

The 9-11 Syndrome

By Abraham J. Twerski

It has been suggested that this generation be called the “9-11 Generation.” Yes, on September 11, 2001, the United States changed forever.

Thousands of individuals and families were traumatized by the attacks. Yet, experience has taught us that as devastating as acute trauma may be, people go through a natural period of grief and eventually adapt to the new circumstances. However, for some people, the effects of trauma may be long-lasting, a condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While the symptoms of PTSD may not be as dramatic as the trauma itself, they may be no less distressing. Furthermore, since individuals suffering from PTSD may not associate the symptoms they are experiencing with the earlier trauma they underwent, they may not seek proper help.

The founder and medical director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, Rabbi Twerski, M.D., is one of the country's leading experts on drug and alcohol rehabilitation. He is the author of numerous books and his column is regularly featured in Jewish Action. His most recent works are Angels Don't Leave Footprints and Prayerfully Yours (ArtScroll).

Those with PTSD may suffer from hyperalertness, intrusiveness or suppression. Hyperalertness refers to being in a state of constant tension and suspense. After the World Trade Center attack, many of us may be alarmed by the sound of a door slamming shut, or obsessed with the idea of a future attack. We may also suffer from intrusiveness, that is, seeing the recurring image of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers, an image which was

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engraved on our minds by our continuous watching of the newscasts. This frightening scene can appear in our dreams or even while we are awake. In contrast to these first two, another symptom of PTSD may be suppression.

This is a psychological defense whereby the mind may minimize the earlier trauma and even ignore it completely. Whereas hyperalertness may result in the restriction of one's activities (i.e. a person may avoid entering a tall building, or traveling by plane), suppression may result in one's “throwing caution to the wind” and not following reasonable guidelines for security.

Those suffering from any of the symptoms of PTSD require professional help. There are several types of treatment for PTSD, and a qualified mental health professional can direct a person to the optimal treatment for him.

Some people are more prone than others to suffer from PTSD. People with an intact support system of family and friends may not feel as insecure and as anxious as those lacking support. Also, people who have a strong faith in God and therefore tend to have less anxiety may not be as severely affected. As the Psalmist says, “Fortunate is one whose help is in Jacob's God” (146:5).

Some may question, “How can we place trust in the God who allowed this tragedy to happen?” There is no logical answer to this challenge, just as there is no answer to the Holocaust. But let me share the following thought

with you. In a pediatrician's office, there was once a mother with her infant, whom she had brought for his scheduled immunization. The child was happy and smiling. When the white-clad doctor appeared, however, the infant emitted a blood-curdling shriek. He knew from past experiences what was likely to happen: this white-clad villain stabs you and makes you hurt badly. The child clutched his mother for dear life.

What happened? The mother took the baby into the treatment room and restrained him in preparation for the injection. The child fought his mother ferociously and could not possibly understand what was happening. "My mother! The one who loves me, protects me and feeds me is now collaborating with this fiend to hurt me!"

The doctor left after the injection, and the child threw his arms around his mother. But why did the child seek comfort and security from the mother who had just collaborated with the enemy to hurt him? Because although the child could not possibly understand why his mother had done this, he nevertheless knew that she loved him and that she was his source of security.

We cannot understand why God allows terrible things to occur. But like the child, we know that He is our only source of security. We must find our strength in God and in each other. We can no longer afford the divisiveness which has plagued our people throughout our painful history. We cannot cope with PTSD alone. While professional help is necessary, we should all be supportive of one another.

Moreover, we must be cautious that anxiety does not result in additional damage. The words of Job, "I felt great anxiety, and what I feared would happen did happen to me" (Job 3:25) are wise. Anxiety can result in self-fulfilling prophecies.

The trauma from the attack on the World Trade Center may result in distressing symptoms for many. But we can mitigate some of these awful effects by strengthening our bonds of friendship and our relationship with God. 