



NEW JERSEY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Healing From Terrorism

By Deborah Wagner, PhD

Our country, and the world outside the United States, have been subjected to far too many acts of terrorism, starting shortly before September 11, 2001. The suddenness, the horror, the fear, and the feelings of helplessness create a challenge for people to heal and move past these events. When the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon were attacked, it changed the way we viewed our lives and our safety while introducing a sense of vulnerability that Americans had not experienced in generations.

Following is my personal experience of this changing day and how my family coped, healed, and moved forward.

8:50 AM

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I awoke and turned on the news. My husband always awakens early and saw the kids off to school before heading into New York City to begin his job on Wall Street.

As the sleep cleared from my head, I tried to process what I was seeing on the television. There was a burning airplane stuck in the side of the tower of The World Trade Center. My mind immediately began to calculate...my husband took the Path train to the World Trade Center to be at work by 9:00am. The plane hit at 8:45. He must be there.

9:00 AM

Moments after I unsuccessfully attempted to reach him, my husband called me. He was breathless-running, scared, and confused. He quickly described some of the horrific sights he was witnessing. Even though he was there and I was in New Jersey, I knew more than he did.

9:03

He was standing in front of the window at his office watching the second plane hit. I begged him to get out of the city. I told him these were terror attacks and he was not safe. He said he would not leave until he could get his employees out. The loud speaker came on telling everyone to evacuate the building. Then the connection was lost.

Hours passed before I heard from my husband. He walked into our home with a group of disheveled, dirty, and frightened strangers; some covered in ash, others covered in soot. They had been lucky enough to catch the last ferry out of NYC before the ferries were conscripted for the wounded that never came.

Together these strangers stood on a ferry boat, covered in the debris of trauma and watched the iconic towers of freedom and commerce in the United States of America collapse like a child's building of blocks. For only a few moments in their lives were these people connected. They all piled into the car of someone who had been parked across the river and drove to our home. My instinct was to nurture these traumatized individuals. They could not eat or drink. They filed robotically into my family room to stare in shocked silence at what was unfolding on the television, not speaking and barely breathing. Soon their loved ones collected them from our home and freed us to go to the school to get our children and bring our family together. We were the lucky ones.

Healing

In the immediate aftermath, my family did all we could to mitigate the helplessness we felt and support those in need. My children raised money to buy the supplies needed for the ground zero emergency workers. I volunteered to provide therapy in local drop in centers and put my name on the list to provide therapy on the navy medical ship, the USS Comfort.

In the ensuing months, my son tutored a young man who had lost his mother in one of the towers and was struggling academically. I had several conversations with a friend's friend who had lost his wife in the Pentagon attack.

My husband's trauma lasted for years. His job had always required a lot of travel. After 9/11 every flight was an emotional hardship. Eventually, just getting on a plane was agony. He recalled having seen suspicious plane activity in the skies near the World Trade Centers in the weeks prior to 9/11. He reported this to the FBI but this information was of no use. The damage had been done.

Our local community was hit hard by many losses. The funerals and memorial services seemed endless but they were gingerly and caringly tended to by our community, locally and from afar. There are statues, memorials, and monuments scattered through local towns. While they were once what you noticed first, as the healing continues, they become part of our landscape. There will come a time, far in the future, when there is no one who lives with the pain of 9/11/2001. It will become another chapter in the history books, side by side with so many stories of devastation, trauma, and eventually, healing. We, Americans, are a resilient bunch. We reel from the incomprehensibility of acts of hate and destruction but we pull together, supporting, giving, loving, and helping one another. This is our strength and this is what keeps us going.