Reflection

*Strengthening Personal &
Professional Care Relationships*

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Who heals the healers? How best do healers experience healing? An inherent risk in conducting healing work, whether as a first responder, a medical professional, mental health provider, or a spiritual health provider, is compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue, or vicarious traumatization, occurs when a provider feels beyond her or his capacity to cope with the exhaustion or other physical reactions that may result from providing care to trauma survivors. People sometimes refer to this experience as "burnout." One way to protect against this risk, a form of preparedness that too often goes unrecognized, is developing personal and professional care relationships to rely on in times of crisis, trauma, or disaster.

Starting from birth, and throughout a human lifetime, care relationships are essential for healthy living and resiliency. A sense of belonging to other people – whether family, romantic or household partner, friend or colleague groups, school, sports team, employment organization, congregation, Bible study or book group, or other community group – gives us a sense of hope, responsibility and purpose, joy, and encouragement. We feel blessed, loved, and/or valued within these relationships. They help to sustain us, especially in turbulent times.

As you consider how to develop skills for responding to crises, trauma, or disaster in your community as a clergy or ministry leader, consider the ways to prepare by establishing or strengthening both your personal and professional relationships. What are ways you can sustain healthy family or household relationships, no matter what is going on in the world around you? Are there daily rituals that can help to hold you together? For example, some people practice never leaving the house without saying "I love you!" or always greeting next door neighbors with a friendly "Hello!" Others diligently practice Sabbath routines with one another, or commit to sharing at least a couple of homemade meals together. For long distance personal relationships, some people commit to a weekly or monthly phone call to check in. Another helpful practice: pre-determine and communicate how you would like to communicate in turbulent times. For example, let people know if you would prefer phone calls, texts, or email. Would you prefer for people to keep you in prayer until you reach out to them, or for them to regularly check in with you? Having these kinds of more detailed conversations about expectations can help avoid miscommunication and frustration, while helping everyone feel more connected.

When it comes to professional care networks, experts in disaster response like to encourage people to shake hands or exchange business cards before the disaster, because familiarity and trust saves vital time and energy. For example, if you likely would have the Sheriff come to your place of employment during a critical incident, or the Chief of the Fire Department, or you would need to rely significantly on the head of the local counseling center, or you would need legal advice, and so forth,

consider each year making a point to treat those people to coffee. Also, you may find particular types of mentoring helpful in times of crises. Take time to consider what that might be, who may best offer it, and how to prepare that relationship in order to be able to call on them when you need them. Additionally, your professional peers can be an invaluable source of support. Consider ways that groups of you – whether as ministerial alliances or denominational groups – can meet on a regular basis to support, learn from, and encourage one another.

As additional resources for this series, you will find inventory worksheets to help you continue to develop and update your own personal and professional care networks. These worksheets are guides. Feel free to adapt them to make them as effective for you as possible. Then, store them in a place that you easily can access when you need them.