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Introduction

It's not easy losing a loved one in an accident. Or surviving a terrorist attack. Or losing your home in a flood or tornado. It's hard and painful and brutal.

Survivors of disasters and crisis situations should never have to face trials on their own. Those around them—particularly their Christian brothers and sisters—should rise up and support them.

“Share each other’s burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Although it isn't easy going through trials, it's also tough being on the outside and trying to help those who are suffering. You don't know what to do. You want desperately to step in and alleviate some of the pain, but you're not sure how to begin, and you don't want to say the *wrong* thing.

Group's Emergency Response Handbook for Disaster Relief will help you come alongside those who are facing tough times after a disaster or crisis event. From care and counseling tips, to practical ministry ideas, to what to say and what not to say, this book offers insight into how to care for the hurting.

Of course, it'd be great if you never had to pick up this book! But the reality is that crisis events and disasters happen. Everyone faces tough times—those who share the Christian faith, as well as those who are unchurched or adhere to other religious beliefs. And they need your help.

So, when someone you know is recovering after a natural disaster or terrorist attack, suffering from depression, dealing with a financial crisis, or considering suicide...it's time to pick up this guide. Use the table of contents to find the specific hurt for which you're caring, and then flip to that section.

Once there, you'll find a **real-life narrative**, a story from someone who's been there. Sometimes they're inspiring, and you'll read how the support and love of a caring group sustained a person through a hard time. Other times they're disappointing and tell stories of people left alone

during tragedy or rejected during trial. Either way, these stories will move you and show you the importance of being there for others.

Each section also includes **care and counseling tips** that will give you practical ideas for reaching out in love. From just listening to arranging for services, these ideas will help you effectively support those who are coping with the effects of a disaster or crisis.

Next you'll find **ministry tips**. These practical ideas will enable you to share your faith in meaningful and helpful ways.

And finally, you'll find an invaluable section on **what to say and what not to say**. The words we use can help or hurt more than we know. This section will help you avoid the hurtful comments and use the helpful ones.

You'll also find a useful box in each section that offers **Scripture help**, plus **referral guidelines** for referring survivors to a professional counselor. In addition, you'll find guides to additional resources such as helpful books and websites. Finally, a disaster response gear checklist will help you prepare to set out to offer your services.

Our prayer for this book is that it will help you help others through the difficult times following disaster or crisis.

—Major Robert E. Bagley, *The Salvation Army, Supplies and Purchasing Secretary, U.S.A. Southern Territory*

The names and identifying information of the people who have shared their stories have been changed.

The information in this book is meant to be a guide to help you respond effectively in the aftermath of a disaster or crisis. This is not professional advice meant to replace that which you would receive from professional personnel or licensed counselors and psychologists.

Crisis of Faith

Supporting Those Who Doubt

The strong winds that blow over the Continental Divide in the Colorado Rockies usually blow storms quickly through Estes Park out to the Front Range. But the winds on July 31, 1976 were unusually weak. A storm system had gathered above the Big Thompson Valley and remained stationary for almost three hours. More than 8 inches of rain dumped into the canyon below Estes Park. The sheer rock of the canyon couldn't absorb much water and channeled the downpour into a 19-foot wall of water that pushed 10-foot boulders, cars, and campers effortlessly down the canyon.

Sharon was meeting at Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch with 34 other women who served as leaders in an international missionary organization. The guest ranch sits in a lovely valley just east of the mouth of the Big Thompson Canyon. The group was surprised to hear sirens. Their surprise turned to fear as a police officer with a bullhorn directed them to evacuate. And fear gave way to panic as the officer urgently directed them to run.

The ladies knew they had to get to higher ground, but few knew which way to go to find it. Two of the cars followed a police officer toward the nearby city of Loveland. The road descended toward the river. The women

approached a stretch of road covered with water and attempted to venture through. The first car stalled just as the wall of water pushed the car into the river. Two of the women in the two cars clung to trees until they were rescued. The other seven perished.

Sharon remained at the ranch. A man led her and the remaining group of ladies up the hills to higher ground. They were later joined by others who shared the news of the loss of their friends and co-workers.

When Sharon first learned of the fate of her friends, she was devastated and brokenhearted. All seven of the women were in their early 20s. She soon found herself questioning God—asking why he would bring them all together for a wonderful reunion—only to have it end in such a tragic way.

“God, why did you let this happen to me? Why did you have me come from California to be caught in a flash flood? Don’t you know how much I love you?” Sharon’s questions nagged at her heart as she tried to deal with the loss of her friends, and she desperately groped to find meaning in the midst of a senseless tragedy. The most difficult question of all shook Sharon to the core: “Why did you take them, God, and not me?”

More than 130 people lost their lives in the Big Thompson flood. Sharon tried to be thankful that she was alive, to look at the heroism of the rescue workers, and to think of the countless people who survived while their property was destroyed. But the grief of the situation caused her to focus on those who lost their lives rather than to be thankful for the majority who were rescued or spared.

Sharon’s shaken but enduring faith in God gave her the strength to move through grieving. And the strength and support of the ladies who mourned with her helped her through the beginning steps of emotional healing. She found herself reliving the horror of the experience, but by giving it all over to God she was able to thank him for bringing her through safely. As she worked through the events and emotions of the disaster, her depression began to lift.

Through reading the Bible, Sharon realized that God wanted her to give thanks *in the middle of this disaster*, and other crises that might come, and learn to fully trust him. Prior to her experience, she had believed the Bible was telling her to be thankful *for* everything that happened in her life. However, she discovered that it is not about giving thanks *for* every

circumstance in her life but rather *in the middle of everything that happens* in her life. Since that time, when she catches herself questioning difficult circumstances, she said she finds the peace of God in her heart by remembering how much he loves her.

SCRIPTURE HELP

+ Deuteronomy 7:9

+ Psalm 33:4

+ Psalm 36:5

+ Psalm 100:5

+ Psalm 145:13

+ Proverbs 3:5

+ Isaiah 26:4

+ Matthew 6:28-30

+ 1 Thessalonians 5:24

+ 1 Peter 1:8-9



Care and Counseling Tips

THE BASICS

A person's beliefs about justice, safety, and the trustworthiness of others are shaped by the circumstances of his or her experience. A person who has spent decades in relative security and safety may feel the world is more or less just, life is primarily secure, and disaster is found in other places. When disaster strikes, it becomes impossible to view the world in the same way.

The person who has gone through disaster is forced to re-examine the ideas and beliefs that bolstered his or her sense of security. Long-held beliefs about God are by no means exempt from this examination. Some of these beliefs may have been erroneous from the beginning. For example, a person may have believed that God does not allow disaster and pain to harm his children. Other held beliefs are true but are difficult to accept in the wake of disaster. For instance, a person may have previously believed that God is good, but struggles now that he or she has personally endured so much suffering.

While intellectual difficulties and arguments are a central part of a person's crisis of faith, a faith crisis usually stems from an emotional pain or loss. A person who has suffered a disaster may feel that God has broken trust in some way, wronged him or her, or simply callously refused to extend protection and grace. A person's deep anger, hurt, or disappointment in God may be expressed through intellectual objections to God's character, promises, or nature.



Care Tips

+ **Commit to remain connected.**

When a person deliberately turns or slowly slips away from faith in Christ, he or she almost always pulls back from the influences and people who support faith in Jesus. The faith community and the people who are a part of it are the earthly representatives of the God who has become difficult to accept or find. This may stem, in part, from the community's inability to embrace the person in the midst of his or her difficult questions or "negative" attitude. Remember that isolation is the Enemy's primary weapon in dragging people away from the faith.

Disaster survivors need others to stick by them more than they need the right answers to the tough questions, more than they need to be challenged for faulty thinking, and more than they need standard Christian responses. Friends and family don't have to agree with everything the survivor says, but sticking by no matter what he or she says is a vital part of healing after a disaster.

Encourage those working with the survivor not to be surprised when the survivor fails to return phone calls or to welcome meeting. Have them commit to remain connected no matter how the survivor responds.

+ **Validate and listen to questions.**

You may feel intimidated, afraid, or deeply concerned when a disaster survivor starts revealing his or her faith struggles. But as Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun." The victim is struggling with the same questions of pain and suffering that humans have always struggled with. Don't agree with statements that contradict Scripture, but do your best to empathize with the survivor's perspective. God can handle honest questions.

+ Look for productive outlets for the disaster survivor's grief and pain.

Work through a book on grief together, or go through a book on Christian apologetics, such as *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. Encourage the person to join a grief recovery group. Also explain the importance of talking with a Christian counselor or pastor to deal with the anger and disappointment he or she may feel toward God.

+ Pray with and for the disaster survivor.

You can't change what happened. But God has the power to bring comfort, healing, joy, and restoration to any victim's heart. Help the person take the big questions and disappointments directly to God in prayer. Ultimately, he or she will have to work out this faith crisis with God. Encourage the person to get in the habit of talking to God.

There is a deeper faith waiting for the survivor on the other side of grief. However, there is a risk that the person may not be able to make it through. And the simple truth is that he or she cannot make it through without God's help. So pray for the person, constantly asking God to help the person emerge with a deeper relationship with Jesus.