

Terror and Response

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For the Many Bereaved, A Confusing Array of Helpers

By Greg Meyer

On the plywood wall of hope and sorrow at Manhattan's Pier 94, families gather to tape pictures of their missing. And the counselors gather too, from social workers and psychologists to preachers and practitioners of "energy healing."

"Some of them look like they're in high school," said Charlotte Morseburg, an American Red Cross counselor who came from Syracuse after the World Trade Center's destruction left thousands of New York families bereft. "They put on clergy jackets, and they come on down."

Of the many shapes generosity has taken in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, grief counseling is among the most diffuse. In the last week everyone from the New York State Office of Mental Health to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness has been lending an ear to the traumatized, a fact that leaves some professional psychologists troubled.

While the state licenses psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses and social workers, anyone can take up psychotherapy and counseling, said Dr. Samoon Ahmad, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University's medical school. While this keeps traditional counselors like clergy in the picture, it also leaves the door open to self-appointed healers seeking to intervene in a time of mourning.

"Getting help from unqualified people can actually be more harm than no help at all," Ahmad said. "I don't want to undermine people's sense of motivation and urge to help, but overenthusiasm to help people who are in a vulnerable state at times does more harm than good."

Many of the counselors assisting pained families and traumatized rescue workers are qualified. Every mental health worker dispatched by the American Red Cross is a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or nurse certified in his or her state of residence, said Jack Herrmann, who is the disaster mental health coordinator for the Red Cross and is based at the organization's Brooklyn command center.

So many mental health workers converged on New York from across the country, Herrmann said, the Red Cross put a moratorium on new ones.

"We've had a saturation of mental health professionals," he said.

The state and city mental health agencies have also staffed hospitals, makeshift family centers like Pier 94, and what has become grimly known as Ground Zero with their own professionals. The state has 325 counselors available in total, said Roger Klingman, a spokesman for the Office of Mental Health.

Hospitals across the city are ministering to the shaken, some providing novel therapies. St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, one of the most active after the air attacks last week, offers acupuncture.

Meanwhile other groups promote different techniques.

Wearing an official-looking badge reading "Grief Counselor," Sharyn Runyon has helped dispatch over 800 "volunteer ministers" from the Church of Scientology's theater district offices to the disaster site. Many started as walk-ins at the 46th Street church, and after an hour's training in the teachings of "Dianetics" author L. Ron Hubbard were sent to Ground Zero the same day.

The training covers a therapy called "Assist," in which the affected person lays down and attempts to quickly rid the mind of trauma, said Runyon, 45, a Scientology minister from Manhattan. Volunteer ministers don Scientology T-shirts and are still working over emergency personnel.

Nationally, the church bought air time to advertise its techniques. The effort has drawn criticism from mental health professionals.

"I urge the Church of Scientology to stay out of mental health," said Michael M. Faenza, president and chief executive of the National Mental Health Association. "The public needs to understand that the Scientologists are using this tragedy to recruit new members. They are not providing mental health assistance."

Runyon denied that the church is proselytizing at the disaster scene.

At Union Square last night, members of the Hare Krishna sect danced, chanted and handed out leaflets offering grief counseling to those who needed it. The group's counselor, Cristina Casanova, is a certified psychologist, the literature said.

The chanting itself is also a form of therapy, said Chandra Shekar Swami, 49, a Hare Krishna leader who traveled from West Virginia to ease New Yorkers' pain. "Depression and anxiety, they go away, they get lost in the sound vibrations."

Some Christian clergy sought to deliver spiritual guidance but, at the request of emergency officials, hauled foodstuffs instead.

"Nathan, he's chomping at the bit," said Harold Moore, 75, who described the chaplain of the Kentucky contingent of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Kentucky group, of which Moore is assistant coordinator, offered charity in the way of trucking provisions between Brooklyn and the crash site, not leading prayer. Moore said Texas and Oklahoma clergymen also found themselves without a flock.

Jim Probst, a 67-year-old minister from Doniphan, Mo., was hoping to give spiritual assistance when he came to New York last week but instead has been driving Red Cross supply trucks.

"I'm a meat hook," he said. "Prolonged heavy lifting is what I do."

Ahmad said religions do have a role.

"Mychal Judge, for example, was a very good listener," he said, referring to the New York Fire Department chaplain who died in the trade center collapse. "But very few people have that gift for listening."

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