

Responding to Survivors about Spiritual Issues

1. Use reflective listening and active listening techniques when working with victims/survivors.
2. Be honest, with compassion, and do not assume you know what they will say or believe.
3. If you do not feel comfortable discussing spiritual/religious issues, listen quietly and refer them to someone who can help them appropriately.
4. Do not try to explain or give answers to spiritual questions.
5. Do not argue with their beliefs or try to persuade them to believe as you do.
6. Do not respond with platitudes or clichés to victims/survivors. “It will be okay.” “It is God’s will.” “They are in a better place.”
7. Let them tell you what their religious/spiritual beliefs are. Do not assume anything.
8. Help them use their spiritual/religious beliefs to cope.
9. They may need reassurance that it is “normal” to ask questions about God and/or their religious beliefs. However, some faiths do tell their members not to question God.
10. Allow expressions of anger toward God or others – in healthy, non-destructive ways.
11. Do affirm their search for spiritual/faith-based answers. Do not impose your thoughts or beliefs on them.
12. Do affirm the wrongness, evil, and/or injustice of what has happened, especially if humans caused the trauma.
13. Give them the materials that can help them in their search for meaning or their search for spiritual answers.
14. Emphasize that everyone has to find their own answers and way of understanding in traumatic events.

Thoughts When Working with Survivors

1. When people go through a disaster or trauma, their whole life is impacted. They will never be the same, but they can be stronger and better as they learn from their experience.
2. As they recover from the disaster or trauma, they need effective support and help as they work to find a “new normal” – a new way of living that will eventually feel right and productive.
3. Victims/survivors may show anger and anxiety to cover up their feelings of fear and vulnerability.
4. Do not take their anger personally – they are just scared of being hurt again.
5. Healing and forgiveness are processes, not events. They take time.
6. Victims can and do make choices as they recover. They can be an active participant in their recovery and not just let things happen to them.
7. Forgiveness cannot be forced or demanded. It is a choice each makes, as they are ready.
8. Do not assume their beliefs about religion, life, death, afterlife, or sin are the same as yours.
9. Listen to them and do not try to impose your beliefs on them. Do not re-victimize them.