

***COPING WITH TERRORIST EVENTS
ADVICE FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN***

We are all shocked and saddened by the terrorist attacks that happened in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. The San Francisco Department of Public Health offers deep and sincere condolences to all who lost loved ones in this tragedy. The following information and suggestions may be helpful to the providers, clients, family members and the public in coping with this tragic situation.

First, keep in mind that the goal of terrorism is to fill people with intense fear, to intimidate people to deliver a political message, and to paralyze government and commerce. Americans have power over how we respond to these events, and our nation is choosing to respond with dignity, community, heroism, and patriotism.

The terrorist events of September 11 have evoked strong and deep reactions in both adults and children. It is important for people to realize that their reactions are normal in these very abnormal and tragic circumstances, and to know that there are things people can do to cope and to help each other through these difficult times.

Common reactions include shock, disbelief, disorientation, fear, worry about safety, concern about loved ones, and grief. After the initial shock wears off, people may have mood swings, crying, jumpiness, irritability, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed, trouble concentrating, and difficulty sleeping. One of the most common reactions in a human-caused disaster of this type is intense anger.

Children are affected by what they see and hear on television, and by how their parents react. Common reactions in children include asking questions about what happened and why, fear for safety, not wanting to be separated from family, regression to behaviors from a younger age, fear of sleeping alone, headaches and stomachaches, and a decline in school performance.

ADULTS

The following are some suggestions for dealing with the psychological and emotional impact of these terrorist events:

- Try to maintain a normal routine. Unless public safety officials have issued warnings or closed buildings, continue in your normal daily activities. Remember that the goal of terrorism is to make you fearful. Rather than being intimidated, follow the advice of professional public safety officials.
- Follow your usual routine of physical activity and exercise. Eat well and try to get rest, even if your sleep is not as restful as usual.
- Avoid self-medication such as alcohol, caffeine, or other drugs.
- Draw on known sources of comfort that have sustained you and helped you in difficult times in the past.
- Share your concerns and worries by talking with a friend, family member, or clergy. Reach out to each other while taking care of yourself.
- If you wish to participate in community recovery activities, volunteer or donate to a known disaster response agency with a clear mission. Spontaneous, unorganized volunteers at a disaster site only add to the confusion.

CHILDREN

You can assist your children with some of the following suggestions:

- Spend more time with them and be comfortable with their temporarily slipping back into behaviors from an earlier age.
- Talk with them about what has happened and do your best to answer their questions. No one can totally answer the question of “why” this has happened or why people do “bad” things. Help them to be aware of the positive response of people to the disaster—of the people all over the world who are responding to the crisis in a helpful way.
- Your children may be fearful about the safety of buildings or airplanes. Remind them that what happened is a very rare event, and not something that happens every day. Security at buildings and airports is higher than ever. Do everything possible to reasonably reassure your children about safety.
- Reassure your children that you care about them, that you understand their feelings and concerns, and that you are there for them. Physical affection is comforting, especially to young children.
- Try to limit the amount of television coverage both you and your children watch. We know clearly from past disasters that media images can traumatize people, especially children. Encourage them to talk with you about their thoughts and feelings about what they have seen. Consider having them draw pictures, or for older children, write in their journal about some of their feelings.
- Try to keep a regular schedule of activities such as eating, playing, studying, and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy. Emotions and problems with concentrating may interfere with studying for awhile.
- Talk to your children’s teachers, day-care providers, and babysitters about your child’s response to the event and about what they doing to assist children.
- While children may be angry about what happened, caution them not to speak or act with prejudice against people of ethnic or religious groups that they think may have been involved. Justice for the people who made the attack must be done with dignity and within the structure of the law.
- Teenagers may want to volunteer or donate to community recovery activities and should be encouraged to do so.

If you find that your reactions to the terrorist events of September 11 are disrupting your daily functions, such as job performance or relationships, it may be helpful to attend a community support group or debriefing group, or to talk with a mental health professional. For children, prolonged or extreme withdrawal, emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, or other signs of intense anxiety or emotion are signs that it may be helpful to talk to a mental health professional. Contact your local mental health agency for assistance.

Adapted from Diane Myers, R.N., M.S.N., C.T.S. Mental Health Press Release (September 12, 2001)