

Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop— Communities Coping with Trauma



BY PAT GLEICH

The hurricanes that struck Florida and the Gulf Coast during the past two years have brought major changes to the lives of the people who live there. Although many agencies and organizations provide emergency assistance, coping with change and loss and adjusting one's vision for the future are long-term processes. Levels of frustration and stress combined with sheer fatigue can become overwhelming. Uncertainty about safety and future storms can make even activities of daily living seem perilous.

After a disaster many people function in "crisis mode"—adrenaline keeps them working at a furious pace. While intense activity is often necessary, it may inhibit the emotional effect of the disaster. When feelings do surface, they may emerge as anger, sadness or an immobilizing sense of despair.

How Do I Know Whether I Need Help?

In the aftermath of a traumatic situation, it is important to differentiate between typical responses and reactions, and those that may indicate need for professional support. Short-term anxiety and apprehension are to be expected. However, if these persist and are accompanied by flashback episodes, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts, especially when exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma, professional help may be needed.

It is critically important that people who feel they are unable to regain control of their lives, or who experience the following symptoms for more than a month, seek professional mental health assistance. Warning signs include emotional



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numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, hyper-vigilance, substance abuse, heightened anxiety, irritability, headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain or discomfort in other parts of the body.

Suggestions for people who have experienced community trauma include:

- Get six to seven hours of sleep per night.
- Eat healthy foods; avoid alcohol and junk food; limit caffeine.
- Maintain an exercise routine, even just a short walk every day.
- Find an enjoyable activity to do with family daily (particularly if there are small children).
- Relax every day, for at least a short time.
- Stay connected with friends and church community.

What Can Congregations Do?

Gather often as a community. Regularly check on congregation members who are isolated or alone. Encourage them to come together, providing a calm, reassuring and nonjudgmental atmosphere in which they can speak honestly and be heard. It is important to validate the anger

and frustration that members of the congregation may be feeling.

- Remember and support the caregivers.

Caregivers in the congregation will face additional difficulties during and after a disaster.

- Pray.

Prayer is a way for people to connect and share their pain with God and one another. Congregation members may need or request guidance from church leaders for appropriate ways to pray at this emotional time.

- Listen actively.

Convey empathy; paraphrase and reflect the feelings others share with you. Encourage the person to keep talking, with responses such as "Tell me more about that," "How do you feel about that?," "How can I help you?" or "I can see this bothers you." Avoid giving advice or trying to solve problems without being asked.

- Reassure children.

Children particularly need reassurance—for a very long time—if they are to feel safe.

- Make asking for help acceptable.

Offer help frequently, mentioning that others have received help, also.

Healing rarely happens without planning and effort. Think about and chart what your congregation and individuals have the gifts and training to do.

Additional resources for congregations that have experienced a traumatic event are available at www.pcusa.org/health/usa/resources/trauma-stress/index.htm.

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