

This article is provided as a courtesy by...

Steven C. German, Ph.D., NCCC

Post Office Box 590485 Newton Centre, MA 02459

P: 617-527-1541 ■ W: www.counselingatacrossroads.com ■ E: dr.stevegerman@gmx.com

Making Peace with Terror:

Reflections on 9-11 with Time Passed

by

Steven C. German

No one in this region will ever forget the pictures from September 11, 2001...of winged missiles from our area fatally striking skyscrapers symbolic of a great culture and city ...of glistening white towers, standing as samples of the best of building technology, plummeting helplessly to the ground in billowing clouds of dark smoke, engraving forever into our psyche the potential for horror that can emanate from mankind's capability for evil. These dramatic images served as a rude awakening to the reality that the threat of terrorism had arrived on our shores.

Aside from the potential for destruction from terrorist acts, the threat touched our darkest fears of not knowing if, when, or where harm will take place, and how it will occur. Besides this, the lingering pain and loss of those who saw the lives of their friends, loved ones, and colleagues evaporate instantly in a public way on September 11 could never be experienced by most of us. However, it is a well-accepted notion that we all have been left with psychological scars, concerns, and stress from this day. With much time having passed since the September 11, 2001 tragedy, it is important for each of us to have developed a way of living with this new reality of terrorism in our lives so we can move forward while not forgetting the enormity of the day.

Reflecting on the new reality that we have had to deal with since 2001, the perception that terrorists are capable of creating havoc and destruction at any time and at any place certainly has contributed to a sense of individual as well as collective stress. These feelings have been heightened by various alerts and the many media reports which have become part of our landscape. But what is the real potential of being confronted with an attack? Let's look back at the period around September, 2001 when these concerns were most intense. From some of the reports in the media at that time there may have been as many as 5,000 graduates of the terrorist camps amongst us. If you figure that

Making Peace with Terror: Reflections after a Decade Passed (cont'd)...2

there were approximately 300,000,000 individuals within our borders at that time, this means the odds of meeting one of these graduates would have been about 1.67 out of 100,000, assuming that all 5,000 of these individuals were poised and ready to attack at the point of contact.

How did this possible ratio of risk number compare to other potential sources of danger at the time? Here are some figures taken from studies made during the period just before 9-11: death by murder – 7.41 per 100,000; being in a fatal plane crash – 1.42 per 100,000; dying from a major cardiovascular disease – 368 per 100,000; and being killed while crossing the street – 2.0 per 100,000. Looking at this data in retrospect, we could certainly have succumbed to the fears engendered by the new threat of terror. However, when we let the perspective of time's passage give us the chance to take a step back and to study the objective data available, what we can conclude is that the threat of terrorism is real, but probably no more dangerous to each of us individually than other possibilities for harm that can be encountered in everyday living.

But looking at what statistics and statisticians report does not always calm a stressed soul. A reality of terrorism, and any of the other risks of living we could encounter, is that they can occur at any time and that the specific form of threat is often beyond our control. This gets into the whole issue of the source of stress. What we know from the reports of researchers is that a frequent cause of stress comes from events that we cannot control, or we think we cannot control. The impact of terrorism since September 11 is that it has become a new element in our lives which can make us feel that life is out of our control. While having this impact, it *can also serve* as a powerful force for causing us to stop and reflect on what we might do to feel more in control. To gain this feeling, we can certainly do our part and be vigilant reporters of possible terrorist activity. We are all more in control of this threat to the degree that we work together as a community at every level.

Even more important though, we have all been put in touch with a bigger question of what can we do so that *we feel in control* of our own lives? There is after all a *choice to be made* as to whether to have life as it evolves be in charge of us, dictating our thoughts and reactions, or to determine where and how we can better manage what life presents. For example, we can opt to be in control of the relationships we pursue and develop, and the quality that we seek from them; we can determine how we will relate to our family, friends, colleagues, and strangers in the street and on the road; we can decide how to focus the primary energies in our lives, balancing the work-time vs. personal-time equation; we can select among our priorities and the resources we have

This article is provided as a courtesy by Dr. Steven German. The information in the article is meant only to offer a personal perspective and should not be considered as counseling, guidance or advice as part of a therapeutic relationship.

Making Peace with Terror: Reflections after a Decade Passed (cont'd)...3

available to us; and we can dedicate ourselves to caring for our bodies and our feelings in a better way.

What is the point in this thinking out loud? It is recognition that we have all been impacted by what took place on September 11 in 2001, as well as by the media coverage and public discussion that have followed since then. The passing of time gives us the chance to see in objective terms that what has occurred is we all have learned we are vulnerable to a *new, yet just another threat* to our safety and well-being. As a result of this exposure to an element of living over which we may have little control individually, we have been faced with a choice of how to respond to this risk while we manage in the environment and community around us. As important, though, is that we are faced with how we respond on a personal level to a threat we seemingly cannot control as an individual. For example, can we use the new awareness as a starting point to exert greater control with all those elements of our lives over which we have the potential for control, and can we learn to expend less energy where we have minimal control? This is a personal challenge for us all to consider. Second, yes, there is a reality here...living can be risky...and yes, we can and should manage the stress we encounter better, lest it manages us. Can we find ways to do this? Hopefully, after having many years to sort out the meaning of September 11 in our own lives, we have been able to incorporate at least these two possibilities into our thinking as we struggle to move ahead in a different world.

Various versions of this article have appeared in different newspapers in the Greater Boston area. The article is dedicated to the memory of Robin Kaplan who grew up in Framingham and was a victim aboard American Airlines Flight 11.

This article is provided as a courtesy by Dr. Steven German. The information in the article is meant only to offer a personal perspective and should not be considered as counseling, guidance or advice as part of a therapeutic relationship.