

Resilience and the Threat of Terrorism

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Fears about acts of terrorism have become prominent concerns in the lives of many individuals. We are reminded regularly of terrorist attacks in other countries, especially in the Middle East. We are also reminded of the possibility of such attacks in the United States as terror alert levels are reported and warnings issued, and as we witness guards with machine guns not only at our airports but in our cities as well. Newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts constantly highlight the reality of the post-September 11 world.

Given our work in the area of resilience my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I continue to receive many questions about the most effective strategies for managing the stress and anxiety triggered by the threat of terrorism. In response to these questions, we have prepared the following article. In light of the recent publication of our book *The Power of Resilience*, we decided to focus on what adults can do for themselves to deal with anxiety occasioned by the spectre of terrorism. The reader is referred to several of the website articles I wrote immediately following September 11 for specific suggestions about helping children with worries about terrorism. Also, in last month's article, I described studies that indicate that resilience in the face of adversity may be a far more common phenomenon than was previously realized. Thus, while many people may experience increased anxiety about the possibility of terrorism, it is our belief that one does not have to have an extraordinary personality to deal effectively with this anxiety. Each person can develop and recruit coping strategies that contribute to a more resilient outlook.

Two World Wars as well as the Korean and Vietnam conflicts were fought oceans away from American shores. While they caused anxiety and uncertainty in our country, especially for those who had loved ones serving in these conflicts, as Americans we were spared from the daily horrors of having bombs dropped on our soil, buildings destroyed, and citizens killed. Even in the midst of war, there was a sense of security for most people as we escaped destructive acts in our land.

However, on September 11, 2001 as hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania, the sense of safety and security in the United States was shaken to its core. The assault on the psyches of Americans as well as on people throughout the world became apparent immediately. The intense pain, anxiety, anger, and sadness triggered by the terrorist acts created an urgency to understand how best to cope with an unfathomable horror.

As psychologists, we recognized this urgency. Our research, clinical work, and writings over the last twenty years have focused upon how children and adults face and overcome stress and adversity. Through correspondence and in our workshops and clinical practice adults and children asked us many questions related to September 11. Adults wondered how best to explain terrorism to their children and reassure them about their safety. Children questioned the future and what might happen to them and their loved ones.

Many of the questions we received focused not only on comforting our children but ourselves as well. Adults inquired how they could provide a reassuring response to their children and students when they themselves were feeling depressed and anxious. Many adults commented about feeling a loss of control over their lives and the world around them.

Suddenly a concept, which had been gaining prominence in the field of mental health, was thrust into the limelight—resilience. In the 1990s mental health researchers and clinicians demonstrated an increasing interest in defining those factors that help people overcome adversity and lead more satisfying, happy, and less stressful lives. A focus on pathology, or what is wrong with people, was slowly being replaced by attempts to examine what helps people to survive and thrive. The aftermath of September 11 accelerated the process of studying resiliency and assisting people to become more stress hardy.

In the weeks and months following September 11, the media besieged mental health specialists for advice about how to cope not only with past terrorist acts but with the fear of possible future terrorism. The American Psychological Association published the pamphlets “The Road to Resilience” and “Resilience in a Time of War” to assist people to deal with adversity and has collaborated with the magazine “Time for Kids” to

teach children how to manage stress. Public leaders have repeatedly used the word “resilient” to describe the attitude and behavior of our citizens in response to the events of September 11.

While, as we have noted in previous writings, we believe that many Americans are resilient, studies indicate the ongoing impact of the terrorist attacks. According to a recent USA Today/CNN/Gallop poll, 27 percent of Americans say that they have changed some aspect of their personal lives to reduce their chances of being the victim of a terrorist attack, and 68 percent say that they are more aware of factors that could affect their personal safety since September 11. Congressman Patrick Kennedy introduced a bill titled National Resilience Development Act of 2003 (H.R. 2370) to convene a task force in order to identify and define scientifically proven means of reducing stress reactions and increasing psychological resilience in preparation for and response to the possibility of another terrorist attack on the United States.

We support Congressman Kennedy’s initiative and believe that a proactive approach to nurture resilience is a sound path to take. There is a growing literature defining the characteristics possessed by resilient people, what we refer to as a “resilient mindset.” Not only can we reinforce this mindset in our children, but there are steps we can take to cultivate this mindset within ourselves.

A basic foundation of resilience and stress hardiness is a sense of personal control. Resilient people focus on what they have control over and refrain from devoting time or energy to factors that are beyond their sphere of influence. They take responsibility and ownership for their own lives. Resilient people do not seek satisfaction and happiness by asking or waiting for someone else to change first, but rather consider, “What is it that I can do differently to manage or change the situation?”

In our day-to-day lives there is little that the average citizen can do to prevent a terrorist act. This does not mean we cannot be more alert at airports or other sensitive locations, nor does it mean that we should deny or ignore possible danger. However, the reality is that most terrorists are not going to advertise their plans. As some experts have noted, terrorists thrive on disrupting one’s sense of security and safety and infusing anxiety into all parts of our lives. In some instances they have succeeded, leaving people less hopeful and more helpless about the

present and the future. When this anxious, pessimistic state of mind prevails, the terrorists have accomplished part of their goal.

However, while we may not know when or where terrorists might strike, we can concentrate on what we have control over in terms of developing a resilient mindset and leading a resilient lifestyle. For example, we know that resilient people are those who maintain strong connections not only with other people but with causes, ideals, and their religion. We know that resilient people are empathic and possess impressive communication skills. They are actively involved in acts of charity and in helping others. Being connected with one's family and friends as well as assisting others are behaviors within our control and behaviors that add meaning and purpose to our existence.

We are also aware that resilient people are skilled at identifying and prioritizing their strengths and values and engage in those activities that are in concert with these strengths and values. Resilient people are excellent problem solvers and perceive difficult situations as challenges to confront and master rather than as stresses to avoid. Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the threat of terrorism, they discover effective ways of coping, such as through friendships, volunteer work, spending more time with their families, or becoming involved in a political cause. They do not engage in a form of Pollyannish denial but realize that even in today's uncertain world one can take the initiative to build a more secure foundation of emotional well-being.

Resilient individuals possess a reflective mindset that is not vulnerable to irrational thoughts and impulsive actions. They do not overreact and view each stranger as a possible terrorist. Rather, they maintain a realistic perspective, focusing on the good that exists in the world and constantly asking what they can do to in their own sphere of influence to have a positive impact.

Dr. Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp to whom I have referred in many previous writings, reflected upon this kind of positive attitude associated with a resilient mindset. Even when confronted by the horror, terror, and unimaginable inhumanity of such a camp, Frankl wrote:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Perhaps more than ever before, it is important for Americans to reflect upon Frankl’s words and to understand the features of a resilient mindset and the behaviors that flow from this mindset. We believe that even in the midst of the threat of terrorism, people can strive to develop a mindset and lifestyle that is rooted in the premise, “I am the author of my own life. There are many areas over which I have control and I must focus on these lest I be swept away by anxiety, sadness, helplessness, and hopelessness.”

The development and maintenance of a resilient mindset is one of the best measures we can take to assume a satisfying, joyful life and not succumb to the psychological assault of terrorism. We must do this for ourselves, our children, our neighbors, and for the future of our country.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>