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Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D.

Executive Director, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

9/11 Anniversary Reactions-What Should I Expect?

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A few days ago, in late August, I was in Mexico on vacation, calm and happy. I was in an elevator, the doors opened and a man walked in with a cut-off t-shirt. He turned around, and on his arm was a detailed tattoo of the World Trade Center with a bald eagle at the bottom. It immediately brought on a feeling of sadness. The memories of the pain, the lives and innocence lost, and the heroic patriotism came flooding back. I spoke about it with my husband, who also was moved by that image. We are New Yorkers. We experienced 9/11. This was an anniversary reaction.

Almost everyone has a story about 9/11. Where they were when they found out about the terrorist attacks, if they knew anyone who fled or were killed that day and how it impacted their lives. As a researcher who studied the impact of 9/11 on children, parents and those who provided mental health care, I've often heard people refer to "life before 9/11 and post-9/11" as the world as they knew it changed forever. Many people experienced post traumatic stress symptoms following 9/11. For some, the severity of their experience produced full-blown post traumatic stress disorder, with symptoms lasting a long, long time.

It's important to discuss this now, as the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks is approaching. And, for many, the thoughts and emotions that they experienced after the 9/11 attacks may resurface. This is common on the anniversary of traumatic events. For some, it may mean increased moodiness, sadness or worry about safety. For others, it can be more intense, with episodes of crying, nightmares and trying to "numb" in order to avoid thinking about 9/11. Anniversary reactions are usually associated with the death of a loved one or another traumatic event, such as a rape. When the date approaches, the grief and sadness that was encountered on that day may reoccur. Since 9/11 was the actual date of the attacks and labeled that way by the public, it's almost impossible for you to go through the day without thinking about its impact.

So, what may you experience?

- The symptoms of anniversary reactions may mirror those of post traumatic stress disorder. These include re-experiencing symptoms, avoidance symptoms and hyper-arousal symptoms.
- Re-experiencing. Be prepared to experience similar thoughts, feelings and even physical reactions as 9/11 approaches. For some, a blue sky like the one on 9/11 brings back a feeling of eeriness. You may have dreams or nightmares about the attacks. You may feel very sad and unsafe.
- Avoidance. Another common response is to try to avoid all reminders of 9/11. This includes the people, places or situations that are connected to the event. You may avoid going to lower Manhattan or watching the news coverage. People may also try to “numb” by using drugs or alcohol in order to stop thinking about 9/11.
- Hyper-arousal. Many New Yorkers and those living in the surrounding area will probably feel nervous, anxious, on “high-alert” as the anniversary approaches. You may be more suspicious of those around you with a feeling of being on guard and very watchful.

As with healing from all types of trauma, everyone’s reaction may be different. Monitor your reactions, keep tabs on yourself. This reenactment and grieving process is normal. Be kind to yourself. Most people get through these days and feel better after the anniversary has passed.

Here are a few suggestions for what to do to feel better.

- Spend time with family and friends who support you. Talking often helps relieve some of the sadness and grief. It is probably best not to isolate yourself if you are feeling really down.
- Talk about it. Everyone has their own 9/11 story. Discuss how it impacted you and how your life has changed. This is normal. Find someone who will listen and understand. Or, if you prefer not to talk, that’s okay too. Perhaps doing something in lieu of talking will help.
- Plan a special activity for 9/11. It may mean volunteering at your favorite charity, making a donation to a 9/11 fund or watching the memorial service. You may have a ritual that brings you comfort. Before 9/11, I had a view of the World Trade Center from my living room window. Now, I wait for the “towers of light” to beam up to the heavens on that night. My sadness lightens, and it brings a feeling of hope.
- Do what will make you feel better, not what you think you must do — 9/11 is personal. If exercising, taking a walk, reading a book, watching a movie or attending a religious service makes you feel better, do it. It’s okay to figure out how best to meet your own needs and put yourself first.

As 9/11 passes, most of us will find that our symptoms decrease. However, if you think that they are not subsiding, talk to your doctor or a mental health provider for support. For more information on

managing 9/11 symptoms, call the Healing and Remembrance Hotline at 1-866-212-0444. For information on talking to your child about 9/11 visit nyspcc.org.