

**Reactions, Dynamics & Issues Regarding the Terrorist Acts of September 11, 2001**  
*School of Social Work, University of Southern Mississippi-Gulf Coast, Long Beach, MS 39560*  
Ray Monsour Scurfield, DSW, LCSW (228) 867-8766 [raymond.scurfield@usm.edu](mailto:raymond.scurfield@usm.edu)

The following range of reactions are normal and expectable in the aftermath of the horrific terrorist acts. I offer this information from my perspective as an Arab-American, Vietnam veteran and someone active in disaster relief

1. Becoming immersed in the media coverage; and reading/talking about it, dwelling on it, etc., perhaps to the point that this has temporarily interfered significantly with one's daily life functioning.

2. Avoidance and denial.

*Why are people spending so much time just thinking and talking about this?*

*After a point, it doesn't help anything----and life has to go on.*

And there is an avoidance or ignoring of media coverage and the ramifications, talking about it, etc.

3. Becoming very task and activity-oriented and engaging in tunnel vision.

A form of *functional* avoidance and denial is to become very serious or have a focused purposefulness to move ahead with daily tasks, to stay busy, simultaneously remaining detached from feelings and intrusive thoughts. This can allow one to function and not let emotions or intrusive thoughts overwhelm you.

4. Triggering of and renewed pain over previous trauma experiences that have remained unresolved. This may *totally or partially eclipse* reacting to the terrorist acts and *instead* become preoccupied with *past* hurt, *alternate preoccupation* between reactions to past and current trauma, or a *convergence* of feelings and thoughts from both.

(a) War veterans of all eras *relive painful combat* losses and carnage and intrusive images.

(b) People who *lost someone tragically in the past* in larger-scale disasters (i.e., the Oklahoma City bombing) or who have suffered *personal* traumas (i.e., a family member was killed or is missing) have an exacerbated re-emergence of pain and loss and intrusive memories.

On the other hand, such triggering of old unhealed trauma *may offer an opportunity* to further process and attend to the unresolved hurt and loss from the past.

5. Inappropriate behaviors and attitudes. Trauma *brings out the best* in many people. However, it can and does *bring out the worst* in others (one example, trauma-related racism, is discussed in #10 below):

(a) Persons who *seek to profit* from crises (i.e., gas price gouging at gas stations)

(b) Those who *ridicule, make crude jokes* about or otherwise demean what has happened  
On the other hand, allowing oneself to enjoy life and appropriate humor is important to recovery

(c) People who seem to be going on *as if nothing has happened*. This may indicate an attitude of very self-centered people who *apparently could care less about what happens to others*.  
On the other hand, an apparent lack of interest or concern may in fact be denial and avoidance so as not to become overwhelmed by the impact of the magnitude of the horror

6. Becoming very reactive to or intolerant of the behaviors and attitudes of others.

(a) *How in the world can people sit here at work/school, laughing and talking about every-day routine matters, when thousands of people have just been killed and maimed!*  
Of course: *Everything else pales in comparison, doesn't it?*

(b) *It is demeaning to those killed and maimed that people could still be concerned about this week's football or baseball games* (or about other “non-essential” activities).

7. And yet, trying to get back to everyday routines is quite important to the post-trauma recovery process:

*Hey, you can't just dwell on it and stop living; we've got to move on with our lives  
There's no harm in getting away from it for awhile; it might help to alleviate the pain a little.  
The terrorists 'are not going to win' by bringing our country to a standstill.*

The balancing and timing *can be tenuous* between grief and reflection, versus the necessity to move on.

8. Strong reactions that are disruptive or troubling to one's functioning for a period of time, i.e.:

(a) *Preoccupation* not only with what *did* happen; *but also* very fearful about *what might* happen:

Shattering of one's assumptions about what to expect in everyday life.  
Preoccupation with environmental dangers and increased anxiety, fear, isolation.  
There may be a loss of *both* a personal *and* a national “sense of safety.” \*

(b) *Becoming very emotional*, i.e., breaking down and crying, sleep disturbance, irritability or temper outbursts, mood swings, surges of sadness, anxiety, grief, rage or fear, nausea, appetite change, guilt . . .

(c) *Strong feelings* of helplessness, extreme frustration or pessimism:

*How can you possibly stop more terrorist acts like this from happening?  
Who do we go after?  
I have all these heavy feelings, but nowhere to put them and no one to take them out on.*

9. “This is an immoral act.” Yes, but critics contend that for decades the perpetration of immoral acts worldwide has been ignored, supported or even caused by the U.S., i.e., “Zionism expansion and apartheid against Arabs/Muslims;” backing despots in many countries; ignoring such atrocities as the Rwandan massacres.

Clearly, “*traditional rules of war*” *don't apply* when facing an enemy of overwhelming military force. *Rather*, terrorism or guerilla tactics are all about terror, disruption and targets of opportunity: Women, children, the elderly: *all non-combatants “are fair game.”*  
*And, vilified terrorists* to some *are revered* as *heroic resistance fighters or martyrs* by others. \*\*  
*And so just what forms of violence are more moral* than others---usually ours but not the enemy's.\*\*

10. Racist stereotyping, potential rise in xenophobia and dehumanizing of alleged perpetrators: \*\*

*Go back to your own country, you stinking Arabs and Muslims.  
We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.  
Yes, there may be ‘collateral damage’ and some innocent civilians killed. It can't be helped. \*\*  
The Palestinians are partying in the streets. Bomb them. Wipe them off the map. \**

On the other hand, there may be:

(a) an *appropriate & enhanced appreciation* for public servants who we tend to take for granted, i.e., firefighters, law enforcement, civilian and military emergency medical personnel, charitable, civic, religious and relief workers and organizations, active duty, reserve and national guard personnel.

(b) *a new or renewed* sense of caring for each other regardless of our race or background, promotion of solidarity and love between peoples; and reaffirming what's important in our lives.

11. Feeling blessed or cursed that one's own intimate circle of significant others has been impacted, or spared, by the tragic events. And this can be a profound catch-22.

One family has a *reaffirmation* of their faith: *God must have been looking out for us (or: we are blessed) that my son got out of the Tower before it collapsed (or: decided to take a different flight, or . . . )*.

And yet, what message do such statements imply to those less fortunate: *God was not looking out for, has not blessed or has punished those who did suffer deaths or maiming?*

On the other hand, maybe *people of all faiths* can agree: *God must be weeping at what has happened.* \*\*\*  
And, there has been a *resurgence* of prayer/reflection, attendance at places of worship, spiritual beliefs, the global interconnectedness among us all. Oh, that it will last.

## COMPETING NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL POLICY ISSUES

Our *personal* reactions to the terrorist acts strongly impact our *support, opposition or non-interest* regarding national policy and priority choices. One danger is that *we let fear or hate* fuel our emotions and actions. i.e. *to dehumanize* all Arabs and Muslims, to include “innocent civilians” in other countries (i.e., Afghanistan) and here (i.e., Arab-Americans, Muslims, Pakistanis . . .). This has happened before, i.e., in our war against Iraq. \*\*

*Kill the bastards; kill them all.*

And so, how much do you *support a military war* against terrorism? And if so, what kind and to what extent? *And do you embrace (or reject) non-violence and a much different kind of war: against the root causes of terrorism and support, i.e., abject poverty, oppression, suppression and violation of human rights?*

How much do we *sacrifice* cherished “due process” and freedoms to clamp down on terrorism?

*See, I told you so. This happened because we have let our military grow weak.  
We must have a much bigger and stronger military force, no matter the cost.*

And so, are *reasoned arguments* against massive military expenditures *labeled as unpatriotic* (if not political suicide)? *Regardless of cost*, in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> *can anyone* be against better security for our citizens, and pre-emptive strikes aimed at verified or even *suspected* terrorists and supporters?!

Must not deep sacrifices be made in *human services programs, social security, reduction of the debt, etc.*  
*But*, won't this *exacerbate the plight* of the poor and disadvantaged in our very own country?

On the other hand: perhaps this been a (*very*) costly wake-up call that our country has been ignorant or innocent about, that it will galvanize our nation to deploy resources where they will do the most good, address both necessary military actions *and* root causes internationally in ways here-to-fore avoided, and to help us to pull together and support each other as families and friends, groups, communities, a nation and internationally.

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This outline is based on the manuscript: Scurfield, R.M. (In submission). *Commentary about the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001: Post-traumatic reactions and issues*. Please give proper attribution. [Complete citations for the content of this outline are in this in-submission manuscript]

\* See various articles, *USA Today*, September 12, 2001, Section A. [Complete citations in above manuscript.]

\*\* Scurfield, R.M. (1992). The collusion of sanitization and silence about war: An aftermath of ‘Operation Desert Storm.’ *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 5 (3), 505-512.

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