



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

DISASTER RELATED DEATH

Managing Concerns About the Dead or Missing

In all disasters, respect for the spiritual and religious customs associated with remains and burial is an important part of recovery for the affected population. Often customs may not be the same as ones own. Protecting the body and soul of the dead, the rituals of burial, who conducts the ceremonies and whether one can afford the ceremony/burial when you have just lost all your possessions are common concerns.

Those who provide medical, psychiatric and mental health care as well as first responders and those recovering remains should seek out local religious leaders for specific guidance on customs for death and burials. For example, in Haiti, although 80% of the population are Catholic, nearly half of the population also practice Vodou. (AKA Voodoo, Vaudou or Vodoun). Belief in Vodou may or may not be acknowledged to a stranger. Specific rules and customs related to death and burial are very important in Vodou.

Expressing Grief and Ritual

In many cultures, physical displays of emotion such as crying and wailing at the time of death are a normal part of grieving. Funerals are social events and families may go to great lengths to congregate at the deceased's home. Services could include several days of food, music, dance and prayer. This may be followed by an additional time period of ritual and social activities. Depending on the spiritual beliefs and the family circumstances, burial may take place soon after death or may be held until family members gather.

Burial Sites

Burial sites may be a significant concern for families. The nature of a disaster as well as desperate economic conditions can limit burial options. It is important to understand what families desire for burial, as well as what alternative options may be required due to the circumstances. It is equally important to be sensitive to cultural and spiritual implications of a less desirable burial site when talking with families.

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Recommendations for specific worries and concerns;

- *“Is my loved one missing, hurt or dead?”*
 - » Have a list of services available (help lines, medical, social service or security contacts).
- *“If my loved one is dead, will the body be protected?”*
 - » Prevent scavenging or thievery.
 - » Keep the body intact (avoid burning, cremation or organ harvesting).
- *“Will the soul of my loved one be protected?”*
 - » Seek out and consult local spiritual leaders for guidance on beliefs and rituals.
 - » Religious and spiritual beliefs may vary by region and family (i.e., belief in the soul). Beliefs and practices may span more than one religion (e.g., Catholic and Vodou practices performed together).
- *“Will I be able to follow my traditional burial rituals and ceremonies?”*
 - » Identify local religious leaders (e.g., Vodou priests and priestesses, or Houngans and Mambos). They may be very difficult for foreigners to find — ask local residents for help in finding them. Local religious leaders will be able to provide guidance on the death and burial rituals according to custom.
 - » Respect and equality should be paid to all religious authorities.
 - » Be aware that this disaster may make certain traditions difficult to carry out (e.g., final washing of the body when water is scarce).
 - » If homes are destroyed or transportation impeded, identify where funerals, religious services and/or gatherings can be held.
- *“How can I pay my respects? I don't have proper clothes, there is no place to prepare food, there is a shortage of food, how do I do what others think is right/proper, which funeral do I go to (if multiple losses)?”*

Continued

- » Provide practical information about safe food and water supplies, extra clothes, and location of elders, spiritual or other community leaders.
 - » Listen to the concerns of family with compassion.
- *“What will be done if we are not able to pay for a burial or ceremony?”*
 - » Know what will be done to manage those bodies not claimed or abandoned.
 - » Identify services for those needing help coping with this burden (e.g., guilt, anxiety, anger, withdrawal if unable to pay).



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