

# Dealing With Trauma

Ordinarily I am not a morning television viewer. But on that terrifying Tuesday, Sept. 11, I was sitting in the customer service lounge of the local Jeep dealership, where the television was tuned to Good Morning America. I saw the unbelievable footage of the blasted World Trade Center.

At first, I thought a troubled plane was off course and computer animation was showing us what could happen. Then the reality of the sudden, unexpected trauma overwhelmed me.

What happens to our emotional and mental state when we witness trauma? How do we cope with surreal events that touch and alter our lives?

Media reports give us a glimpse into the variety of possible responses—a dazed, soot-covered woman finds herself 22 miles from the World Trade Center, unable to account for how she got there; an angry father of a deceased son screams for revenge; a New York resident weeps uncontrollably.

At first, we all are numb as we experience events that tax our abilities to cope. Later we may have other responses. These can vary over time and from person to person, and include:

- \* Intense, unpredictable feelings. Our mood can shift from depressed to anxious to sad to angry. Irritability increases, and fear is heightened. We may unexpectedly burst into tears or feel incredible sadness. We may experience guilt, confusion, isolation, fear, panic and anxiety.

- \* Disturbed sleep. Sleeping may bring nightmares and dreams about feeling vulnerable and out of control.

- \* Decreased productivity. We may find it difficult to concentrate on daily tasks.

- \* Physical symptoms. These include headaches, nausea, chest pain, high blood pressure.

- \* Flashbacks. Recurring images of the trauma can occur.

Your reaction to recent events has everything to do with the coping skills you possessed before that dreadful day in September. If you were a fearful, anxious person, those feelings may be exacerbated. If you lacked spiritual grounding, peace and comfort, you will be more shaken than those with strong faith. If you've endured other losses and trauma, your reactions may be heightened.

So, how can you and your family cope with a disaster of this magnitude?

Talk about your feelings. Don't keep them bottled up or lash out in anger and revenge. Desiring to bring justice and restrain evil is biblical, but hating is not.

Set boundaries with your children. If you are extremely upset, talk with other adults, and don't overburden your children with your fears. Listen to your children's questions and answer with age-appropriate responses. Remember, they are watching how you handle your emotional state.

Reassure your children. Let them know that feeling unsafe is common after these events. Remind them that nothing happens out of God's control. God's way is to take what was meant for evil and bring good out of it.

Limit viewing of graphic violence. The aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing and other media-displayed horrors taught us that witnessed trauma causes emotional damage.

Discuss difficult spiritual questions. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does evil abound? This is an opportunity to present a Christian worldview to your family.

Reassure your family with the Bible. Focus your devotions on Scriptures that point to God's comfort and grace, His peace, and His admonitions not to fear or be anxious. Read Scriptures that declare evil will not prevail and justice will be served.

Re-establish your routines. Eat well, exercise and get plenty of rest. Your body must reboot. Engage in leisure, play or creative expression for tension release.

Pray together. Remember those who lost loved ones and those who tried to save them; pray for our leaders, and for all of us to proceed with wisdom.

Finally, remember that grieving and readjustment will be a long process. Life was lost. Evil was unleashed, and we all watched. We need time to heal, and we must be patient with ourselves.

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