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# The 9/11 Terrorist Attack on the World Trade Center: A New York Psychologist's Personal Experiences and Professional Perspective

## Der terroristische Angriff vom 11.9.2001 auf das WTC: persönliche Erfahrungen einer New Yorker Psychologin und professionelle Perspektive

**Zusammenfassung** Anhand persönlicher Erlebnisse aus der Beratungstätigkeit werden die seelischen Folgen für die direkt und indirekt Betroffenen der Terrorattacke auf das WTC vom 11. 9. 2001 dargestellt. Es wird aufgezeigt, mit welchen psychologischen Konzepten und Methoden die professionelle BeraterIn Krisenintervention betreiben und bei der Traumabewältigung helfen kann. Nach dem Terroranschlag entstand die „positive Psychologie“ mit dem Fokus auf „Wachstumspotential“ und „Anpassungsfähigkeit“ angesichts traumatischer Ereignisse. Neue Modelle der Krisenintervention sind u.a.: Beruhigung der Person, kurze kognitive Verhaltenstherapie, Massage, der Einsatz von Therapiehunden, „Impfung“ gegen Stress mittels Einzel- oder Gruppengesprächen, um eine Retraumatisierung zu verhindern, „Guerilla counseling“, d.h. kurze Beratungsgespräche an Ort. Diskutiert wird auch die Frage, wie eine Retraumatisierung vermieden werden kann. Die Autorin beschreibt, mit welchen Mitteln sich die Menschen selber zu helfen versuchten und dass als Spätfolge der schrecklichen Ereignisse eine positive Entwicklung in den USA beobachtet werden kann: Der Stellenwert der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen ist für viele Menschen gestiegen.

### Schlüsselwörter:

Terrorismus; Trauma; positive Psychologie; Krisenintervention; Beratung.

## Introduction

The September 11th terrorist attack in New York City is an event that will live on in history. Its occurrence has impacted the world forever.

As a psychologist who has given mental health support at disaster sites around the country and the world, most recently at Ground Zero and the Family Assistance Center after 9/11, and who has heard many tragic stories as a radio call-in advice host for over twenty years, nothing can compare to the experiences, feelings and consequences of 9/11. In this paper, I reflect upon that event, and terrorism in general, as it impacted my personal and professional life, and explore the relevance of some fundamental, as well as newer psychological principles with regard to helping people cope with terrorism.

## A marker event

The September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York is what's called in psychology a "marker" event. Like a wedding, birth of a child, or death of a loved one, a marker event is a significant experience that has a major impact on a person's life as well as potentially on history. Often a turning point, the event becomes a date against which people remember other events; for example, saying, "Before 9/11, we ..." or "After 9/11, I no longer ..."

Another such marker event in recent American history is former President John F. Kennedy's assassination. An equivalent in German history is the fall of the Berlin wall.

Common qualities about these marker events are that people remember where they were when they heard the news; the people who were important at that time (who they were with or called); how they felt; and how the event has changed their life.

## The 5 questions to ask

Given the nature of marker events, there are five helpful questions to ask people when helping them cope with the impact of such a marker event like 9/11: (1) Where were you when the 9/11 attacks happened? (2) Who were you with? (3) Whom did you call or called you? (4) How did you feel? And, (5) What impact did 9/11 have on your life?

These can be asked in various settings, whether in a therapeutic intervention, seminar, or social interaction.

The sequence of these questions helps create rapport and follows a solid psychological principle about gently guiding a person into deeper exploration of an experience. Starting with a question about location elicits factual information allowing the person an opportunity to focus on the subject in a relatively safe, unemotional left-brain way. Defining whom they were with at the time continues a factual identification. Asking whom they called or who called them begins to arouse feelings of significant others, arousing emotions and leading to the

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more direct question about feelings and a deeper exploration of the impact of the event on their life.

One young woman calmly described being in her office when a co-worker told her of the tragedy. Facing the question of who called her, she became emotional, describing how she ended a budding romance with a suitor because he did not call her for days after the attacks.

“Why would I want to be with someone who does care about me enough to have called me on that day?” she said. “He should have done anything to get in touch with me to see how I was.”

Going through this sequence was also helpful for me.

I was in Chengdu, China on September 11th, on the eve of one of the trainings I do to teach doctors about American counseling techniques. One of the doctors came up to me and told me I better watch TV, whereupon a group escorted me to my hotel room where they translated the broadcast as we watched repeated images of the hijacked planes crash into the towers. Immediately, I tried to call my husband, my assistant and my mother, but could not get through on the phone until one of the Chinese doctors offered his cell phone that miraculously made the connection. I’ll always remember those three people I worried about first and the support of those doctors who stayed by my side for hours as I watched the TV and fretted over the news. I am particularly grateful to professor Tianmin Xu, who lent me his cell phone even as he was also trying desperately to reach his daughter in New York.

After the immediate shock, I became devastated over the destruction, fearful for the future, and furious that anyone would desecrate “my city” and “my country.”

As soon as I could return home, I went immediately to volunteer for the Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Services and was assigned to Ground Zero to offer mental health support for the emergency workers at the site. Later I had assignments to the Family Assistance Center, starting from the tragic day the families were offered death certificates for their lost loved ones.

Reviewing changes I life in the aftermath of the attacks can be healing. This is especially true for those directly involved or for others like myself who helped.

As requested, I committed to 12-hour shifts, suspending all else in life. I did night shifts, since I was used to working late nights on the radio and playing music in bands. Each day merged into another. Like the rescue workers, I’d go to my assignment and come home, mindlessly drop into bed and get up to start over again. Mail piled up, emails went unanswered. Nothing existed except walking the perimeter of Ground Zero, giving out water, apples, candy bars, warm socks and sweatshirts to the grateful rescue workers, firemen, police, FBI, repairmen and others working at the site; going back to the respite center (converted public schools or hotels) for food (delicious, I might add), and sharing with co-workers about the night’s “walk-abouts.”

## Psychological concepts in action

Certain psychological concepts became clearly useful in assessing the impact of 9/11, and determining how best to help people.

### The importance of contact comfort and transitional objects

Contact comfort is a concept I remember learning in introductory psychology class. It refers to holding closely an object that has some comforting effect and offers nurturing. A transitional object helps the person make the adjustment from childhood to adulthood. The most common transitional object that offers contact comfort is a baby blanket. People often keep these types of items throughout life, as a symbol of comforting from childhood, and reach for them in times of stress.

Stuffed animals, particularly stuffed bears, are another good example. During my work with the Red Cross at Ground Zero and the Family Assistance Center we handed out stuffed bears to children and adults. One man hugged his bear, and told me, “This is the nicest thing someone has given me in years. I’m a grown man, but you have no idea how great this feels to hug this bear.”

Of course, the best contact comfort is that which comes from another human being hugging you or a loved one holding you through the night.

## Maslow’s theory of needs

The impact of 9/11 proves the usefulness of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Terrorism and loss (of loved ones, home, finances) sends people down to the base of the triangle, concerned over basic needs for security and safety.

But clinicians need to assess where different people are on this hierarchy, and allow them to move up and down the hierarchy. Some may be worried about survival, while others question the “meaning of life” as part of existential crises. Studies show that spirituality increases during crises, when people search for higher meaning.

## Locus of control

One of the most troublesome feelings evoked by disaster is feeling out of control.

Disaster is either “natural” (caused by the environment, as in floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes) or man-made (as in terrorism). The latter can trigger deep emotional wounds, since human beings are the cause. Unlike in the case of natural disasters, you cannot rationalize that you have no control over the world.

Locus of control is a concept that refers to whether you believe events of life are caused by outside influences or by yourself. Rooted in social learning theory, it was applied to “alienation theory” by sociologist Melvin Seeman in 1959, who associated internal or external locus of control with alienation concepts such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation and self-estrangement.

Since introductory psychology classes, this concept has always fascinated me, as I often ponder, “Did I cause this to happen, or was this caused by events outside my control?” I have come to the conclusion that both are true: I can affect certain outcomes, but other people and unforeseen natural events also affect my life, over which I have no control. As the popular saying goes, “You can’t always control what happens, but you can control how you react to it.”

Therapeutic advice I offered for those feeling out of control: do something simple that you CAN control, like straightening up your closet or garage. Alabama Senator Richard Shelby even

noted “the streets spilled over with trash bags” as people cleaned house, washed cars and got rid of crab grass as vicarious ways to regain control and beating the enemy. Make conscious choices, to feel empowered, even for simple things like deciding what time you will set your alarm clock for, or what you will eat for dinner.

### Processing

People in crisis can function and put off processing. Yet, processing the impact of the terrorist attack on life both immediately after and in the longer term is exceptionally healing.

While terrorism can make people doubt the meaning in life, it can also do the opposite, as in my case, reaffirming purpose as a result of connecting deeply with others and forming strong bonds.

This experience is consistent with my experience for so many years working on the radio, hearing people’s problems. While many people wondered how I could keep myself sane or not be drained after hearing so many problems every night for years, I actually felt energized because hope emerged from the experience of deep sharing.

### The life stress test

In the useful scale of life events by Holmes and Rey, various experiences in life are measured by their relative stressful impact. The scores are added to assess a person’s overall amount of stress and vulnerability to breakdown. The World Trade Center attacks caused some people to score exceptionally high on such a test. Putting them at risk.

Identifying their level of stress itself is helpful, giving people an explanation and acknowledgment of their situation.

### Lingering stress and learned helplessness

The statistics about stress after 9/11 are staggering. About 100,000 Americans either saw one of the attacks or knew someone involved. But more thousands were affected even if not close to the scene. 90 percent of Americans had at least one stress symptom, from flashbacks to insomnia, in the week after. In a recent national survey, nearly half of women and one in four men said the terrorist attacks had shaken their sense

of safety and security. Some 84 percent thought future attacks were likely.

Persistent threats of terrorism can lead to learned helplessness, a well-researched psychological principle whereby constant living under stress causes frustration and giving up. Classic conditioning research on animals in cages given shocks without possibility of escape, led to the animal’s passive resignation. Humans are vulnerable to a similar outcome.

The antidote to learned helplessness is reaffirmation that one can be effective in doing something to change one’s circumstances, and taking small steps to do so.

### Father figures

The most common responses to the 9/11 attacks, besides depression and anxiety, were feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. Americans had felt safe, like a child in a secure family. But like a frightened child whose security was shaken, post 9/11 Americans sought the strength and reassurance of a strong authority or “father figure.”

Such figures emerged. Then New York mayor Rudy Guiliani became the perfect “father figure” by displaying his ability to be strong yet also compassionate in face of hysteria and crisis (Guiliani even admitted that he becomes stronger when faced with chaos). Narrowly escaping himself from a nearby building as the towers collapsed, the mayor shared the city’s grief, yet pulled together and functioned, setting an example of his advice to “get back to normal” (re-opening the Stock Exchange and Broadway theatres after only a few days, setting up a command center, all the while going to funerals of friends).

President Bush also presented a reassuring father figure. Consistent with psychological literature that victims of abuse need to feel protected and feel better if justice is done, the President responded by defying the abusers (bullies or terrorists). Public statements that “Freedom has been attacked ... we will hunt them (the terrorists) down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts” were well received.

Heroism of the city’s uniformed officers as well as civilians further set an inspiring standard of parental protectiveness.

### A new focus on positive psychology

A new approach in psychology that emerged post 9/11 is a positive health-centered one, focusing on growth potential and adapting well in the face of adversity instead of focusing on dysfunction and disorders.

The now popular word describing this is “resilience.”

The Practice Directorate of the American Psychological Association in collaboration with the Discovery Health TV channel launched a campaign for education, research and public service promoting the resilience of people in response to terrorism and identifying qualities that help people cope.

According to the APA executive director for professional practice, Russ Newman, “Now more than ever people seem to be examining their lives and finding new ways to cope. Resilience is a way of responding to adversity, challenges and even chronic stress, that can be learned.”

Tips to achieve resilience available in a free brochure ([www.helping.apa.org](http://www.helping.apa.org)) include: make connections and accept support from others, avoid seeing a crisis as insurmountable, look to a better future and acknowledge how well you already deal with difficult situations, move towards your goals, keep things in perspective, and take care of yourself.

In studies before Sept 11, adults who bounced back quickly didn’t bury their bad feelings after the attacks. Though only slightly less angry and sad than adults who weren’t as resilient, they felt more positive feelings like gratitude and love. These positive feelings are considered to account for their ability to weather tough times caused by the terrorist attacks.

In a study by one of my colleagues at Columbia University’s Teachers College, George Bonanno, a positive sense of self was crucial in adjustment to extreme adversity.

University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson suggests using the word “post-traumatic growth” instead of just concentrating on “post traumatic stress.”

“Throughout most of history, psychology has been concerned with identifying and remedying human ills,” Peterson said. “But a positive psychology approach today puts more emphasis

## L'attaque terroriste du 11 septembre : l'expérience personnelle et professionnelle d'une psychologue vivant à New York

**Résumé** Les effets psychiques sur les personnes directement ou indirectement concernées par l'attaque terroriste sur le WTC (11 septembre 2001) sont présentés en utilisant comme exemples les expériences faites par l'auteur dans son travail. Elle montre quels sont les concepts et les méthodes qui peuvent être utiles au niveau de l'intervention d'urgence et de l'affrontement au traumatisme. Après l'attaque sur le World Trade Center, les professionnels ont développé une « psychologie positive » centrée sur les potentiels de croissance et les capacités d'adaptation, compte tenu des événements traumatiques. De nouveaux modèles d'intervention ont été élaborés, incluant : calmer la personne, thérapie de comportement de brève durée, massage,

utilisation de chiens de thérapie, « vaccination » contre le stress par le biais d'entretiens individuels et en groupe (l'objectif étant d'éviter une re-traumatisation), ainsi que le « guerilla counseling » (à savoir de courtes consultations sur place). L'article propose également des solutions à la question de savoir comment une re-traumatisation peut être évitée.

L'auteur décrit aussi les moyens que les personnes touchées ont tenté de mettre en œuvre pour se soutenir elles-mêmes. Elle indique qu'une conséquence à plus long terme de ces terribles événements a été une évolution positive dans la société américaine, de nombreuses personnes accordant maintenant plus de valeur aux relations avec d'autres.

on strengths versus weakens, building better things in life rather than repairing the worst, and increasing fulfillment of healthy people as much as healing the distressed."

Past traumas indeed affect resilience. Those who have suffered more losses are more vulnerable. A psychologist who has studied grief, Tom Pyszczynski, uses a word-stem completion test to assess people's experiences of death. In his studies, subjects who finish the word stem "coff" with "in" spelling the word "coffin" have suffered more losses than those who complete the word with "ee" spelling a more innocuous word, "coffee."

### New models of crisis intervention

The most important first step in helping someone deal with disaster, experts now say, is to calm the person. "Make every effort to reassure the person and not prolong the state of terror," says psychology professor and public health associate from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, George Everly. "Convince them that the immediate life threat has ended."

Invoking Yogi Berra's characteristically humorous statement that "90 percent of the game is half mental," Everly advises saying, "It's over. You did OK. You can cope."

### Brief cognitive behavior therapy program

Everly reported at a recent conference about a new cognitive behavior program lasting 2–5 weeks. The sessions involve relaxation training, and safely

recounting the incident in a secure environment, addressing mistaken beliefs, confronting present fears, and then in-vivo desensitization by visiting the site of the disaster.

### Massage and other R and R's

Military psychologist Larry James said at the 2002 APA convention that the top request for help after the attacks on the Pentagon was for a massage. James, chief psychologist at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington D.C., noted that victims needed rest and replenishment, besides reassurance. "Before talking about PTSD," says James, "be sure the person is eating and sleeping well."

At the respite center in the Marriott Hotel only blocks from Ground Zero, tables were set up in a quiet area on the third floor for workers to get a massage.

In an adjacent room, there were computer stations and large TVs with soft leather reclining chairs, for comfort.

### Therapy dogs

At the Family Assistance Center, trained dogs with expert handlers roamed the floors, waiting to be petted by family members who were seeking help. Not just children, but adults, eagerly petted the animals, smiled and reported feeling happier.

### Stress inoculation

A popular concept re-emerging in response to terrorism is "stress inoculation," whereby mental health workers meet with people, often in groups, to discuss impending events that could re-

trigger trauma. Such sessions took place in counseling centers around the New York area before the anniversary of the attacks, giving people a chance to share and comfort each other.

### "Guerrilla counseling"

In times of crisis, psychologists can find themselves offering counseling "on the spot," rather than always in their offices at appointed times. As a profession, we have to be prepared to do this, often pro bono, work.

People may ask questions and need help, requiring "Impromptu therapeutic interactions. A variation of this model that I developed as a result of 9/11 is what I call "guerilla counseling," – in-person, on-the-spot advice given to people with issues related to a crisis. I found myself addressing many people's anxieties in the downtown area, especially around Ground Zero, Chinatown and Greenwich Village. Some of these sessions were videotaped by a television crew and aired on a website to show people that they are not the only one suffering with a particular problem related to 9/11. Since I am well known in the New York area, many people recognize me in the street and spontaneously asked questions. They ranged from a parent asking, "How do I tell my children about what terrorism is?" to a young Arab student asking, "How can I convince young girls to trust me enough to go out with me after what happened?" to a woman who wanted to know, "After what happened, should I break up with my boyfriend who doesn't treat me well?"

## The cell phone solution

Resolving to be in closer touch with loved ones was one of the silver linings of the very dark cloud of the terror attacks.

Since terrorism incidents exploded throughout the world, the fastest growing business has been that of cell phones and contact technology. Most of the couples I spoke with after 9/11 mentioned calling their loved ones more often. For example, one young man I interviewed in the Ground Zero area mentioned that he upped his cell phone usage plan so he could call his fiancé several times a day, and gifted her with a call package.

Non-techie types have had others program their phones to call loved ones at the touch of a tone.

E-mailing also became a growing means of instant communication.

## A kindler, gentler nation

Comparing responses to online surveys before and up to 10 months after the attacks, Researchers found a sustained increase in the level of seven character strengths: gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality and teamwork ([www.positivepsychology.org](http://www.positivepsychology.org)). This pattern held regardless of gender, race, age, education and marital status. These results bode well for an index of a change in the American character.

## What to say: the nature of trauma work

In the face of terrorist events in the last decade, a specialty in psychology has grown, that of dealing with trauma, post-traumatic stress, the psychology of terrorism, methods of grief counseling and techniques like “critical incident debriefing.”

On most issues in this area, psychologists agree. But there are some areas of potential dispute.

One expert giving a presentation at the APA convention warned against being teary eyed as a helper. I disagreed. In some situations, with some people facing trauma, crying with them makes them feel not alone, and trust you because you are being real.

Another issue regards talking about the event.

This same expert warned against asking people questions about the event at the time, at risk of causing traumatization. “It is not necessary to talk about the grisly details,” she said. “That leads to rumination. People can get better without telling the details.”

In my view, this should be treated on a case-by-case basis. Experience shows me that if people want to talk, it is good clinical practice to let them do so.

This is consistent with the model of “exposure therapy” used by therapists from the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia Medical School in New York working with the New York Police Foundation. Their technique guides individuals to confront their painful memories, identify the triggers of stress, and hone in on their strengths.

The bottom line: whether revisiting the event re-traumatizes or diffuses fear depends on how and when it is done, and in what setting.

“It is safe to re-experience the traumatic event in imagination or real life if it is done properly, when the real threat is over and in a setting where there is no threat,” said Professor Psychiatry at University of California San Francisco Charles Marmar. “You can prolong the trauma if a review is done before it is clear that the life threat has ended.”

Interventions in the first few minutes, says trauma expert Marmar, should be aimed at soothing, calming, and reassuring the person of safety. “This does not mean telling the person to please pour out emotions,” warns Marmar, as that can exaggerate feelings and reactions. Anger and panic management, he says, should precede exposure therapy.

The degree to which people talk about trauma is related to personal style. There are those (more right-brained types) who need to express emotion, and those (more left-brained types) who prefer to use defense mechanisms like denial and suppression, to keep their anxiety in check.

Every clinician knows that for some people, recounting a horrific experience can defuse the associated four major “negative” emotions: anxiety, shame, and embarrassment of fear. During the aftermath of the World Trade Attacks, I found people wanting to relate horrors (some because they trusted me, knowing me for years as a

media personality in our city). One electrical worker drove me home after an overnight shift downtown at Ground Zero and immediately as I got into the truck, began to tell me about horrors he witnessed, including driving over a corpse’s decapitated head.

The opposite was also true: people like to escape trauma, by talking about other aspects of life. These might be light-hearted, to distract them entirely, or heavy, addressing other problems (since trauma in one area can unleash memories of earlier past traumas).

Many patients in therapy brought up past abuses, from rape or incest to being forced to perform sexual acts on male dates.

Many people talked to me about sex, understandably since I am known as a sex counselor. Many an evening I sat in the firehouse at Ground Zero with dinner companions asking me about their sex problems, like about a wife who wasn’t interested in sex after having a child, or their own disinterest because of working too hard.

Talking about sex – or sports – is a common relief from trauma. Sports talk allows the expression of aggression against a competitor or “enemy,” while sex talk can offer relief from anxiety.

How do you start a conversation? On a neutral level, with a smile in your heart (even if not on your face), and usually making a statement before asking a question. On line in the cafeteria at the respite center, I might say, “We had chicken like this yesterday but this one looks more appealing than last night,” and then ask, “How’re you feeling today?” A good clinician can sense where to go from there and what a person needs to talk about.

## The impact on relationships

At the 2002 annual convention of the American Psychological Association, with almost a quarter of the 3,000 presentations related to terror and the aftermath of 9/11, psychologists uniformly agreed that in spite of stress that strains some relationships, couples generally became closer and more committed.

Responses to another online survey, replicated by my students’ study at Columbia University Teachers College, revealed that up to two-thirds of women

and men wanted more connection with their partners.

### Asking for what you want

Ever since the age of “assertiveness training” in the 1970’s, therapists like myself have been encouraging women to ask for what they need from men. This refers to women in particular since they traditionally have a harder time than men asserting themselves. The events of September 11th were like a proverbial “kick in the pants” for many women, to finally have this message about assertion hit home. Many more women finally resolved to have courage to speak up to the men in their life about their needs, whether for love or in sex.

### A question to assess commitment

Classic questions have tested partner’s devotion. One has been, “If you and your partner were in the Titanic and there was only one place on the lifeboat, would you go or give the spot to your spouse?” In another, women muse, “Would my husband still love me if I had breast cancer?” (an all-too-sad health problem too many women today face, and that in reality does test a relationship).

While these type questions can be threatening, they can also be fruitful. One young woman was dating a man for some time, and was upset that he was treating the relationship too casually. She asked him that question, “What would you do if I were in the towers when they went down?”

“Don’t ask such a question, you weren’t,” he said in a stereotypically male response, focusing on the facts rather than the emotional overtones.

“What is she really asking you?” I said to him.

After much discussion, he finally admitted, “I guess she wants me to show more that I care about her.”

“That’s it,” I said. “She wants more of a commitment.”

The young man explained that he moves “far more slowly” than she does. Ultimately, however, he agreed to show her more affection that she so desired. Thus the initially disturbing question led to a discussion that the woman had longed for, yet feared bringing up (typical in so many relationships).

### A change in sex role stereotypes

Men and women still fall into stereotypes, with women expressing feelings and men being less expressive. In this way, the woman offers the man vicarious emotional release and he offers her more security by being a rational “rock” in the relationship.

After September 11th, sex roles shifted. More men openly expressed emotion, giving female partners a chance to show more strength. Looking at a flyer requesting information about their missing son (as so many similar others posted on walls around Manhattan), one husband stood crying as his wife held him tight. “I am hurting inside too,” she told me. “But for a change, he’s the one who’s showing it on the outside and I can be strong for him instead of my always being the fragile one.”

September 11th gave macho men an excuse to express feelings as the whole country joined in mourning and the New York City Mayor was hailed as a perfect example of male strength and sensitivity when he publicly cried. On the day families were given death certificates of lost loved ones, a man I was counseling broke down sobbing. “Thank you for letting me cry for the first time in my life,” he told me.

Finally, after so many years of my counseling women to do so, I found more women willing to give nice guys the nod and bad boys the boot. Moved by the disaster to realize they deserve to be treated well, women told me they no longer needed to continually test their desirability by winning over resistant men. More self-respecting women spell healthier relationships.

### Exploring relationships: a valuable classroom assignment

As the six-month anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks approached, a great deal of media attention again focused on the tragedy. Pundits argued whether review of scenes and feelings could re-traumatize people, and criticized the media for exploitation of the events for ratings.

From my psychological perspective, there is benefit from examining the events, given the distance of some time. As a result, I gave my summer class in

“The Psychology of Intimacy” the opportunity to do projects researching the impact of the attacks on relationships, and also the assignment to ask a significant other about the impact of the events on their relationship.

The assignment: How did a conversation you had with someone about 9-11 affect the relationship you had with them?

Every student reported a positive experience from the discussion. Samples of their (abbreviated) reports included the following.

“I learned a lot about my (then) boyfriend’s personality by a conversation about 9-11. We speculated about why this happened, why other tragedies happen and have happened and discussed G-d’s role in them. This led to a discussion about our overall belief systems and world outlooks. I learned that he was open to hearing and thinking about my ideas and opinions, even though some of them differed from his own. He spent the whole day comforting the distraught wife of a friend who worked at Ground Zero and then aiding in the rescue and relief efforts himself. This showed me his extraordinarily giving nature. Even though he usually projects a “tough, macho” image and doesn’t usually display emotion in public, he reacted to the events of 9-11 in a very appropriate and emotional way, feeling jarred, saddened and confused.”

“My best friend told me that her relationship with her mother and sister changed for the better on that day, cherishing one another and realizing how fortunate they were to have a family. However, since then things have gone back to what they were before the tragedy. Bickering and petty fights are more consistent, and I’ve even heard her say that she hates her mom because her mother took her driving privileges away. Also, after the tragedy, she and her boyfriend became tight and spent much more time together. He even moved in with her to provide extra support, however, since then they have broken up when he assumed that she cheated on him during a vacation.”

“Since the incident, my relationship with my boyfriend has become more open. We feel the need to communicate more than ever. We cherish every time we have together, especially since we are miles away. He said that he began to think about our relationship a lot and the thought of losing me; he wouldn’t know what to do. He was not there and did not know anyone that was involved. However, it did help him appreciate his relationship with me because in a split second someone can be with you and then gone the next. He also gets very scared for me because I frequently fly and he prays that I always make it safely to my destination.”

“My best friend of 7 years confided in me that he was glad to have a friend to share all

of these feelings with. In the midst of our fears and uncertainty, we could both say I love you to one another and those three words seemed to have so much more power than they did on September 10th."

"My boyfriend's friend used to drive me crazy but after I found out he was alive when I thought he died in the tower, I ran outside and hugged him before he even got to the door. I couldn't believe that there could have been a chance that I would never see him again. He said it was weird how many people came out of the woodworks to call and see if he was ok. Now, every time I think about September 11th, 2001, I think about that feeling I had when I thought Mike was dead. And I am so grateful that he is still here to drive me crazy."

"I have since come to terms with my mother; we had constantly fought with each other. I realized

that there wasn't any point in fighting with her over insignificant things. I also realized that I was lucky

to even have a mother considering that so many children lost their mothers in the terrorist attack."

"My boyfriend and I are more open to new experiences and we have decided to try new activities together, experiment with different foods, and to travel to different places. We want to do as much as possible with each other while we still can. Overall, I must say that my boyfriend and I have become more loving and appreciative of each other. We have also come to accept the fact that we both have our flaws and that our relationship is not perfect."

## Make love not war

I believe that Freud was right when he identified two major instincts: Eros (the life, love, sex drive) and Thanatos (death and aggression). They're two subjects that people are most interested in talking about, and have most conflicts over. Today's television shows prove that, as viewers are treated to daily doses either of "reality" shows about relationships or shows about crime, cops, and investigations.

Sex and war are connected.

After September 11, reports surfaced about an increase in extra-marital affairs and casual sex. That meant that faced with immediate disaster, men and women were having casual even unprotected sex as in the pre-AIDS days. Thinking that the world could come to an end anyway, they were going to enjoy their last days. The media frenzy warned of "terror sex," "apocalyptic sex" and "end of the world sex."

"If I only have one day left to live," one woman told me, "I might as well have the best time of my life, whether it's buying all the clothes I like or bedding any man I want."

The urge is not new. It was presented in the classic film, recently produced on Broadway, called "The Summer of '42," where a newly widowed woman almost immediately takes a new lover upon hearing news of her loss.

I call this phenomenon "the Anne Frank Syndrome," referring to the diary of the young Jewish girl during World War II, who records her first sexual experience that happened when faced with the probability of being discovered by the enemy.

Psychologically, the connection makes sense. Confronted with death, there is a natural urge to reaffirm life by indulging in pleasurable activities like sex. In more extreme cases, overindulgence in sex, as in drugs or alcohol, represents an effort to bury painful feelings.

Tragedy can also trigger "post-traumatic sex syndrome," a phrase referring to a variation of "post traumatic stress syndrome, the recognized psychological term describing the complex of symptoms stimulated by the experience of a traumatic event that threatens life and loss, can lead to the opposite reaction – reduced libido. Symptoms like depression, anxiety, fatigue and disinterest in otherwise pleasurable activities can cause a withdrawal from sex that further increases depression in a vicious cycle.

## From sex to terrorism

Most people certainly in America, and to some extent around the world, know me as an expert on relationships and sex. I have been referred to as the "younger taller Dr Ruth," because even though I started my career at Columbia Medical Center's New York state Psychiatric Institute on a cross-cultural study of depression and schizophrenia, my research group was approached by then pioneer sexperts Masters and Johnson to evaluate their sex therapy techniques and I became involved on this issue from its beginnings in the early 1970's. As someone who could talk openly about sex, I was asked by many media to talk about the subject.

But for many years I also did crisis counseling in disasters, like after the

San Francisco earthquake, Hurricane Hugo, and even a major earthquake in Australia.

After 9/11, the media became saturated by the subject of terrorism. Even Brides magazine interviewed me for a story about the effect of terrorism on weddings; more couples were making commitments and having ceremonies sooner than expected, and more couples were choosing to honeymoon closer to home to avoid potential traveling dangers.

## Collateral damage

Many people other than those directly affected in a disaster also suffer, though more silently and less recognized. A new term to refer to this phenomenon is "collateral damage." It's the title of a recent Arnold Schwarzenegger movie where his character's innocent wife and son are killed in a terrorist bombing in a restaurant (in response to which he seeks to capture the offenders). The term is being used to refer to those affected indirectly, but still powerfully, by a traumatic event.

These include rescue workers, policemen, firemen, journalists and even politicians. Former New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani admitted stress from losing so many of his close friends who served in city government, and cried at the funerals of many city workers after 9/11.

Utility workers (gas, phone, water) are also under-served. One night I took time at Ground Zero to talk with four telephone repairmen, who surfaced from an underground workspace. Grateful that I had given them attention, one of them said, "Noone talks to us. They don't realize that we're suffering as much as the firemen and policemen here."

Elderly are also affected, whose fears often cause them to become housebound.

Children watching television or hearing about events at school, develop nightmares and regressive behaviors, including bed-wetting, thumb sucking and refusal to go to school.

Other under-recognized groups include:

1) Businesses. Organizational psychology is a recognized psychological discipline, but since 9/11, the concept of considering business like a family is even more vivid. Businesses, especially those that employed many people like

Cantor Fitzgerald, were called upon to treat their employees with understanding and financial support.

Businesses of all kinds were greatly affected, even long after the attacks. Many people in New York were so traumatized after 9/11 that they took days off from work, or couldn't concentrate when they were there. Some suffered from "workplace phobia," like "school phobia" where children fear going to school because their parents might die while they were away.

For example, one young middle manager was terrified to drive to work anymore, fearing that the tunnel she had to drive through would explode or that loved ones at home would be in danger while she was away.

In response to this situation, I did a number of seminars for businesses. For example, at the Jasper Alabama Chamber of Commerce, I lectured to business owners about being sensitive to employee's fears and special needs at this time and suggested that businesses offer discussion groups for employees to air their feelings, facilitated by outside staff that would maintain confidentiality.

2) Journalists' burnout. Journalists put themselves in the eye of the storm while having to stay emotionally detached – a difficult task. An organization, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, based in Seattle Washington, was formed after 9/11 to help journalists cope. News directors and newspaper editors have asked me to help their staff discuss feelings about the war stories they are covering. And a grant proposal I consulted for was submitted to help journalists in the Middle East explore feelings.

3) Psychologists and health professionals suffer from what's being called "compassion fatigue." In contrast to burnout (a relatively predictable phenomenon generally associated with high stress), compassion fatigue refers to the fact that as a result of exposure to clients' trauma, helping professionals become subject to "vicarious traumatization" or "secondary post-traumatic stress." Compassion fatigue has been defined as the emotional residue of exposure to working with people who have suffered the consequences of traumatic events.

Strategies to avoid this syndrome include quality sleep, relaxation techniques, guided imagery specific to com-

passion fatigue (for example, "seeing a light at the end of the tunnel"), avoiding "numbness," setting boundaries, case-load scheduling and monitoring and spiritual practices.

The Red Cross emphasizes the need for helpers to help themselves, by constantly asking volunteers, "What are you doing to help yourself, relax, and feel better?" A common answer: taking a bath. For me, relief came from talking about my feelings to trusted others (my mother, assistant), or watching TV movies to distract my mind. These feelings ranged from "negative" ones (sadness, fear, frustration, anger towards the terrorists) to more "positive" feelings (being more connected to others, proud of being able to participate and help).

In an online survey of psychologists' experiences of the terrorist attacks, the APA Practice Directorate found that my method of coping (communication with family or friends) was common for 92.9 percent of the 407 respondents. 71 percent consulted with colleagues, about 2/3 took time for themselves and engaged in activities like hobbies and exercise, nearly half reported spiritual or religious involvement, and 11 percent sought therapy for themselves.

While many people experienced severe fear of flying, given the terrorists use of airplanes as a means of destruction, I was determined not to submit to such fear. Against advice of friends and family, I took many scheduled airplane trips both nationally and internationally in a defiant attitude, "I will not be defeated!"

Yet my feelings are still not far from the surface whenever I talk intensely about the attacks, or when I visit the memorial wall with the list of names of those who died. When interviewed for a feature on five New Yorkers for Max Magazine in Germany, I found myself uncontrollably crying while standing by the teddy bears and notes left on the memorial wall, and when crossing on the Staten Island ferry, looking back at the now-changed New York skyline.

4) Pets suffer too. Research is proving the importance of the human-companion animal bond, showing that a high percentage of people consider themselves closer to their pet than to another person. They usually cite how unconditionally a pet loves them and point out how "human" their pet seems to be. Pets suffered during 9/11. One

woman who lived close to the site told me how her pet did not come out from under the bed for days after the tragedy, frightened by the sounds and the soot that seeped into her apartment. Other pet owners recounted how their pets showed signs of regression like urinating on rugs and constant whimpering during the night, not dissimilar to traumatized children's nightmares and bed-wetting.

Sometimes people use talking about their pet (or child) as a way to vicariously express their own feelings. Additionally, since animals are sensitive to their owner's emotions, pet owners emotions are reflected through the animals' behavior. Asking about the pet's behavior can give the psychologist clues as to how the person is coping.

## Volunteering

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York, psychologists rushed to help. In fact, many more applied to work for the Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Services than were ultimately assigned. Those turned away were disappointed that they could not participate in the helping effort.

Helping helps the helper. Research shows that volunteering is good for your physical health in improving the immune system and overall vitality. One University of California study showed that doing for others decreased cholesterol and chest pains. Altruism further stimulates opiates in the brain linked to overall feelings of well-being.

The benefits are also psychological, reflected in increased self-esteem and self worth.

## Coping with anniversaries

Anniversaries revive the emotions of a marker event but they also offer an opportunity for creativity and new connectedness.

During the summer of 9/11, as the six-month anniversary of 9/11 was approaching, Americans were re-living their emotions. There was a big debate in the media: are we making people re-traumatized, or are we helping those with post-traumatic stress heal?

The answer psychologically for me was "both." Some people might not



want to relive the trauma, but a majority can be helped to process the events from a position of some distance in time. After all, they could exercise choice (that negates helplessness) by choosing not to watch TV or read newspapers.

I chose to follow the media coverage, and to delve into the event, like requiring my students to write essays about "What is Hate?" and to review relationships post 9/11.

Reunions with others who worked at the sites or families who were affected became powerful experiences. We felt like "war buddies," who form strong bonds and provide a sense of belongingness and intimacy (in to me you see) greatly lacking in everyday life.

### Watching media coverage

A large national survey conducted by University of Texas psychologists found that the more TV people watched, the worse their stress a week after the attacks. Popular advice was widely given by experts to monitor children's, and one's own, exposure to media coverage. Personally I found watching coverage alternately constructive and destructive. At times I was obsessive, scouring for details, for reality testing, true to the principle that knowing facts eases anxiety. At other times, I suffered from information overload and had to tune out.

### Professional growth

The persistence of terrorist fears has created an ongoing network of professionals committed to combating terrorism, and experts dealing with all aspects of grief and mourning. There are an increasing number of well-attended seminars and workshops on this issue, and trainings offered to professionals.

During the latest APA convention, many psychologists presented workshops together about terrorist issues. At one such afternoon, on "Terrorism: Trauma Recovery," I was among the presenters, raising the issue of terrorism's affect on relationships, an important subject on which there has been little formal research, even though it is generally recognized as a clinical reality. The seminar brought

psychological experts together with emergency workers and even a photo exhibiter.

The professional network has grown worldwide, as was witnessed at the recent World Congress of Psychotherapy in Vienna, where panels of experts from different cultures and countries discussed the issues of terrorism.

### A wider world view

The World Trade Center in New York housed companies from all over the world. This universality was evident at the Family Assistance Center, with its booths for helping organizations from all cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds (Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim) – a true "melting pot."

The bombing in Bali is a similar example of local terrorism affecting the world, as the island is a popular vacation destination for people all over the world, not just from nearby Australia (that suffered the most victims).

The destination, like wealthy New York, is also a symbol of luxury.

The WTC site and Ground Zero has become a tourist attraction. People from all over the world come to see the site, as they would visit the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building.

"We come from a small country that is ignored in world evg'ts," said one young man who came to visit from Holland with his fiancé, "but coming to Ground Zero made us feel more a part of the 'family of man'."

America has a reputation of being isolationist, but people are more aware now that paying attention to world events is crucial, especially in these days of globalization and a shrinking globe due partly to easy internet access.

Even my eyes were opened more widely to the world, coming closer to my childhood dream of doing something for world peace. Granted I had awareness of Asian affairs, as I had been back and forth to Japan for four years, where several of my books were published and my radio advice show aired live. In the last three years, I have been working in China, mainly training doctors, family planners and other health professionals in American counseling techniques. At the anniversary of the hospital I collaborate with in Shanghai, the Shanghai Center for Reproductive Health Instruction, I had been labeled by

one government official as "golden bridge" between China and America for health and peace. I see that role more consciously now.

The experience of 9/11 making me more sensitive to world hotspots led me to visit Israel and Palestinian territory on missions to visit the hospitals and rehab centers to offer support to victims and helpers. This has led to several projects, including a book with Israeli and Palestinian health professionals on the different approaches to therapy, and to proposed projects "helping the helpers" and journalists on both sides.

### The universality of reactions to terrorism

A review of literature on disasters and my own clinical experiences reveal similarities across various types of attacks, people's reactions, and recommendations.

After an earthquake in a small town in Australia (where I happened to be camping) ten years ago, I went on their local radio to field many people's concerns. The Australians seeking advice voiced similar concerns to Americans after our recent terrorist attack. An elderly woman needed encouragement that it was safe to go out of the house. A mother worried about her 9 year old daughter's nightmares, whom I advised to have her draw her fears. A disgruntled wife had to be warned not to get a divorce in the heat of the crisis. A rescue worker was reassured that his joking was a normal way of coping with extreme anxiety. A religious man was reassured that his anger at God was understandable.

### A stronger commitment to peace

After 9/11, the concept of peace enters my consciousness more often in all aspects of work. I have become more involved in various peace initiatives around the world. And I have added a stronger peace consciousness to the workshops that I have given on "East West Counseling and Higher Consciousness" to diverse groups in the U.S. and around the world (professionals at the Vienna World Congress of Psychothera-

py, the public in Hong Kong sponsored by the Social Sciences department of Hong Kong University, students at Hebrew University after the bombing in Jerusalem last summer, and a group of inner city youth in Newark sponsored by Planned Parenthood). This model integrates ancient techniques with modern western approaches, directing energy to generate personal peace that extends out to others.

In Newark, a drive-by shooting was happening at the same time a few blocks away as I was guiding a group of 12 youth Black high school students in a group exercise generating love and peacefulness within their hearts and sending that out to the world.

In a stroke of fortuitous timing, I was editing the final version of my book, "The Complete Idiots Guide to Tantric Sex" just after the WTC attacks, enabling me to add my thoughts about how tantric practices can serve as a healing force for peace in the world.

The Beatles sang a song about "Give Peace A Chance," popular during the Vietnam War. The message applies today.

## Closer ties

A silver lining to the very dark cloud of the World Trade Center Attacks was the overwhelming coming together of people. It is a known psychological fact that when faced with a common enemy, people band together. Children of abusive or alcoholic parents can form a stronger bond together when facing their parent's behavior. In times of war, people tend to have less strife in their personal relationships than in more peaceful times.

In his administration, former President George Bush (Senior) called for a "kinder, gentler nation." New York in particular is a "tough town," with people known for being rude and having no time or patience for others (in comparison to Midwestern towns where people are more aware and considerate of their neighbors).

In the wake of 9/11, New Yorkers showed their finest, being nicer to each other, smiling on the streets, offering help to strangers.

As a veteran New Yorker, I have sadly noticed this behavior waning, with the passing of time and dulling of immediate fear of another attack.

## Looking towards the future: preparedness

There is no question that New York City, America, and the world has been changed forever by the events of 9/11. The war on terrorism rages. With it has come fear of bioterrorism and other attacks.

On the six-month anniversary of 9/11, there were orange alerts of a "dirty bomb" hitting New York, reportedly capable of killing 50,000 people in its range. And warnings that major landmarks in America, as Disneyland, the White House, the Statue of Liberty, and even the San Francisco bridge, could be bombed.

Americans experienced deadly anthrax attacks, and a terrorizing spate of sniper shootings in the Washington area.

Such fear has become inescapably part of daily life.

One solution is preparedness. That word has become much more commonly used in our language.

A terrorist expert and professor of criminal justice at Long Island University, Harvey Kushner, with whom I am collaborating on a book, opened a store called "Safer America" just streets from Ground Zero with many items for safety. While the media initially questioned whether such a store was necessary and just raised fears, my psychological opinion was that it was helpful, giving people some control over their life by being prepared for any emergency, just like having the typical home medicine kit.

Forewarned is forearmed. Making people aware of how to cope psychologically in the face of terror returns a sense of power to them. Many books have been written since 9/11 about explaining terrorism, including a four-part series "The Psychology of Terrorism" edited by Northwestern University professor Chris Stout (cstout@ix.netcom.com). These help professionals understand the nature of this tragic phenomenon. But only a few projects address the important issue of being prepared. One such book is "Access: Emergency Survival Handbook," a project started in the face of floods in Alabama in 1993 and expanded after the September 11th tragedy (www.ediehandfoundation.com), and to which I contributed the section on emotional responses and recovery in the face of disaster.

## Bringing the world together through arts and song

In psychology we know that arts and music are healing. For example, a New Yorker named Michael Feldshuh invited people after the attacks to post photos, of personal relevance to the attacks, on a gallery space wall. This grew to become "The September 11 Photo Project" that toured the country and the world. At the APA panel we were both on, Feldshuh told me, "Posting their personal photos for others to see gave people a chance to process their experience, and to share it with others, helping them deal with feelings through pictures instead of words."

A famous music producer, Niles Rodgers, gathered famous musicians and performers from America together a few days after September 11, to re-record his famous song, "We Are Family" (www.wearefamilyfoundation.com). "It's a song with a message of peace for everyone, letting them know that we are all in this together and need to love each other," Niles told me in a recent reception honoring the song at a New York convention for the arts.

Knowing the impact of music to heal (as a former musician myself), I assigned a class project to one of my students, a music major and accomplished composer and pianist, to write a song about 9/11, which we ended up writing and producing together, in time to distribute it free of charge to victims' relatives, city workers and dignitaries (including President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell), attending the one year anniversary ceremony at Ground Zero on September 11, 2002.

The song, titled "Towers of Light" sends chills up the spine of many who hear it.

Here are the words:

### Towers of Light

written and produced by Russell Daisey and Dr. Judy Kuriansky

I feel like I'm broken inside me, I feel that it's so hard to heal.

There must be a sane way beyond this, To accept this insanity's real.

I want to wake up and remember ... That morning before it all changed.

But sadly it's real, not a bad dream. Our lives have been all rearranged.

*Chorus*

Towers of light shine in the night, A  
pathway to the stars,  
Souls taking flight, move to the light,  
Where they become new stars.

*Bridge*

They're our friends, they're our lovers,  
They're our sisters and our brothers,  
They're our fathers and our mothers,  
taken away.  
They're our husbands, they're our wives,  
They're the children ... in our lives  
And their spirit that survives ... that  
fateful day.

*Verse 2*

They tell us to get back to normal, But  
normal's so far from my mind.  
I'm looking for some kind of closure ...  
To leave all this madness behind.  
But right now, let's honor the heroes,  
Who sacrificed all for our lives.  
There must be a far greater purpose ...  
Where love over hatred survives.

*Bridge*

Even though my heart is broken ... I  
have mem'ries as a token ...  
Of our last words that were spoken, On  
that day.

Though I know I must go on ... It still  
hurts that you are gone.  
But I trust there'll be a dawn each brand  
new day.

*Chorus*

Towers of light shine in the night. A  
pathway for new stars.  
Souls taking flight, move to the light ...  
Where they become new stars.  
There they are, new stars, We're still  
here, gazing at, new stars.