



Self-Care for Religious Leaders

“Self-care involves the need to develop a vision for one’s life and then develop a plan that allows one to live out that vision. It involves ‘caring for the whole’ – body, mind, and spirit. It involves understanding that before we can be effective in caring for others we must be effective in caring for ourselves.”

Ausma O. Mursch (former Executive Director, Lutheran Counseling Center)

Self-care begins before a disaster occurs. The normal daily lives of religious leaders can be very stressful, and during times of disaster, responsibilities and pressures multiply. Religious leaders will be caring for family, congregants, staff, and others in the community who are likely facing loss, disruption, and chaos. Often, this is a very rewarding but also challenging and exhausting endeavor, especially considering that disaster recovery can last for years. Lack of self-care might impair your decision-making and coping skills. Learning the tools and practice of self-care before a disaster occurs can help one’s overall well-being and health on a daily basis.

Common Barriers to Self-Care and Wellness

- Lack of time to focus on personal well-being
- Loss of time for personal prayer and theological study
- Substance abuse
- Participation in violent or abusive relationships
- Too tired or lack of energy
- Too expensive
- Guilt – feeling that others are more important
- Belief that it will not work or that it will not be achieved
- Lack of knowledge
- Fear
- Feeling of weakness

Make a Plan for Self Care and Practice Daily

Develop a plan for self-care that you can use daily and that includes identifying tools and routines that work for you. These tools and routines will then be available to you during times of disaster, and help you manage high stress levels.

Self and Family

- Improve self-awareness.
 - Know your areas of strength and vulnerability.
 - Learn to recognize signs of stress in yourself, family, and others.
 - Look for signs of compassion fatigue.
 - Identify stress management techniques that work for you.
- Practice a healthy diet and regular exercise.
- Help and take care of your family. Taking care of your family and ensuring they have their needs met will help you better take care of yourself and your congregants. Family can include those people whom we love and with whom we live, as well as those people with proximity to our lives, whether it is a traditional family, a colleague, or a roommate.
- Develop support structures in your life.
 - Talk to peers and develop team support.
 - Share emotions when appropriate and communicate openly with friends, families, and professionals.
- Avoid risky behavior – practice a balanced lifestyle.
- Monitor use of self-soothing behaviors (i.e. alcohol, cigarettes).
- Avoid prolonged or excessive use of substances, which can aggravate stress, if abused.

Professional

- Learn skills in reconciliation and conflict resolution, and also stress and time management techniques.
- Limit work hours – set boundaries and take time off.
- Define clear purposes and goals.
- Attend to your own spiritual life.
- A spiritual leader must manage expectations of others and self:
 - Be realistic about what you can and cannot do.
 - Recognize the different roles people look to you to fill during times of disaster.

Continued on reverse

- Assess your capabilities:
 - What are your competencies and expertise?
 - What types of care are you trained to provide?
 - Do you have any physical, emotional, or cognitive considerations that would impact your work?

Know About Compassion Fatigue and Recognize the Signs

People who are in helping professions are particularly susceptible to “compassion fatigue.” This occurs with individuals who are in helping professions and have constant exposure to the suffering of others. It comes from secondary stress or trauma experience from hearing of the suffering of others. Some of the signs of compassion fatigue include:

- Sleep disturbances, irritability, anxiety
- Lack of focus during worship
- Intrusive thoughts
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Depression
- Increase in ineffective and/or self-destructive behaviors
- Diminished sense of purpose/enjoyment with vocation
- Decreased functioning in non-professional situations
- Loss of hope

Seek Help

Seek professional advice. Normal stress reactions will often reduce after days or weeks following the disaster. However, if stress symptoms persist for over a month and begin to interfere with normal daily activities, this may be a sign of a sustained traumatic reaction and it may be necessary to help yourself or help others to link with professional mental health services.

New York City offers a crisis hotline, LifeNet™, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. They have a staff of mental health professionals that speak a variety of languages and can help people who are suffering with emotional or substance abuse problems. This hotline serves the City during times of disasters, as well. You can reach LifeNet™ at any of these toll free, anonymous numbers:

- English: 1.800.LifeNet (1.800.543.3638)
- Spanish: 1.877.Ayudese (1.877.298.3373)
- Asian Languages: 1.877.890.8585
- TTY: 1.212.982.5284 (for the hearing impaired)
- 911 in case of a mental health emergency

RESOURCES

- **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheets “Disaster Spiritual Care” and “Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health”**
- **“Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster for Disaster Response Volunteers, First Responders and Disaster Planners”** written by NVOAD: www.nvoad.org/articles/light_our_way_links.pdf.
- NYDIS’ and Institute for Disaster Spiritual Care’s **“Self-Care: Putting on Your Oxygen Mask before Helping Others”** by Ausma O. Mursch, Former Executive Director, Lutheran Counseling Center; provides great assessment tools and more detailed information.
- **“The NYDIS Manual for Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response in New York City,”** Go to the NYDIS website at www.nydis.org or call NYDIS at 212.669.6100.
- Care for the Caregiver Interfaith Project, Council of Churches of New York City: www.cccny.net/caregivers. This program offers custom-designed, individual self-care training and resources for each participant.
- Church World Service (CWS): www.churchworldservice.org, www.cwserp.org.
- Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR): www.ldr.org/care.

NEW YORK DISASTER INTERFAITH SERVICES

22 Cortlandt Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10007 ■ Tel 212.669.6100 ■ Fax 212.669.6101 ■ www.NYDIS.org

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