

**Nontheistic and Naturalistic World View  
Crisis counseling of nontheists by theists**  
Prepared to supplement Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries  
Emergency Ministry pamphlet



To deliver effective chaplaincy services, it is important first to understand the distinction between a supernatural or divine world view and one that is strictly nontheistic and naturalistic. Whether the individual is firmly identified as Humanist or not, if they have a commitment to a nontheistic and naturalistic world view, chaplains should tailor their ministry appropriately.

It is important to note that individuals are less flexible and understanding in a crisis situation. Chaplains are called upon to be understanding to those who may themselves have less capacity for understanding while they are dealing with extreme stress. If a patient is initially hostile to religion, these tools will give the chaplain a second chance to help.

The first suggestion is to apply those rules from purely secular grief support, as you might with believers. Assure them that everyone has their own way of grieving. The Kübler-Ross grief stages aren't "required". Give them some fair expectations about their grief, that it may ebb and flow and that they should lean on supporters more as they need it. Finding a good support group of others facing similar circumstances as well as others with similar world views can be very helpful.

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Chaplains should be aware that nontheists do not expect life after death. Discussions of heaven or being in a 'better place' are severely hurtful. While 'several hurtful' may sound extreme, this wording does not overstate the issue. Talk of the afterlife suggests that their loved ones will not really die or are not really dead, or that the patient is not facing death but merely a transition. Aside from general condolences, a nontheist is best consoled by reminders of the life the individual led, their accomplishments, the good times of their life and impact on others, and the ways in which their life, though over, still enriches the lives of others. The context of the connectedness of the physical universe, the cycle of life, and even the psychology of grief (to experience the grief process with the understanding that this too shall pass) can be comforting.

Talking of a divine plan can be similarly hurtful to a nontheist. The idea that a divine power planned for their grief is infuriating, and more so because the chaplain may be seen to approve of this "plan." An alternative perspective is that everyone has done their best or at least that no one could have prevented the situation. As in the case of military casualties, discussion of sacrifice for a higher purpose can add meaningful context to loss. Conversely, as some who see a divine plan may feel betrayed or guilty for bringing on the loss, nontheists need have no such negative feelings as they had no such expectation of divine protection. Comforting those who believe in a neutral, natural world can in many ways be easier for a chaplain than ensuring the bereaved that their loss is part of a divine plan.

Prayer is a key component of any chaplain's "tool kit", but it is important to remember that prayer is not consistent with the world view of nontheists. Offering to pray for a nontheist may be helpful, but only if it is presented as an offer or a request rather than being assumed upon them. Traditional prayers are likely to need some deliberate customization to be helpful to a nontheist. For example, prayers of wisdom and reconciliation would be helpful, but reliance upon divine intervention or the afterlife would not be. Chaplains may also recommend meditation with or without internal dialogue to encourage introspection. Another option is to recommend discussions with respected mentors (just as those who pray seek divine guidance).

Saying "I'm so sorry you are hurting so much right now," or "I hope that you will find a way to live with your love and grief and still find joy in life," or "I know you will not feel this way forever," can be simple and effective and generate no belief-based conflicts. The chaplain's challenge and special contribution to healing is the chaplain's ability to understand and leverage someone's beliefs in a positive way. From simple secular comfort to connection with a supportive belief-based community, the chaplain has a lot to offer.