

The Need for Spiritual First Aid During COVID-19

How we can help ourselves and others thrive virtually during the pandemic.

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Source: Alvin Mahmudov/Unsplash

Hospitals are crammed right now, but how are you at providing spiritual triage?

Human needs for spirituality and connection have always existed, but they have come sharply into view this year. These are beautifully expressed by experts I've recently interviewed:

"It's not clear where spiritual needs fit in any hierarchy. For many, spiritual needs are basic needs. Spirituality is not all about meaning in some esoteric sense of a narrative that weaves tragedy into a story of life-defining purpose. Spirituality includes deep feelings and familiar sacred routines."

— *Dr. Geoffrey Sutton, psychologist, author, speaker, and emeritus professor of psychology at Evangel University*

"The church must first and foremost be a place where people can find healing in the unconditional love of God. But in order for this to happen, the spirit of the church must be one that allows Christians to be open about their physical and spiritual pain and also their psychological and emotional pain—without the consequence of antiquated stigma."

— *Ryan Casey Waller, writer, therapist, lawyer, and Episcopal priest*

"Research tells us something else about spiritual pain: checking in really works."

"We are going through a crisis where social distancing and isolation are essential to save lives, but this social distancing is not likely to cause loneliness if we see it in the context of that we are all in this together. Humans have a need to be connected. Checking on each other and offering support (even virtually) may help compensate for the loss of the ways that we typically use to connect and interact with others."

— *Dr. Martina Luchetti, Assistant Professor at the Florida State University, College of Medicine, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine, who studied loneliness and perceived support this year during stay-at-home orders*

"Connection is everything. While there are many limitations on the kinds of connections that we can make under COVID-19, we have not been rendered entirely powerless to connect. I encourage people to think of their loved ones and reach out in ways that make them feel truly seen. Work to avoid interactions that feel stilted or perfunctory. Instead, consider how you might interact with people like never before. Handwritten letters, moments of public celebration, and even a willingness to ask questions that require deeper conversation are just a few simple ways that we can improve the quality of our interactions. No matter how you do it, the important thing is to keep the other person's feelings and needs in the center of your mind. And if you find that you don't actually know what the other person's true feelings or needs are, then asking them about that might be a great place to start."

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— *Luke Renner, filmmaker and author on trauma and resilience*

"We know from my work on time perspective when coping with trauma that people's social networks can play an important role in helping people retain a positive sense of the future. Supportive social relationships help people feel connected to the future, whereas conflictual or emotionally constraining social interactions (e.g., where a person gets the feeling that their social ties don't want to hear about their experience) can similarly constrain a person's sense of the future. Conflictual or constrained social interactions can also leave individuals focused on a painful past experience as that difficult life situation moves into the past over time."

— *Dr. E. Alison Holman, Ph.D., FNP, Professor of Nursing at the Sue & Bill Gross School of Nursing and Department of Psychological Science at the University of California, Irvine, who also conducted longitudinal research during the pandemic*

Spiritual First Aid is an evidence-informed, peer-to-peer, disaster spiritual and emotional care intervention, designed to be delivered virtually. It is the first intervention of its kind to have been built from the ground up using evidence-informed spiritual and psychological insights from years of scientific study.

Spiritual First Aid is based on 15 years of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute's (HDI) faith and resilience research, conducted around the globe after disasters, mass traumas, civil conflicts, humanitarian crises, and public health emergencies. HDI spent the last four years refining and field testing Spiritual First Aid after numerous disasters across the United States, and this spring adapted the method to specifically focus on equipping people to provide spiritual and emotional care amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human needs relating to belonging, livelihood, emotion, safety, and spirituality are all interconnected. As such, they all have a spiritual component. To ignore this is to ignore an essential part of healthcare.