

CHAPLAIN'S CORNER



Hard Times, Can Bring New Perspectives

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Rescue workers gathered in front of Salem Lutheran Church in Houston (ELCA.org web site)

Hurricane Harvey was the first major storm to make landfall in the US since 2005. This was followed shortly by hurricanes Irma and Maria which were among the most powerful storms recorded in the Atlantic. They left wide spread damage along the East Coast and in the Caribbean. High winds, high tides, rain, and floods have hit all these places. So many people have been affected by these events. Disasters are frightening events because they are beyond our control.

When you have the opportunity to be a part of the rescue efforts, there is a lot of stress added to your life. Police agencies, Firefighters, EMT's, Paramedics, aid workers from Salvation Army and Red Cross will come to help in their capacities. This presents a unique environment for a chaplain. Stressors in this situation can be much different than a fire call or rescue call that is run on a regular day. The chaplain here must recognize this and respond to the higher than normal stress of the rescue personnel.

Most firefighters and rescue people have a unique personality that is motivated to take action quickly and help others in need. In doing this the body may be overwhelmed at times. Especially in disasters like this, the stress of the situation may be more than some can handle and go beyond the person's ability to cope. Personnel need "stress breaks" to relieve some of the tension that builds in the

body. Simple things require more energy than normal. Realize that water, food, and shelter become very important and needed frequently as well.

Things that rescuers see during their duties may affect them differently. It's hard to see people piling into a large Cat truck in order to get away from the flood waters. It's hard to see people sitting on their flooded house roof waiting for a helicopter to move them to safety. These stressors may accumulate in rescuers to the point that it may cause problems in other areas of their lives. Hopefully, there are chaplains available in the area to help rescuers defuse high stress situations before problems arise.

Chaplains are trained to walk people through these situations. It's important for the rescuer to realize that any sign or symptom of distress is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. This is not in any way a sign of weakness or incompetence. Workers and rescuers will not experience signs or symptoms in identical ways. Some may experience the signs of stress days or weeks after an event. Any change in your normal habits or behavior should be noted. In any event, please seek help from a peer or chaplain.

The prolonged exposure of such large events as hurricanes may lead to many stressors over a long period of time. Some changes in a person may occur very subtly and slowly. Periodic rest and rotation of duty cycles will help lessen the stress of the situation. When you are off duty, go to a

shelter or other area completely away from the work area. This will lessen the anguish of the sights and sounds of the rescue work. A proper diet is essential during your off duty cycle. This ensures that all your nutritional resources for healing, energy, and health are available in your body. Proper hydration is important to help rid the body of excess adrenaline and other chemicals that the body produces during stress. Get the sleep that your body requires. Trying to over-do your duty cycle will not benefit any one in your crew. Proper sleep cycle is important for your body to be at peak efficiency for the required work.

Care for the whole person is a primary concern of the fire chaplain. Physical, emotional, and spiritual conditions are all present in a person at the same time. The ministry of the chaplain will be effective using all the resources available. Whether it's rescuer or the rescued, the chaplain can help.

Hard times can bring new perspectives. We see people around us differently. We are all neighbors and friends that can and will help each other through many crises. This can bring communities together as never before. We need to support each person through this life changing event. God encouraged people to remember the past while we live in the present.

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