

WORDS OF INSPIRATION

Finding Hope

I've served as a U.S. Army chaplain in Baghdad at a combat support hospital. I've served as a trauma chaplain in a Minneapolis medical center. Nothing I've experienced has been like this.

It's like staring at the sun. One can glance at the sun very briefly, but any prolonged exposure hurts and might blind. Healthcare workers especially need help to protect the "eyes of the soul" during this pandemic. What I have found is that beyond the obvious PPE protection, what is needed is the support of one's colleagues on a similar journey.

People on a common path can help each other to debrief, and also to laugh at the ridiculous things that happen in the dark times. Holy hilarity is a real stress reliever. I know that I have relied on my colleagues, especially when really tough deaths occurred. The passing of children is especially difficult. I would know that a child was involved in trauma when I was called in at night and would see more than normal emergency vehicles in the ED driveway. Then when I came into the ED there would be more first responders than usual. That's when I found the healthcare team to be essential to share the weight of emotion in the room. We all had our individual roles, but we were part of a team that made any situation more bearable. What about dealing with the unknown, the "What If's"?

I remember visiting patients with HIV during the epidemic many years ago. There was fear of the unknown then, too: fear of needle sticks and bodily fluids. Back then the patient had to deal with stigma issues as well. My dad drove an ambulance in the early 1950s during the polio epidemic. I remember that he was afraid of bringing polio home to my sister and me. He would shower and change his clothes after every shift. Sound familiar?

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"When you're going through hell, keep going!"

- Winston Churchill

We develop coping mechanisms when dealing with stressful life and death issues on a regular basis. Turning to whatever gives us strength is essential when dealing with an overabundance of hot and difficult issues. What are yours? Often, we draw strength from other people we're close to. What do we do when we have to physically distance from them?

Being cut off from the people who usually support us, help us to process our experiences, even by simply listening to our story, is stressful. When I was in a combat support hospital in Baghdad, I didn't have the usual family support. But I did have a chaplain assistant, a sergeant from a tough section of Philly. He told me that he basically grew up in a war zone. We walked about a mile for each meal at the DFAC (Dining Facility). During this walk we would often process the challenging situations at the hospital, as we kept an eye out for hidden explosive devices disguised as a piece of trash.

Keeping a journal is another way to cope by keeping track of the many things that happen. At times rereading my private journal helped me understand why I was grumpy or depressed. I would look back over the prior week and realize there had been several very sad cases in a short period of time. I worked with another chaplain in Ohio. He could make me laugh. He would do or say something bizarre and unexpected that would cause me to belly laugh. Most health care workers know what I'm talking about: gallows humor.

One's faith can deepen especially during these times. I'm convinced God is able to bring hope and calm in the midst of crisis. Turning attention to our Higher Power can give us perspective and strength like nothing else. Take time to pray or meditate to find a deeper ability to cope. Many places of worship are offering services that are live-streamed and recorded, available to view whenever convenient.

The 23rd Psalm speaks of "walking through the valley of death." Best wisdom I've heard about that is: when you're in the valley, KEEP GOING until you get through it, and remember that you're not alone. Not knowing where the valley ends makes this especially difficult, I know. Find ways to connect with others. Find ways to take time to nurture yourself, until you come out the other side of the valley to a brighter day. Label the pain and emotions.

Once the pain is named you can deal with it better. WWII vets often buried their emotional pain because they thought it was unacceptable to feel or show it. Unfortunately, that way of coping often led to self-medicating with alcohol and other self-destructive behaviors. My dad was a combat medic in WWII and rarely talked about his experiences. I know now why he struggled when he returned and started a family; he lacked the tools to cope with the trauma he'd witnessed and endured. His example taught me the value of seeking out professional counseling to cope with the cumulative impact of being a caregiver.

Often when people go through traumatic events they either grow deeper as a person or become bitter and brittle. We have choices. We've survived September 11th and Superstorm Sandy and we can survive this. The question is: will we simply survive or live to thrive?

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