



Terrorism and its Effects on Mental Health

This fact sheet is designed to assist people living with the fear of terrorist attacks or other human-made disaster. It draws heavily on the NSW Health and NSW Institute of Psychiatry publication *Disaster Mental Health Response Handbook*, July 2000. The fact sheet aims to address the anxiety that can affect people in the face of impending terrorist attack, and what to do after such an event.

The attacks on the US, Bali and London, together with other terrorist incidents in recent years, have caused many of us to think about our personal safety and the risk of terrorist attacks. However, studies have shown that even in extreme disasters, the majority of people do not become incapable of functioning. While there may be initial shock and distress; resilience, helping others and coping are probably the most common reactions seen following disaster (Ursano et al, 1996 in *Disaster Mental Health Response Handbook*, page 79). Panic is uncommon and people call on their personal strengths and those of their family and community, and for the most part recover and return to their normal activities.

Australians are renowned for their courage in dangerous situations, and for their resilience and ability to cope with trauma. Whilst some people may develop mental health problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after such an event, most will recover completely - see also the Mental Health Information Service fact sheet on PTSD.

Living with the fear of terrorism

We may not be able to prevent all attacks on us and people we love, but there are some things we can do to protect ourselves and help those we care about to live with danger. Taking reasonable precautions and being prepared are appropriate responses to the threat of an emergency or disaster. However, it is important not to become over-anxious about the possibility of terrorism and getting on with your life is one of the most effective responses.

- **Where to get help in an emergency.** Find out what your local community services and mental health services can offer. Make a list of important telephone numbers and keep it somewhere prominent. It can be difficult for people under stress to find and process information such as where to get help.

- **Give and receive emotional support.** It is a good idea to have a number of people to whom you can turn in times of crisis. Think about whom you would feel comfortable talking with if you were distressed. For example, your spouse or partner, a relative, good friend, next-door neighbour, member of your church or local church minister.
- **Keep in touch with people you care about.** Do not let petty quarrels prevent you from expressing care and concern to someone you care about. Tell someone today you care about him or her - don't wait until it may be too late. If there is nobody you feel comfortable with right now, some options are a telephone counselling service (such as Lifeline on 131 114, Salvo Care Line on (02) 9331 6000, Mensline on 1300 789 978) local community organisation, local service clubs, local council.
- **Offer help to others in your community.** Reach out to someone you know who may be isolated or lonely. They may be more anxious and upset than anyone else. Some groups may be more vulnerable at this time, including:
 - People who are socially isolated, including older people
 - Children and young people, particularly if they are separated from their parents and families
 - People who have experienced trauma earlier in their lives, for example, refugees
 - People who have experienced trauma in their childhood, such as domestic violence or abuse
 - People with a language barrier who may not understand what to do

People with pre-existing mental health problems may experience a worsening of symptoms. Talk with them about contacting their caseworker or doctor and work out strategies for coping with symptoms. Lack of sleep or food can worsen some symptoms, so ensuring that people have access to a safe environment, low stimulus sleeping area and food can prevent some problems from occurring. (This is good advice for everybody).

Keep yourself informed about what is happening and what you can do

Reliable news sources such as the ABC; reliable newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian* can give you information about events that might impact upon you. All are available on-line.

Ask your local Members of Parliament what your governments, State and Commonwealth, are doing. Ask your local council if there is a disaster management plan for your area.

Make contact with community organisations in your area and find out what plans and policies they have in place for disasters. Get some ideas about how you could help, should help be needed. But be aware that too many people offering help in an uncoordinated way can hinder recovery efforts - so be prepared to step back or to be directed by community leaders.

Take a look at the *Disaster Mental Health Response Handbook, July 2000*, Centre for Mental Health, NSW Health and the NSW Institute of Psychiatry downloadable from

A fact sheet produced by the Mental Health Information Service

How can you help someone who has been a victim of trauma?

Most people who have been through a serious trauma go through a number of different stages including, but not necessarily in the following order, numbness, denial or shock; traumatic stress reactions such as flashbacks and nightmares; grief reactions to loss; anger, despair, sadness or hopelessness. Conversely, relief and survival may lead to feelings of elation, which may be difficult to accept in the face of the destruction the disaster has wrought. (*Disaster Management Handbook, page 18*).

Feelings

People who have been affected by such events may show feelings that others find hard to understand. These feelings may be:

- Fear, shock, horror and helplessness
- Anger that this has happened – why has this happened to me or my loved one?
- Loss of control; of being a target and not able to control the fear
- That you might have done something to lessen the trauma or avoid the attack
- Guilt for surviving when others did not
- Grief for those who have died

These are all natural feelings after being affected by crime or disaster or act of terrorism. Most of these feelings will settle in time. If you or someone else is still experiencing high levels of distressing feelings after the first week or so, consider seeking professional help.

Practical help

We often call the first stage of helping others at a time of sudden or unexpected emergency, terrorism or disaster 'psychological first aid'. There are a number of components to this, including offering emotional support, safety, security and shelter, warmth, food, clothing and protection. Providing assistance with children and pets, and support, for instance, with transport can help enormously immediately after a traumatic event. Ask if help is needed with tasks like making telephone calls, finding resources, obtaining news about or searching for relatives and friends who may also be affected.

Bear in mind that some people who have been very independent may not feel able to ask for your help; others may be confused and unable to identify what they need. It is important, however, for people to regain control over their own lives as soon as possible. You can help most by offering help where it is clearly needed, but having the sensitivity and awareness to allow the person to take over managing their own needs.

If the person wishes to talk about his or her experience this should be supported but it is inappropriate to probe people for their reactions at an early stage. Indeed intervening in this way could make things worse for the person's recovery. Automatic 'debriefing' sessions are no longer recommended.

Resources

Where to Get Help

- General Practitioner
- Counselling services:
 - Lifeline 131 114
 - Telefriend (02) 9419 8622
- National Association for Loss and Grief (NALAG) NSW (02) 9976 2803 - provides referrals to support services for grieving people
- Transcultural Mental Health Centre - 8.30am-5.00pm (02) 9840 3800

Medicare rebates and accessing private practitioners

What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists?

Psychiatrists are medically trained doctors who specialise in the treatment of mental illness. Like GPs they can prescribe, administer and monitor medication. Psychiatrists do not advertise so it is up to your GP to refer you to someone appropriate.

Psychologists are trained in human behaviour and use a range of therapies to treat patients. They provide services including assessment, psychological testing, and various types of psychotherapy and counselling.

Medicare rebate for psychologists

A Medicare rebate is now available for up to 12 sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist* with a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, i.e. a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition.

The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost. For further information about the rebate or to locate a psychologist in your area contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 www.psychology.org.au.

*Similar Medicare rebates also exist for mental health accredited social workers and occupational therapists.

Websites:

http://www.psybc.com/pdfs/Udrstdg_terror_Induce.pdf
Understanding Stress in Children Due to Terrorism

<http://www.guidancechannel.com/talkingterrorism.pdf>
How to Talk to Children About Terrorism by Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D.

National Security Australia
<http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/>

<http://www.ema.gov.au>
Emergency Management Australia PO Box 1020
Dickson ACT 2602 Australia
Telephone: 02 62665402
Booklet - *Preparing for the Unexpected*, available on the internet or
telephone: 1800 262 222 (new line)
Published: Emergency Management Australia 2003

<http://www.lexington-on-line.com/nafterrorism.html>
Terrorism Fear - What You Can Do To Alleviate It
Written by Stephen Cox, M.D. President and Medical Director of the National Anxiety
Foundation, Helping Sufferers of Panic, Anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

<http://www.redcross.org.au>
Australian Red Cross

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/ptsdmenu.cfm>
National Institute for Mental Health

Further Reading

What Australia Means to Me by Bob Carr, Penguin 2003
This is an essay on the nation, patriotism, meaning of Australia, issued on the eve of
Australia Day.

*Mouse Family's Most Terrible, Terrifying Day: Helping Children Cope with Terrorism
Fears* by Joan S. Dunphy, New Horizon Press Publishers, 2002, ISBN: 0882822276

*Individual and Community Responses to Trauma and Disaster: The structure of human
chaos*, Editor: Robert J. Ursano, Cambridge University Press 1996

When Disaster Strikes: How Individuals and Communities Cope with Catastrophe by
Beverley Raphael, Basic Books, N.Y. 1986

See also other Mental Health Information Service fact sheets available at
<http://www.mentalhealth.asn.au>

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Anxiety

A fact sheet produced by the Mental Health Information Service

- Recognising and Managing Stress

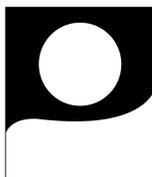
For further information, please call the NSW Mental Health Information Service on 1300 794 991.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW. This and other fact sheets are available for download from www.mentalhealth.asn.au. The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

This fact sheet was last updated in January 2008.



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