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How Your Faith Can Help in Times of Tragedy by Debra Haffner, M.P.H., F.S.A.M.

I overheard a child say to his mother yesterday, "But why would God let this happen, Mom?" If you are a member of a religious community--as an estimated 65 percent of Americans are--your faith and your faith community may be of help to you and your children in dealing with the tragedy that has struck our country. Here are some ideas that may be helpful:

- **Bring your child with you to your church, synagogue, or mosque.** Most congregations will devote services this weekend--if not sooner--to helping people cope with the week's horrifying events. Go together as a family. Be sure to talk about it together afterward. Ask your children what they think; listen to their concerns. This is not a time to lecture, but to really *hear* your child's worries and fears.
- **Encourage your faith community to hold a special service or workshop for children.** Religious educators and youth ministers have the training and skills to talk with children about issues of faith, life, and death. Your son or daughter may welcome the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings with a group of other children.
- **Consider attending an interfaith service together.** Many communities have joined together to offer interfaith prayer services, which can act as a valuable demonstration of diversity, tolerance, and acceptance during the weeks ahead. Take time to remind your children that all people have dignity and worth.
- **Say prayers before dinner.** Offer thanks that your family is safe and together. Pray for peace and healing. Give thanksgiving for life. Ask your children what they are grateful for today. Especially during times of crisis, it is important for children to know that life is good and to appreciate their time with loved ones. Familiar prayers from your faith, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, or the Sh'ma, may be comforting to share together.
- **Offer prayers together at bedtime.** Some children will be anxious at bedtime, fearing what may happen overnight. Saying prayers together for peace and healing can be calming for parent and child alike.
- **Light a candle together.** Many religious denominations use candles as an expression of light and hope. Lighting one together as a family can be a simple moment of prayer and reflection. If you can do so safely, consider placing the candle (or an electric replica of a candle) in a window where it can serve as a message for others.

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- **Do not shy away from the big questions.** Talk about your family's understanding of God and suffering, good and evil in the world, death and dying, war and peace. Your child will be hearing a lot at school in the next few days--it is important that you use this as an opportunity to talk about *your* family and religious values. If it is consistent with your faith, even a child in elementary school can understand that God suffers with us at these times and that our faith can help us to heal. Talk about what it means to "love thy neighbor" and "love thy enemy." Adolescents can be engaged in much more complex discussions about faith and how it can help us in these difficult times.
- **Remind your child that life is good, that people are good.** Yes, there are bad people in the world and bad things happen, but most people of faith want their children to believe that there is a stronger, more positive spiritual presence at work in the world. A strong sense of hope is important for both children and adults.
- **Let your children witness your acts of kindness and concern.** Have them accompany you to a blood bank. Talk about donating to charities. Have them search websites for suggestions as to how people can offer their support in the days and weeks to come. Your actions speak louder than words--demonstrate how to be a caring citizen.
- **Seek help from your own clergy if you are finding it difficult to cope or to present a calm message to your children.** Children pick up on the emotions of their parents. It's OK for them to see that you are sad, but you still must let your children know that they are safe and that things are under control. In the coming days and weeks, you may find that difficult to do; if so, seek support. In addition to turning to medical and mental health professionals, be aware that clergy are trained to offer care and support during times of crisis; don't hesitate to turn to them as well.

Debra Haffner is one of drSpock.com's parenting experts and is a candidate for the ordained ministry.

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<http://www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,677,00.html>

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