

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

2. Making a start on long-term recovery from crisis

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Our usual response

Kate says: Here's how a common conversation I have with a leader who has just been through a natural or mass casualty disaster tends to go:

Me: "Tell me about how the last couple of days have been going."

Leader: describes chaos, endless decisions needing to be made, experiences of shock and disorientation, feelings of heartache and exhaustion, and experiences of adrenaline rushes.

Me: Expressions of appreciation, and then, a few questions about how basic daily habits are going, including eating, sleeping, movement and fellowship with family, housemates or close friends.

Leader: expressions about how things have been far too chaotic or there have been far too many decisions to make to do any of that.

Me: Expressions of appreciation, then, gently: "So, when is the next time you will be having a meal with your family (or housemates, or friends)?"

The leader, at this point, often blinks at me, as reality registers: if they keep going at the same pace they have been going for the last few days, they honestly have no idea when they will spend regular time with their loved ones again. Or exercise regularly. Or sleep regularly. Or eat regularly. Or engage in hobbies again.

I sometimes ask, "Does it feel like it might be six months or a year before you do that again?" The leader often nods, as they consider all the work and the enormity of the need surrounding them.

This moment of recognition is when the difference between the stress of long term recovery and other types of stressors begins to dawn, if it hasn't already, and especially on someone who has responsibilities for leading an organisation or a community through a time of crisis.

Though doing so may feel counterintuitive, we have found that **one of the most important practices for becoming restored after disaster is to begin to implement nourishing routines, even if only in very small ways, as soon as possible. Without forcing or rushing, but rather incorporating them a step at a time, sooner rather than later.**

Please help yourself

Here are some of the tips that we encourage people to consider resuming within the first days after a crisis breaks:

- Drink water throughout the day.
- If you have to sit or stand for long periods of time, set an alarm to take a five minute walking break every hour. Within a week or two, try to incorporate ten-twenty min walks at least a few times per week, until you gradually can increase to or resume 30-60min of daily movement.
- Periodically stretch your body throughout the day.
- Give people in your home, or, if you live alone, at least one close family member or friend, at least ten-fifteen minutes of your time in which you do not talk about what's happened or how work is going. If you do not know what else to talk about, try asking them to simply tell you about other things that are going on in their life or the world beyond the crisis. Notice how your body feels after the conversation, and continue to foster conversation topics that give your spirit a bit of a lift. Continue to practice this daily routine, and consider incorporating a nourishing meal with it.
- Smile at people you love, reminding them and you that circumstances do not determine your love.
- Practice breathing slowly throughout the day.
- Eat foods that give you healthy energy, help you think clearly, and encourage your spirit.

These practices will not magically make things better. But you will notice, incrementally, that they help you feel some relief and take another step forward.

---and breathe

Take a few minutes to reflect on the comments and suggestions above:

- Am I one of those leaders Kate writes about, busy rushing around doing things and struggling to deal with the emotions she describes?
- Am I able to give myself permission to take on board the suggestions she makes for self-care and make time to integrate them into my routine?
- Is there someone I know and trust with whom I could share some of the difficult emotions?
- What might I take away from this article into my ministry, where prayer fits perhaps, and is there anything here that I could share with others?

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website below or on 020 7898 1700.

St Luke's thanks Kate for use of this piece, which was first published in Sept 2019 on the Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth website. You can find further useful information on this site www.ictg.org.