

## **We Will Never Forget: Psychological Effects of 9/11**

As the 9/11 memorial in New York City opened, thousands gathered to remember those that lost their lives. The collective voice of America on September 11, 2011 was "We Will Never Forget." Those words were plastered on major online news sources. They were published on the signs of memorial service attendees. They were heard on television and radio stations. America will never forget those that risked and sacrificed their lives to save others. For some, those words are a tribute to the parent, child, co-worker, husband, wife, or friend that lost his/her life. For others, those words represent their inability to forget the inhumane actions of the terrorists themselves. While the words "We Will Never Forget" mean different things to everyone, those words symbolize the change within the lives of many. Whether indirectly or directly exposed, September 11 produced social, economical, and psychological effects on many. The following discusses the psychological effects of those directly affected versus indirectly affected by the events of September 11, as well the resiliency produced individually and as a nation.

### **Types of Psychological Effects**

Throughout the past ten years, researchers have assessed different populations that were affected by 9/11. Those populations include: survivors, New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania residents, families of victims, rescue departments, and residents of other states. Research has concluded that psychological effects are produced for people that were directly exposed to 9/11 and those that were indirectly exposed. People directly exposed to the events are those that physically witnessed the events. These usually are rescue workers and New York, Pennsylvania, and DC residents. Those indirectly exposed are people who may have seen the events on television, attended a memorial service, or who are residents of other states. Common psychological effects produced are: increased depression, anxiety, distress, hostility, and formation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Often times, men who had increased anxiety and distress also had increased amounts of drinking problems. Researchers have pointed out that people directly exposed, rather than indirectly exposed, develop PTSD. These people experience symptoms of PTSD, such as nightmares, ruminations, anxiety, and avoiding reminders of the attack. Common symptoms of depression that people develop include: sadness, guilt, loss, hopelessness, and troubling sleeping/concentrating. Similarly, research suggest that overall, people have increased terrorism related thoughts and fears.

### **Who is More Prone to be Affected**

Some key factors have contributed to the psychological effects people obtained. Research suggests that the more exposure to 9/11 combined with more exposure to past traumatic events have influenced the likelihood of serious or lasting psychological problems. Experiencing the traumatic events from 9/11 may cause someone to redevelop the same symptoms that he/she endured through past traumatic events. Other factors that have influenced the likelihood of lasting psychological problems include: living in traumatized communities, gender, age, race, secondary stressors, and socioeconomic factors. The chances for residents that live in New York, DC, and Pennsylvania to develop lasting psychological problems are more prevalent than those in other states. Those with lower socioeconomic status and those with secondary stressors increase the chances of having lasting psychological problems. The increase chance of psychological problems is a result of a combination of multiple stressors that can be hard for the person to handle simultaneously.

### **Resilience**

Although traumatic events can cause psychological problems, some researchers suggest that not everyone requires attention from a mental health professional. People have natural

coping abilities. Many of the survivors experienced immediate reactions, however, those reactions declined over time. For example, the prevalence of PTSD among residents in Manhattan was at 7.5% one month after 9/11. Within the next six months, there was a sharp decline in PTSD among the same residents. Throughout time, the prevalence of psychological problems can decrease. One suggestion is that "as time moves on, people make the lives around them better, and making things better helps people to do better psychologically and socially." On the other hand, getting professional help can aid in processing emotionally painful experiences, and for some people is essential in their recovery. In addition, research has consistently shown that crisis counseling quickly after a traumatic event aids in emotional recovery. Individually, people react and cope with traumatic situations differently. Some resilience factors that can cause people to react differently can be: personality traits, what they attribute to the causes of his/her circumstance, amount of social support, and biological factors.

On the 10th anniversary of 9/11, resilience existed not only on an individual level, but on a national level as well. On 9/11, President Obama stated that "Nothing can break the will of a truly United States of America. It will be said of us that we kept the faith, that we took a painful blow and emerged stronger." Time and Yahoo created websites depicting family members, survivors, first responders and others that were affected by 9/11. These people discussed not only their connections with 9/11, but how they have continued on with their lives and how they cope with the memory of 9/11. Time named its website "Portraits of Resilience". One quote from its website states that "If the story of the United States has a theme so far in the 21st century it is surely one of resilience."

Overall, research shows that traumatic events do not discriminate on who becomes affected. That is, psychological problems can develop in anyone, and a person's own characteristics, their attachment to the traumatic event, and his/her history of traumatic events can be important factors in determining how psychological problems develop. When experiencing emotional pain, therapy has been found to be one effective tool in helping to alleviate that pain. However, research also shows the development of psychological problems does not necessarily mean a person has to seek out the help of mental health professionals. Individuals have the power to cope with stressors and overcome them as well, and often the passage of time has its own healing power.

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