



Faith-Based Responders

in the Wake of Mass Violence and Terrorism



This instructional tip sheet is for faith-based responders, service providers, and volunteers who function in the role of disaster chaplains in mass violence response and mass care settings and within their houses of worship, religious communities, or professional agencies. The recommendations address basic skills for competent engagement within the disaster response field and as service providers in ongoing recovery efforts.

The Role of Faith-Based Responders

Victim advocates who serve in the role of faith-based responders are, first and foremost, responders. This means that the role requires them to focus on the victim's needs, regardless of their faith or lack thereof. All faith-based responders who serve as advocates, crisis interventionists, or case managers are responsible for performing their jobs by supporting the needs of victims. For some victims, that might not involve any spiritual or religious concerns but might call for more basic forms of emotional support, such as help gaining stabilization, becoming more grounded, and having a sense of safety.

Spiritual and Religious Literacy

Some victims may talk about their religious or spiritual beliefs, and it is essential to listen without judgment. It is as vital to ensure that, as a faith responder, you do not impose your beliefs on the victims,

especially when they are emotionally vulnerable, they are more impressionable, and they are not in the best position to make any significant decisions. Their emotional and cognitive status makes it inappropriate to proselytize or influence their beliefs. Of course, for those victims who want to discuss faith and share their thoughts on how their religion or faith may support their recovery, it is helpful to provide deep listening (without interruption). Speaking with faith leaders, engaging in pastoral counseling, and participating in faith-based practices, such as worship services, prayers, or meditation, can be effective coping tools that help victims have hope, a key factor in recovery. Integrating core elements of various beliefs of victims and communities can enhance the effectiveness of crisis interventions. Examples include—

- Identifying leaders who are expected to provide support or guidance.
- Knowledge of acceptable and unacceptable language (e.g., use of proper titles with surnames, avoiding slang words or phrases).
- Understanding the meaning and value of spiritual and religious images, representations, and symbolism and the ramifications if those images and symbols are misused.
- The need for respectful and culturally tailored approaches to physical interactions regarding the acceptable etiquette for adult males, females, older adults, and children.

- Knowing who can gather individually, in groups, and who requires designated others to join any/all meetings.
- Identifying standard or established worship schedules/timeframes and holidays that restrict or invite certain interactions and activities (e.g., celebrations of life, grieving over death and loss, fasting, silence).
- Cultural and spiritual beliefs about health, mental health, and illness; accessing health and mental health care.

Coping:

There will also be those victims who look to faith responders as trusted individuals who would be understanding of how the trauma of the event has affected them. Faith responders must show victims that they are not afraid to have a conversation, allowing them the space they may need to talk about their shaken, long-held beliefs and to be accepting of the thoughts, questions, and the unstable ground a victim may experience for a while before they can make their way forward.

Providing psychoeducation around how common it is for many victims to begin questioning their faith and wondering about the meaning of these terrible events can reduce anxiety and feelings of guilt a victim may have about these reactions. It will also be key for faith responders to draw on the positive aspects that spiritual and religious beliefs can bring to victims of mass violence and terrorism. Explore with victims what coping skills they learned from their faith and support them in accessing those that are most helpful. Some examples may include—

- Any form of prayer, meditation, chanting, reading, or studying (including the guiding principles of their faith).
- Engaging in social gatherings, both formal and informal, with others who are of the same belief system; consider both peer groups and those guided by faith

leaders with participants who had similar types of experiences (e.g., families who lost a loved one often prefer to be with other families who also lost a loved one; victims who suffered physical injuries tend to share more openly with other victims who had a physical injury; parents tend to want to speak to other parents).

- Attending to children and youth, helping them understand the children's reactions and that children and youth will process events differently from adults, familiarizing themselves with age-appropriate responses and how to seek help.
- Creating or engaging in established rituals that can help calm and stabilize victims (e.g., bringing flowers to the site where a loved one was killed or to their burial site; attending a faith-based service for those who were injured or killed; holding a celebration of life or a gathering of gratitude; sharing a meal).
- Volunteering or donating to causes that are meaningful to the victim or their loved one; offering support to others in need.
- Creating music, art, writing, and other expressions of one's emotions to honor and remember the event, loved ones, and the community's resilience.

Helpful Resources

OVC Mass Violence Toolkit.

The OVC *Helping Victims of Mass Violence & Terrorism: Planning, Response, Recovery, and Resources Toolkit* was created for communities to prepare for and respond to victims of mass violence and terrorism in the most timely, effective, and compassionate manner possible. Through developing a comprehensive victim assistance plan, the community can respond to mass violence, terrorism, natural disasters, human-caused disasters, emergency crises, and high-profile criminal incidents promptly and more effectively.

American Red Cross Faith Based and Community Programs.

The Red Cross Faith-Based and Community Program's services include disaster preparedness education, community outreach booths for events, and adult first aid/CPR certification.

National Disaster Interfaith Network.

A consortium of subject matter experts who collaborate with faith communities and their partners to reduce disaster-caused human suffering through the exchange of training, research, resources, and best practices.

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

This association of organizations, many of which are faith-based agencies that mitigate and alleviate the impact of disasters, provides a forum promoting cooperation, communication, coordination, and collaboration; and fosters more effective delivery of services to communities affected by a disaster.

Please contact OVC TTAC if you would like to discuss technical assistance in developing a mass violence response plan.

Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center

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