

Reflections on Terrorism from a Therapist's Perspective

By Monty N. Weinstein, PsyD, MPA, DAPA, NCP

One of the basic problems confronting psychotherapists dealing with the victims of terrorism is that there is rarely closure in these horrific acts. As pointed out in my previous columns, psychotherapy does not end when key issues are resolved, such as when Saddam Hussein, who many would call the very personification of evil, was found and captured. The issue emanating from these experiences is that the victims must go on living a life that many times is totally surrounded by anxiety and frustration. While individuals in the Justice Department find closure by bringing the perpetrators of such criminal devastating deeds as terrorism to justice, the human psyches of the victims are still obsessed by the shock of physical and emotional loss, whether it is themselves, their families or immediate loved ones that were directly involved in the incident.

To our generation, terrorism is a very real threat. A major challenge to therapists today is the phenomenon of suicide bombing, which existed to a degree in the past (such as during World War II) but is now an everyday occurrence not only in the Mideast, but also with our European allies and neighbors. Children today have to go through

stringent and psychologically stressful competition, whether it be in high school or college, in order keep their heads above water. This stress is extremely compounded when horrific incidents such as the attack on the World Trade Center become written into the equation. I remember going to my daughter's graduation at Stuyvesant High School in New York right before the attack on the World Trade Center. During the final part of the graduation ceremony, the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* was played with assistance from the school orchestra. I can still remember that moment, because many parents were asking, "Why are we playing military music when our nation has been at peace at home for over 200 years?" Three months later, the attack on the World Trade Center occurred and these same people were sending their children to therapy to alleviate the trauma of the World Trade Center attack and the residual impact it had played on these children. These factors show that in one day, where we are peaceful and dealing with the stresses of the competitive society, the element of the possibility of imminent death and shock becomes part of the everyday equation to our children. What I think is the most important message to be taught by therapists today is that we do not have the only answer to why the equilibrium of our patients is totally off, but rather we must facilitate the acceptance of anxiety and fear and allow these emotions to emanate rather than try to give an etiology of why these acts ever occurred.

The challenge ahead to modern-day therapists is being able to transcend their own political feelings and hostility towards the perpetrators of terrorism, and focus instead on the feelings of the victims without going through any of the deep, complicated process of transference. In my work with some victims of terrorism, I've come to realize that one of the difficult agendas that one faces is spending hours upon hours contemplating the cause of this phenomenon rather than getting into the impact and metamorphosis that the patient, who is the victim, has to go through. As I am stating, for the modern psychotherapist, the equation is much more complex because the etiology of these devastating acts of terrorism shatters the imagination of anyone in modern-day civilization. It becomes even more mind boggling when innocent children become the victims of people such as terrorists who live their lives in utter desperation.

What the therapist has to realize is that the process will never end for the victims of terrorism, and that their inner strength must be able to endure the ongoing psychological challenges that they as psychotherapists must face. I think it is very important for psychotherapists dealing with the families and victims of terrorism to undergo their own psychological reflections, because in reality, when working with these issues, the therapist becomes to a degree a victim as well.

In order to help the victims and families of terroristic acts, it is very important that one must understand the psychological makeup of the individuals who perpetrate these devastating scenarios. This comes back to a concept of phenomenology in psychotherapeutic modalities that deal with various aspects of reality. We must enter into the mind of a person who commits these acts by transcending what we perceive as right or wrong. To a terrorist's mind, committing these acts is a moment of reaching martyrdom and ecstasy. This martyrdom comes from believing that if we violate the people whom we perceive as our enemy, we are doing something that is just, and therefore, can be rationalized. This is the same type of rationalization that psychopaths use to reason in their distorted minds.

It is, therefore, important when dealing with victims, the people that terrorists have violated, that we must support them in a way of being in touch with our feelings rather than rationalize the psychic development of these people. We also, as therapists, must understand that this is a process that may be infinite because we are entering a generation which is predicated upon turmoil and conflicts. We must also understand that our brave men and women in the military are undergoing some major psychological changes in that on one hand they must restore peace in countries that we have conquered, and on the other hand, they must be ready to protect us against people who, without rhyme or reason, can turn against us. The conflicted nature of therapists in these

times is very challenging, and the people who perform the acts of therapy must be ready to transcend their own emotional conflicts to alleviate the tension of their clients and patients.

About the Author

Dr. Monty N. Weinstein is Director of the Family Therapy Center, a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, A Diplomate of the American Psychotherapy Association, a Fellow of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, a licensed marriage and family therapist and certified psychologist. He has also been qualified as an expert in custodial matters in the United States and Europe.