us?
- How can children be allowed to suffer and die?
- How can evil be allowed to exist?
- How can the people that did this be forgiven?
- How can I be forgiven for my desire for vengeance?

In the midst of this vulnerability, survivors frequently have an implicit trust in those trying to help them, including providers of PFA. As they question their own spiritual values, they may look to you for more than just an understanding of psycho-social effects, but also for spiritual guidance. What follows are a few dos and don’ts that may prove helpful:

- DON’T try to explain or provide definitive responses to spiritual questions. Most people affected by a disaster know that there are no quick or simple answers to such difficult questions. Let them know that such questioning is important and normal, following a disaster; as well, it may take time for them to find the answers, but that many do come to peace with things over time.
- DON’T impose your spiritual beliefs on survivors. They are vulnerable to such influence, and attempts at conversion are a violation of their boundaries. As well, responses such as “it was God’s will,” “your child is in a better place,” or “God

- never gives us more than we can handle” are of little comfort and in the long run, can be the source of lingering anger in the struggle to recover. If they express those beliefs, acknowledge that some have found comfort in such thoughts.
- DON’T respond with adages, proverbs, or old sayings. Hearing that “it’s always darkest before dawn” is no more helpful than “bad things always happen in threes.”
 - DO affirm their right to adhere to their beliefs, or alternatively, to question them. Those who are anguishing over the anger they feel towards their God(s) should have such feelings normalized. It may be helpful to remind them that all close, caring relationships can at times involve anger, but that in many cases, it can be worked through, sometimes leaving the relationship stronger.
 - Do emphasize that everyone must find her or his own spiritual answers in the wake of tragedy. If asked what you believe, acknowledge that it’s normal to question one’s own beliefs, indicate that everyone has a right to their own belief systems, and then if comfortable, briefly answer, without suggesting that yours is the “right way.”
 - DO ask if their spiritual beliefs are important to them. And if part of a formal religion, ask if they would like to be connected with a member of their clergy.

Some Final Thoughts. As you seek to provide PFA to those who have experienced a disaster, recognize that spirituality can play an important role in their recovery. There are studies that indicate that engaging in spiritual practices (including formal religion), may reduce recovery times following surgery, reduce mortality rates for a number of afflictions, or even improve overall longevity. There is no reason to believe that it might not have a similarly ameliorating impact on individuals as they struggle to recover from a disaster.