Common Reactions Following Terrorists’ Attack

Terrorists’ attacks have increased in places frequented by families than before. This year we have had a number of attack’s reported to have taken place in churches and complex shopping malls where families tend to go during their leisure time to relax and at the same time meet other basic needs like shopping or meet with family friends or go to worship like in churches. It is beyond doubts that these attacks have left families scared of going to these social amenities. The following information will help increase your knowledge of the common reactions following terrorists’ attacks and also provide you with some actions that you may take to facilitate your recovery following an exposure.

A terrorist’s attack is a very life threatening event and we cannot hesitate to call it a critical event whether you are directly involved or you witness others being attacked. You cannot go through this and remain unaffected. Following an exposure to a terrorists’ attack one may experience many types of reactions which may be emotional, physiological, cognitive, spiritual and behavioral just like in any other critical incident where lives of fellow human beings are threatened or are being executed.

**Emotionally** one may be shocked, anxious, stunned or even emotionally numb. Denial and disbelief are common. One may display an inability to acknowledge the impact of the attack or accept that the event occurred. One may dissociate may look dazed and apathetic and may experience feelings of unreality. Other reactions may include: panic, fear, intense feelings of aloneness, hopelessness, helplessness, emptiness, uncertainty, horror, terror, anger, hostility, irritability, depression, grief and feelings of guilt.

**Cognitively** one may experience: impaired concentration, confusion, disorientation, difficult in making a decision, a short attention span, suggestibility, vulnerability, forgetfulness, self-blame, blaming others, lowered self-efficacy, thoughts of losing control, hyper-vigilance, and perseverative thoughts of traumatic event, e.g. after rescue one may cognitively still be “in the attack”, or replaying the “tape” of the attack in the mind.

**Behaviorally** one may: withdraw, “space-out”, non-communication, change in speech patterns, regressive behaviors, erratic movements, impulsivity, a reluctance to abandon property, seemingly aimless walking, pacing, an inability to still, an exaggerated startled response and antisocial behavior.

**Physiological** reactions are those responses that indicate a temporary change on how the body functions. These include: Rapid heart-beat, elevated blood pressure, difficult breathing, shock symptoms, chest pains, cardiac palpitations, muscle tension and pains, fatigue, fainting, flushed face, pale appearance, chills, cold clammy skin, increased sweating, thirst, dizziness, vertigo, hyperventilation, headaches, grinding of teeth, twitches and gastro-intestinal upset.

**Note:** *Immediate medical attention is needed if you have difficulty in breathing, shock symptoms, chest pain and cardiac palpitations.*

**Spiritually** following a terrorist’s attack one may experience mixed feelings. Anger and distance from God is common, there may be withdrawal from participating in religious services. Sometimes the opposite is experienced often a sudden turn toward God and uncharacteristic involvement in religious
community activity. Other experiences include faith practices (e.g. prayers, scripture reading, hymns, worship, communion), as empty and without meaning. Often one may feel that God does not care and that God is powerless and anger may be directed towards clergy, questioning basic beliefs.

*Note:* All the above reactions do not necessarily represent an abnormality; they are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

Following a terrorists’ attack do not keep to yourself support is available. Normally when a major critical event occurs the UN Security Control Room will alert all staff members via communication channels that are available and are working at that time. In order to facilitate communication related to your safety and security, register your telephone number with DSS for update and any other relevant information. During a terrorists’ attack emergence response lines will be activated and the numbers will be communicated to all staff members immediately. In the absence of any immediate number, at the back of your UN – ID card several numbers have been provided for you to use during emergence. Kindly master at least two of these numbers such that you can dial them without looking at them or you can instruct another person to call on your behalf if you are not in a position to call. You may also call - JMS 24 hours’ service line: +254 724 255 378, and psychosocial assistance will be organized for you.

The following Psycho - social protective actions may help reduce the intensity of the impact of an attack:

1. Do a self psycho-protective care by reducing further exposure to triggers via watching too much repetition of the event on Television.
2. Have adequate rest
3. Exercise once energy returns to you, you may start with a slow relaxing walk initially
4. Avoid alcohol, instead take plenty of water and fresh fruit juices
5. Eat and sleep well, often these two are forgotten, but they are important as they enhance your coping ability.
6. Remember that old traumas poorly treated and unresolved can be reactivated. If this becomes your experience, take lead is asking for help and share this info with your counselor. Past traumas may complicate a current traumatic experience
7. Care for children and protect them from *second hand terrorism*. This is further trauma that they are likely to experience as they view televised live shows and past images related to the event
8. Social media too! You have control of how much you and your children are to be involved in social media. This can be a source of continuous traumatization
9. Tell children facts: If the situation is yet under control, tell them that but explain facts about what is being done. They too have other sources of information. Remain true and credible to your children.
10. Reassure them of their safety, your safety and of others of concern to them. Tell them what they need to do to maintain this safety.
11. Create a safe environment for them free of re-traumatization
12. Train your family members to learn one or two essential telephone numbers, or even more by heart one of which should be a police line.

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*Peninah Iru ngu, JMS, UNON staff counseling service.*
13. Finally if you or any of your dependent is too overwhelmed book a session for them with the counselor. Do not worry of whether to call it a counseling session/debrief or/diffusing session. This is not important.