



# FACING CRITICAL INCIDENTS AS A COMMUNITY

Supporting Self and Others in Shared and Varied Distress

## Typical Responses to Tragedy

### Emotional

- Shock
- Numbness
- Anger
- Disbelief
- Guilt
- Irritability
- Grief
- Feeling involved
- Feeling mobilized

### Behavioral

- Social withdrawal
- Strained relationships
- Substance Misuse
- Vocational impairment
- Social connectedness
- Altruism

### Cognitive

- Disorientation
- Poor Concentration
- Intrusive Thoughts

### Physical

- Fatigue, muscle tension
- Headaches
- GI Distress / Poor appetite

## *A frame for recent events*

Language falls far short at capturing the breadth and depth of the recent tragedy and loss that has impacted the Montecito community. This is that place in life when we are deeply reminded of the “not yet” of the *Kingdom already... but not yet*. This brief document is intended to be a resource for the Westmont community on responding to tragedy.

Knowing where to begin starts with framing, and validating, the extent of what has occurred. Our community has faced two *critical incidents* in a one month span. A critical incident is an event **outside the range of normal experience** which may evoke **strong feelings** and have the potential to **overwhelm the ability to cope**.

The recent fire and flood are significant enough to be traumatic for members in our community, including those directly or indirectly impacted by the events.

## *The broad range of “normal” reactions*

After the natural disasters we have faced, the range of “normal” or “typical” responses is tremendously broad. Outside of tragedy such as this, many Americans experience the bulk of their lives feeling safe and in relative control, despite the fragility of life. We tend to see tragedy happening beyond but not within our immediate sphere. Tragedy happens in other places, like Houston or the Middle East.

When the unimaginable happens, our minds struggle to incorporate the overload of new information that does not fit our safe and secure cognitive framework. In response, emotional affect tends to intensify and vary substantially. Some of us feel seemingly everything: grief, disbelief, guilt, etc. Others may feel nothing. Some can easily go back to life as usual. Others may



## Coping with your distress

Take time to consider how you are responding to these events:

- Experience your thoughts and feelings
- Talk about your thoughts and feelings with others
- Engage in self-care
- Moderate your news intake
- Take action to support others
- Seek support when needed

## Supporting the distress of another

Take note of those around you in our community, and respond in ways that seem appropriate:

- Listen over and over to their experience
- Be in the mire (or mud) with them
- Process with them as they think through the situation
- Offer concrete support
- Be present long-term. Check in with them long after this intense season has passed
- Avoid one-liners that invalidate distress (e.g., God has a plan in this)

struggle, with problems such as difficulty sleeping or focusing. The broad range of response is normal as each of us integrates this new experience into our lives.

## *Supporting ourselves; Supporting others*

As we navigate through this season as a community, we will benefit from drawing closer together and closer to God.

Responding effectively to others begins by first noticing our own experience. Pause, take time to consider your response, and cope in ways that are beneficial for you. By understanding our own response, we can then more effectively be present for others. If not, we run the risk of burn-out, or worse, projecting our distress and irresolution onto others who may need support.

One barrier to growth to consider is pathologizing the experience of oneself or another. Experiencing a significant emotional impact from this event does not mean someone has PTSD.

Please take time to review the side-bar for tips on personal coping and responding to others.

## *Moving forward*

As we seek God for the beauty from the ashes, we can find peace leaning toward God and into each other. This can be best facilitated by our deliberate care for self and others as empowered by Christ. Furthermore, our reach into the Montecito community can truly bring Christ incarnate to those facing loss beyond expression.

Lastly, moving forward sometimes does not progress as quickly as we hope and distress continues to impact our daily functioning. Please see the information below for additional resources:

- Aetna EAP - Short-term counseling for Westmont employees and family - 800 342 8111
- Hospice of Santa Barbara - Counseling services - 805 563 8820
- For a list of providers in community, reach out to Dr. Eric Nelson, Director of Counseling Center - 805 565 6003 - [ernelson@westmont.edu](mailto:ernelson@westmont.edu)
- <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/disaster-articles.aspx>