



## **Coping with Disaster Within the Faith Community**

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Americans of every religious and spiritual tradition are experiencing 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 National Mental Health Association and the American Association of Pastoral Counselors have developed this fact sheet to assist people of faith and their communities in coping with the emotional and spiritual impact of our nation's 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 and come to grips with our nation's response. As a result, many Americans are turning to their faith through prayer and meditation to try to cope with their feelings and seek support, reassurance and understanding during this time of crisis. While some people find turning to their faith helpful, others may be troubled by questions and doubts. 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](http://www.aapc.org). The National Mental Health Association has several resources available to help you and others cope with the disaster, including *Time for Reassurance*, *Talking with Kids*, *Coping Tips for Adults* and fact sheets on post-traumatic stress, depression, coping with loss and other topics. To obtain this information, go to [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) or call our toll-free line 800-969-NMHA (6642).

***Information provided courtesy of the National Mental Health America.***