

Chaplains Help in Times of Crisis

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New diagnosis...traumatic injury...incarceration or detention...terminal diagnosis...loss of loved one...loss of function or capacity...natural disaster...the list of crises is familiar to so many of us.

When a crisis strikes a person or group, it throws routines into chaos and causes significant distress in several inter-connected ways: physical, emotional, relational and spiritual (meaningfulness). Normally we have enough resources to help us cope with the ups and downs of regular daily living. Normally we have what we need: within ourselves, within our group of loved ones, and within our personal convictions and practices that give meaning and direction to our lives. Normally we are fairly resilient and can flex with the stressors of life.

But a crisis is not a normal time; the critical event rises above the level of normal coping resources and creates a gap that may be difficult to fill. We need extra help. It's like when we skinned our elbows as kids. Initially we may spit on the wound, rub it on our jeans, and go back to playing. If that doesn't do the trick, some soap and water, a band-aid and a kiss from Mom may get it done. Occasionally, the wound gets infected and we have to go to the doctor's office or emergency room to get it cleaned out or even operated on. The bigger the crisis, the bigger the need for specialized help.

The different personal crises listed at the beginning of this article often create a large gap between the distressing event and our coping resources. Beyond our current personal vitality, supportive community, and personal faith or philosophy, we may need extra help coping with the crisis. Enter the specialized caregivers called chaplains. Professional chaplains are extensively trained and experienced in helping struggling people cope with their crisis. They work closely with the person's other coping resources (vitality, support, existing faith), not apart from them. In addition to helping people manage their emotional and spiritual distress, professional chaplains help people find their sources of hope during and following the critical event.

Sometimes when people hear a chaplain is coming, they mistakenly assume they'll be subjected to some type of uninvited or unwanted religious intervention or they may think, "If the chaplain is here, death must be near." These are false assumptions. Professional chaplains get involved in a crisis only after determining that there are not sufficient resources (the gap) to help the person cope and find hope. Perhaps the person is drained of inner strength, or has no one to sustain them, or is unable to apply their existing convictions and beliefs. The chaplain, a specialist in coping and hoping, is skilled at filling the gap between crisis and available resources. Neither by imposing a bunch of religious stuff nor by manipulating a vulnerable person, the professional chaplain comforts and encourages by expertly accompanying, gently supporting, firmly advocating, and sensitively using what matters to the person or persons as they recover from, adapt to or find meaning in their crises