

Helping Survivors of Traumatic Events for Fire Chaplains

Jim Burns

I have spent many years responding to and helping people who have experienced something horribly unforgettable. I am not and do not claim to be a traumatologist. However, I have listened to, held hands with, walked in circles with, cried with, hugged and given hushed whispers to many people in the aftermath of a wide variety of traumatic events over almost fifty years in my ministry – natural disasters, criminal violence, catastrophic and life-threatening illness, suicide survivors, and other horrifying and deeply disturbing events.

This paper is not intended to be a sound theory, carefully researched thesis on crisis intervention and trauma management services, rather, it is part of real-world experiences to provide some practical applications for fire chaplains working with traumatized people.

The Chaplain needs the skills to recognize and assist those who come to them in the aftermath of trauma on an emergency scene, at the fire station, or when you encounter them wherever you are. The word trauma comes from a Greek word meaning to “wound.” Just like the physical wounds, humans can be wounded psychologically just as well as physical wounds. In the aftermath of a horrifying event, a person can suffer psychologically, being overwhelmed by thoughts and feelings from traumatic events.

Psychological trauma has been recognized far back into antiquity. Psychological trauma was recognized as far back as in the disastrous fire of London in 1666 (Daly, 1983). Many others, including Freud in the nineteen hundreds, recognized the effects of traumatic stress. However, the full measure of the psychological effects of trauma in the United States came in World Wars 1 and 2, then particularly at the return of veterans coming back from the Vietnam War. Even in our time, we are recognizing the devastating results of post-traumatic events.

According to the National Center for PTSD, every year as many as 17 million people in this country survive disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, chemical explosions, toxic spills, riots, mass killings, terrorist attacks, and motor accidents.¹

Most fire chaplains are not normally trained, certified and equipped to treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Those who are suffering from PTSD requires treatment of a trained mental health professional. Many suffers are not yet diagnosed officially as PTSD. One who is diagnosed as PTSD has had symptoms for more than one month at least.

Even though fire chaplains are not normally trained and certified to treat PTSD, It is important for fire chaplains to be skilled in recognizing PTSD symptoms because research shows that most people in times of traumatic crises turn to a clergy person, a pastor or chaplain, first.

With adequate training, chaplains are in an ideal position to recognize, assist and refer to those suffering from traumatic events. Since, a clergy person usually turns first in their time of

¹ National Center for PTSD

traumatic suffering, the professional chaplain needs to know how best to help people who have been affected by trauma. Since there is a 16 percent lifetime prevalence rate of PTSD among firefighters,² we need to learn about the signs and symptoms of PTSD.

Most of those who suffer from PTSD, initially react with extremely intense emotions. They experience a state of shock and feeling of being completely overwhelmed, lasting for a few minutes, for a few hours and even several days; this usually follows intrusions of thoughts and vivid memories that enters the person's mind repeatedly through the day. These intrusive experiences can be repetitive. These experience can be nightmares or flashbacks, which are intensively vivid and highly emotional. It is like the sufferer is re-living the horrifying experience, sometimes over and over and over again. Often they feel like they are being in the moment (reliving the horrifying event in this present time). Many have described the experience as being in "a living hell." Many of the person is too afraid to sleep, and sleep deprivation further contributes to the loss of emotional control and may intensify the nightmares and flashbacks. Most often the person tries to deal with the problem himself; this is especially a soldier or a firefighter, since they are such self-reliant personalities. As a chaplain, you may hear about the trauma sufferer from a family member who may at their wits end. The victim doesn't want his colleagues to know he is having a problem. When in fact, they know, but often doesn't know what to say about it or do about it.

There again, it is important to build a relationship with your firefighters so they will confide in you that one of their colleagues might be having a problem. They don't usually tell you what's going on, but they tell you they are concerned and they want you to know there might be a "possible problem." Be sensitive to them without prying. Simply let you know that you'll look into it.

Something else you might be looking at; the sufferer may seem to be moving toward an emotional numbness, deadness, or emptiness. He will often do his job to a degree, but he is isolating himself from his fellow firefighters (if he normally is sociable). The trauma survivor may tell others that he is feeling "fuzzy-headed." He may feel confused or disoriented. He may be tense, on edge, tend to be startled easily, or he may be unusually irritable.

Once you have begun to see these symptom, it is time to take action. Chaplain, you need to pray for wisdom like Solomon, and the wisdom as serpents and harmless as doves³ You probably already know that the person going through deep traumatic stress, is not usually ready for you to sit down and talk to them about what's going on. Probably the last thing you need to do is say, "What's going on with you?" To do this you just built up an impenetrable wall.

So, what do you do? Be sensitive. Be gentle. Let him tells you what he wants to tell you. It is crucial to listen with your eyes and ears. Carefully listen to come to an accurate understanding of the person's unique perceptions and feelings. Don't say, "I understand what you're going through." Survivors do not need to hear clichés or platitudes; those kinds of words usually reinforces the wall. They need someone who cares and is trying to understand. Be there. Listen

² McFarlane, A. C. (1998) *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 176, 2-26.

³ Matthew 10:16

to them. Love them. Refer to them. Something, (call his name), I'm here if you need me. When you want to talk, I'll be here. Anything I can help you, just let me know.

As a chaplain you can mobilize a network of support from your contacts within and outside the department, church people and/or community people who have worked through certain crises in their own lives or worked with others in crisis. You probably want to think about some well-known people you in your community to become your support network when there is a need for such a support team.

A fire chaplain is by definition, an emergency service chaplain. We are there to do emotional first aid. One of the best things we can do for our firefighters who are trauma survivors is to make effective referrals to a mental health specialist. It is essential for the responsible practice of ministry that the chaplain be prepared to recognize the emotional needs of persons in distress and make effective referrals. Don't get in over your head. Refer. Refer. Refer.

As a fire chaplain, we need to develop a working relationship with at least one or two mental health professionals in the community and is willing to work with you. Some mental health professionals have specialized training in treating survivors of psychological trauma. In some of us will have to look toward a larger city in the area. With a little ingenuity and research you will find someone, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a marriage and family therapist. In some small town nurse practitioners have received specialized training in trauma counseling. Just don't do therapy unless you are trained and certified as a counselor.

It is important for the chaplain to create a list of professional and community resources before you are faced with a mental health emergency. Do whatever you can do with the training you have to help the survivor of traumatic stress, and refer. One of the most important things we can do for those locked in a traumatic event is to quickly refer to a mental health professional.

Continuing education is necessary. Take all the courses available to you. I highly recommend that you take the International Crisis Intervention Stress Foundation's Group Intervention and Individual Crisis Intervention and Peer Support at a minimum. I also recommend Pastoral Crisis Intervention 1, Pastoral Crisis Intervention 2, and Grief Follows Trauma.

At Louisiana Fire Chaplain Network we usually offer some of these classes every several years and the Federation of Fire Chaplains offer many of these classes at the annual conferences. The Federation of Fire Chaplains Training Institute offers an advanced class called "Dealing with Difficult Deaths" that I fully recommend to fire chaplains.

Other classes we have sponsored and will be sponsoring periodically are Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention, Disaster Response for Fire Chaplains and Grief Work- from loss to acceptance. And, we are always on the lookout for other training opportunities that will be of help to fire chaplains.