

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 40

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Surviving the Holidays after Sept. 11, 2001:

Ten Thoughts on Coping from the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA)

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You must live through the time when everything hurts.” — Stephen Spender

It is always difficult to live through holidays in the aftermath of intense tragedy. For victims and survivors, holidays are often marked with pain and anguished memories. What, in the past, may have been a time for family gatherings and celebration will be a time for missing loved ones and a sense of loss. Many holidays will be coming up in the next few months: Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Years Eve and Day. Veterans’ Day may be particularly significant this year as the United States wages its war on terrorism. Individuals will have their own special days that need to be acknowledged: birthdays, anniversaries, memorial days for loved ones who have died.

Knowing that it will be hard to get through holidays or other special days will not make the problem go away. But by looking at the problem in advance, many families and individuals can plan their own way to cope – often with a special way of remembering their loved ones.

Everyone creates their own unique way of coping, and sometimes one person’s way of surviving creates “unfair” demands on others. Try to be generous with yourself and with your family members and friends and allow room for differences.

Some thoughts on holiday survival:

1. Remember to take one day at a time. Don't allow anxieties to build up about events that will happen during the holidays or special days. Live in the present and focus on what needs to be done now. Some things can be put aside. But on the other hand, you may want to do things that have been done in the past. Sending holiday cards may seem to you to be frivolous at this particular time—but some people may find it reassuring to get in touch with loved ones that they usually contact.

2. For some people, it is helpful to review all traditions that are associated with family holidays. Pick out some that are particularly meaningful and which help to continue warm memories, and plan to observe them even in sadness. Other traditions may be too painful to continue, so they might be suspended or ended. Some families decide to begin new traditions to commemorate the absence of the one they love. The following are some practical examples of how other families have approached traditions.

- Family A had a tradition of allowing the youngest child in the family pick out the first gift to be unwrapped at Christmas. Once their youngest child was killed in a drunk driving crash, they abandoned the tradition rather than allow another child to “substitute” for the missing youngest.
- Family B had always had a big family gathering for Thanksgiving. Everyone assembled at “Grandma and Grandpa’s house” and each family unit attending was assigned to bring a special dish for the occasion. After the grandparents were murdered, the tradition was changed to rotate Thanksgiving from family to family and the “potluck” tradition fell by the wayside.
- When Jimmy C was killed, his family could not bear having Christmas without some acknowledgment of his absence and their love for him. They decided that each year they would select and hang a special ornament on their Christmas tree in his memory.
- Mary D and her husband and daughter always went to her in-laws for large family celebration. When her spouse and child were killed, she decided she could not face the merriment and gift-giving year after year. She asked her in-laws if she

could continue to stop by for Mass on Christmas Eve, but decided to go on a trip on Christmas Day—and every year for the next five years, she planned a different trip for the holidays. She always chose a “Christmasy” spot but chose to be alone in a new place with her memories.

It is better to think through any changes in tradition and make conscious decisions about how to handle them than to just let them happen. In that way, everyone knows what will happen and some dissension can be avoided.

3. Sometimes a person who was killed was a person who was very organized and planned ahead for life’s events. An aunt, or mother, or grandparent may have been purchasing gifts all year long in anticipation of Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or a birthday. This raises some painful questions. How do the family members deal with such purchases? Do they wrap them and give them to the intended recipients? Do they distribute the gifts along with others in the usual fashion at the holiday? Do they dispose of them by giving them away? There are no definitive answers. Family members need to discuss these issues openly. For some, the receipt of a special gift from a loved one after he or she has died may have loving significance—and for others it may be an unbearable agony.

4. Holiday songs, stories or prayers can also be a cause of grief. Often a loved one had a favorite piece of music associated with the holiday, and when family members hear it on a radio or in a store, it may precipitate a spasm of pain. If family members can prepare themselves to think of the joy that their loved one had when that music was played—rather than the absence of the loved one—it can make it more bearable.

5. Victims, survivors, families, and friends should be reassured that holiday time is a time when survivors of disaster are often depressed. Depression after a major tragedy is not uncommon or a sign of illness. Sadness over the catastrophe contrasts with the perceived glow of happiness all around. All who are affected by the catastrophe should try to plan time for themselves. For some this may be a time to be alone, a time for thought, a time for remembrance, a time for prayer. Planning specific time periods for such reverie is useful. It may be an hour in the early morning or late at night—but it should be a time when peace and quiet can prevail.

If depression seems to be overwhelming, call local or national crisis lines and encourage others to do so too. Talking with someone who has some knowledge about crisis, trauma reactions, depression and the like can be useful during this critical period.

6. If there are children in the family, plan a time when they, along with loving adults, can remember the people who have died or who are injured. Children need to be reassured that others are remembered and that there is a time when sadness is not only appropriate but needed. Encourage children to draw pictures, write stories or otherwise to create their own way of remembering.

7. Nothing is the same after the sudden death or injury of a loved one. Do not pretend it is. Feel free to go out to eat rather than to plan a home-cooked dinner. Some families may want to skip the immediate holidays altogether. It doesn't mean that they will skip a lifetime of holidays. But make this family decision. Families that include children between the ages of 4 and 15 should remember that children do live in the present and may want to have traditional holiday celebrations. Adults should try to accommodate these needs when possible. Sometimes children are willing to partially change celebrations by giving gifts or send cards to other children in need or by participating in a memorial activity, but often children just want to be reassured that life is still going on in a way that seems normal.

8. Some people may find it helpful to keep a journal or write letters to loved ones who have been killed in order to stay in contact during special times. This is perfectly understandable. Such written thoughts may be a part of memories in the future—even though they are painful.

9. It is useful if victims, survivors, family members and friends can plan at least one event relating to holidays or special events that is celebrated together— a coffee and dessert occasion, a pre-holiday memorial service — perhaps for those who celebrate Christmas, on the 23rd of December — or a New Year's Day gathering to exchange memories of the last year and to exchange thoughts about how to approach the New Year.

10. Spiritual connections are vital to trying to process the impact of sudden, random death and loss. Seek out spiritual counselors. For most people there is a need to find meaning in the lives and deaths of loved ones. Beliefs may differ. Rituals may differ. Prayers may differ. But the search for meaning and understanding is common throughout the world.

Children's Reactions and Needs After Disaster

by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.,
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1. Most children in the USA and even outside the USA will be directly and indirectly affected by this disaster (act of terrorism) to a greater or lesser degree.

2. In the light of the events, and the turmoil that followed, children may a) not understand, b) understand a little, c) understand a fair amount of what happened.

3. Children need to know the facts—appropriate to their age. You, the caregivers, (Parents, Grandparents, Teachers, etc.) must be the judge of what would be helpful for the child to know. Reassure the children of their safety and let them know what they need to know, in order to not be unnecessarily traumatized by rumors. At this time families need to reach out to each other.

4. The following behavior is to be expected during the next 2-3 weeks. In times of crisis the behavior of children regress. The following is a list of behaviors that children might exhibit during this time. Remember to compare the behavior to the way the child behaved prior to this tragedy.

5. Warning signs of stress. The following signs indicate a need for extra support. Look for behavioral extremes (shock-like behavior and “fading – out” vs agitation).

Look for:

Pre-School – Kindergarten:

- Withdrawal (quiet, subdued, detached, mute)
- Denial (avoidance, ignoring, denial of facts & memories)
- Thematic play (re-enactment, ritualistic play of traumatic theme)
- Anxious attachment (clinging to parents & favorite objects, whining, tantrums, afraid of strangers)
- Fears (of violence, new situations, strangers, confinement, certain objects)

- Regression (to behavior they found successful at earlier developmental stages)

School Age Children: (any of above behaviors plus)

- Performance decline (school, intellectual, sports, hobbies)
- Compensatory behavior (deny, reverse facts, gain retribution through fantasy, play or interaction)
- Discrepancy of mood (inappropriate moods and feelings following incident)
- Behavior changes/problems (regressive behavior, attention seeking behavior, getting into trouble)
- Psychosomatic complaints (stomach aches & upsets, headaches, bedwetting, nausea, rashes etc)
- **Adolescents:** (any of above behaviors plus)
- Acting out behaviors (isolation, truancy, drug & alcohol abuse, sexual activity, delinquency, running away, suicidal expression/attempts, self destructive behavior)
- Low self-esteem and self-criticism (blame themselves, condemn own reactions to crisis, experiencing loss of control)
- “Too old, too fast” (develop life styles too advanced for their chronological age)
- Displaced anger (onto inappropriate recipients)
- Pre-occupation with self (adolescent self-centeredness amplified, disconnected)
- The following ways could help to readjust your child:

1. Talk and support the children:

- Tell them the facts (appropriate to age)
- Listen to what they have to say
- Be honest – even if you do not know certain facts, tell them
- Provide reassurance of safety to the child – touch/hold if indicated
- Allow the children to grieve and mourn
- Validate normalcy of reaction
- Reaffirm life direction

2. Support each other as a family:

- In times like these families often re-unite—use the opportunity
- Talk to each other as indicated above

3. Hold on to your faith/belief system

- Prayers may help

4. **Provide supportive climate** in all classrooms and reach out to homes that are experiencing a crisis

5. By recognizing and monitoring the distress signals that a child exhibits, and by being supportive, we facilitate the normal recovery process.

6. If the abnormal behaviors of the children persist for longer than 3 weeks, please refer the child to a Mental Health Professional for help.

Teachers:

Extra care now can help prevent behavior and performance problems later:

- Pre-school – 2nd Grade: Routine is critical, as it conveys security. Little ones look to adults to figure out how serious things are. Project calm.

- 3rd – 6/7th Grade: Consider relaxing performance demands temporarily. Children's self—esteem is tied to their feelings about their performance.

- 8th – 12th Grade: Look for self—medication, acting out, and (with older kids) identity issues. Provide guidance and stress management.

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Dear Readers,

In this sad time, I was looking on the internet for the addresses of organizations I think are helpful to trauma survivors and found these wonderful articles, all of which came with permission to reprint them. Talk about finding help when you least expect it!

This holiday season is different from previous ones. Perhaps it is easier for us all to understand how people with PTSD react to holidays. Money doesn't seem so important. People seem to be much more important to most of us. Helping others has become a national pastime. Bob and I wish you all memorable and meaningful holidays and much recovery in the year to come.

Coping with Reactions to Terrorist Attack

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“Day of Horror: Jets Hit World Trade Center; Towers Collapse; Plane Crashes into The Pentagon; Plane Crashes in Pennsylvania – Witnesses, Rescuers, Victims, and Survivors All Were Thrown into a Deep Chasm of Crisis.”

– from the headlines, September 12, 2001

Helping Yourself

Remember that you are not the only one overwhelmed. Most Americans have found the terrorist attack to be unbelievably horrible. It has caused many to be afraid, to cry, and to be angry. These emotions are intensified by the feelings of helplessness that accompany the shock at the attack. While some of the ideas below speak to people who have suffered injury or death in the families, they are meant to help all who are suffering crisis reactions in reaction to acts of war that the whole world witnessed.

Restore connections with others

These may be people with whom you watched, witnessed, or survived the attack. They can give you different perspectives on what you experienced and validate common responses. They may include family or friends who do not know what you have gone through but want to help. They may be acquaintances or counselors who just want to be there to listen to your story of what happened. Remember, even if you don't want to talk about the attack, it helps to know that someone is around who cares.

Express your reactions or feelings

Many people discover that when they find appropriate words to describe emotions of fear, anger, grief—or any other feeling—it helps to define what happened, and that can help reduce the intensity of the emotions. Some cultures and some people do not feel comfortable with talking, so for them, it might be more helpful to express their reactions through physical activity, music, writing, or art.

Find a way to help others and our country

One of the best antidotes to feelings of helplessness is to take positive action. This can be done in our responses to the terrorists' attacks by simple things. Millions of people are donating blood for the injured victims. Others are sending donations of in-kind goods or money. There are many other things that can be done in your home community to show support. Volunteer to help your schools in addressing the concerns of children in your community. Talk to your local newspaper about printing a petition in support of America's response to terrorism. Volunteer at your local victim assistance program to help family or friends of victims who might have been survivors of the attack. Fly an American flag at your home or office. Organize your neighbors or friends into a group that will prepare to write cards or notes to the survivors of the victims of the attacks during the holiday season.

Keep to ordinary routines as much as possible

Maintaining established patterns of life does not mean you have not been deeply affected by the tragedy—but it can help to stabilize a life that has been dramatically altered. Everyone needs some kind of anchor in restoring everyday activities. Routines can be that anchor. For victims or survivors whose lives have been shattered, and whose routines have been destroyed, plan a day ahead for what might be expected—then try to think about how you can integrate those expectations into a routine. For example, you might be awaiting news of what happened to a friend or loved one. You are planning to circulate pictures or information that will help identify them or go to the place where they are missing. Prepare for those events but try to feed pets, water plants, arrange for childcare, or simply pick up your newspaper on a schedule that conforms as much as possible to other days.

Focus on maintaining physical health

Try to eat regular meals, take daily vitamins, rest, and get some physical exercise. Mental distress takes a physical toll on your body. In order to keep up your strength to face the days ahead, it is important to keep as physically fit as possible. For people who are enduring great emotional anguish, check in with your doctor.

Reach out for spiritual connections.

If you have a strong faith and this attack has challenged it, get in touch with others of your own faith or your spiritual leaders to help work through some of the questions you might be facing. If you do not have a faith system, but have spiritual values, try to find someone who might share those values to talk with. Restore your connection with the environment around you, if that is the source of your sense of meaning in the world.

Learn all you can about the reactions you are having

It often helps to realize know what physical and mental reactions are not uncommon. Think about your former experiences with extreme stress or traumatic events, and consider how you have coped with those experiences in a positive way. Read or watch educational materials on how traumatic events often affect people and suggested ways of coping with these events. Ask for help in learning about such reactions—there are many organizations and agencies throughout the United States that can provide you with additional materials, referrals to resources or counseling assistance. •

“Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time, it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; He does not fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Suggestions for Survivors of Loved Ones Who Have Died or are Missing

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1. General decisions – for most, it is wise to put off important decisions. This is not a time to decide to sell a home, get married, or seek a divorce.

2. Prepare for the “firsts” – everything that is done after someone dies becomes new. There will be the first time a survivor has dinner after their loved one died. There will be the first time that a holiday occurs without the loved one there. There will be the first birthday and so forth. Each first marks a time of “going on” and, for many, a time for grief.

3. Prepare for the roller-coaster of grieving – many survivors resent the term “healing” because sorrow afflicts survivors for a lifetime. The process of building a new life in the wake of disaster has a similarity to the physical healing of the body after a deep wound. It does not happen in a linear way. People have good days and bad days after tragedy.

4. Don’t set unrealistic expectations for yourself or others. It takes a long time to adjust to the loss of a loved one. Try to take life slowly. Don’t worry about the small stuff.

5. It’s okay to be scared. You are starting on a new journey into uncharted territory. No one has been where you are today and where you will go. People will give you comfort and support, but grief is a personal journey.

6. Don’t be afraid to be angry. Someone you love is gone. It is unfair and unjust. It was caused by an evil act. You have a right to rage – but don’t harm others or yourself.

7. Avoid dwelling on personal guilt. It’s hard not to think of the possible ways that you might have helped your loved one avoid the tragedy. You may think that you could have suggested they stay home from work. Perhaps you wanted them to pursue another job and could have pushed that idea more. Maybe you encouraged them to take a certain flight to either stay home with you a few more hours or to get home to you quicker. There is little use in dwelling on what might have been. It is not your fault or their fault that you were victims of this horrendous event.

8. Stay in touch with your doctor to monitor your physical responses. It is not unusual for a person who is grieving to be vulnerable to illness and unhealthy behaviors.

9. Educate yourself on trauma reactions, traumatic death, mourning, and bereavement. Reading about grief is a way of validating your own experiences and learning more about your options.

10. Maintain or develop routines.

11. Stay in touch with the living: pets, plants, children, and friends. Children are often a lifeline to going on. They need your love and support. Their impressions and reactions will be varied. Most of us want our children to grow up to be healthy and vital adults. They need our help to get through this not only now but for years into the future. Many times the need to care for a pet or for plants is another motivation for living.

12. Communicate with your loved ones who have died – write to them, talk to them, pray to them.

13. Take time for yourself. Take time to be alone, if that is what you need. Find ways to express your feelings. Some people find music a way of expressing deep emotions. Others may find physical activity a relief from intense stress. Some people find support from others who have suffered in the same way after the attacks to be useful. Becoming involved in activities that relate to helping others or advocating for others after the attack may help. Many people find art, dance, carpentry, crafts and so forth to be useful ways to express reactions. The important thing is to find time to concentrate on yourself, at least for a while, each day.

14. Talk to your clergy member or spiritual leader. Ask questions about what this means and how it could happen. Search for your own explanations from God or your spiritual beliefs. If your faith is a sustaining force in your life, find comfort from your beliefs.

15. Seek meaning in what you do and how you are living.

“To be sure, man’s search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium. However, precisely such tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health. There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst of conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life. There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

– Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 1959.