

After 9/11, USA was more resilient than experts expected

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Updated 08/03/2011 9:23 PM

Ten years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the American psyche has bounced back better than psychologists predicted. But that doesn't mean the terrorist attacks didn't leave scars that are only now coming to light.



New York: The Twin Towers in flames, Sept. 11, 2001.

Getty Images

Psychologists already know that those who experienced loss or personally witnessed the devastation, such as those in [New York](#), Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, were and continue to be harder hit emotionally than those around the country who were not personally involved. But a small army of researchers who for a decade have been exploring the emotional wreckage of 9/11 say psychologists overestimated the number of people who would suffer long-term effects — and underestimated the resilience humans can muster in the wake of tragedy.

"The problem with a catastrophic collective trauma like 9/11 is it's not just the place and the buildings that were destroyed. Many aspects of our social lives have also been distorted and altered," says psychologist Billie Pivnick of New York, who is among an expected 12,000 psychology professionals in Washington as the [American Psychological Association](#) opens its annual meeting today.

K. Mark Sossin, a psychology professor at Pace University in New York, joins Pivnick on a panel about 9/11 research.

"9/11 was not just an event trauma. It was the loss of the assumptive world," he says. "When you presume and assume you'll wake up to the same safety net that you had yesterday and you don't, you not only lose that assumption, you lose all related assumptions."

Still, the research suggests that for the most part, "we are extremely resilient as human beings," says George Bonanno, professor of clinical psychology at [Columbia University](#) in New York. "We were remarkably resilient. ... I don't think people are permanently scarred at all."

Is televised trauma toxic?

But now there is a new controversy: Research published online last month in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* found long-term health effects of 9/11, not just among those who were present but among people who watched the attacks live on TV.

Researcher Roxane Cohen Silver, a psychologist at the University of California-Irvine, is among those who have spent decades studying the emotional and physical effects of traumatic exposure. After 9/11, their focus shifted to the terrorist attacks.

"Sept. 11 was really the first event in the [United States](#) of a national scale that we could explore these effects," she says. "The impact of 9/11 was not limited to the people who were directly exposed. The spillover was widespread. This is perhaps the first study that's shown this physical and psychological effect of experiencing something indirectly."

Her study found an 18% increase in doctor-diagnosed physical ailments in the first three years after the attacks among almost 2,000 adults who took online surveys in the aftermath. Of the sample, 63% had watched the attacks live on TV; 4.5% had been directly exposed.

"The notion that people's physical health would be impacted by trauma is not new. But most of those events have been personally experienced," she says. "People who watched the attacks live on TV experienced more ailments than people who did not watch it live."

But some are skeptical of the findings, including Bonanno, who says he and colleagues conducted a major review of disaster literature after 9/11 that showed TV imagery harmed only people who already had been exposed.

"Can people be affected remotely by disasters? We concluded no. The research says no, unless you have lost a loved one or have pre-existing psychological problems," he says.

Psychologist Suzan Stafford of Washington, D.C., was at the Pentagon after the attacks; she says resilience is key. "We want people to move on. It's an important part of our psychological makeup. ... We can't stay mired in that pain," she says.

Bonanno says 9/11 was a riveting event that caused everyone to think differently about terrorism and disaster. But he says disasters — whether natural or man-made — do happen and will continue to happen.

"I think we are wired to deal with trauma," he says. "It's not only in the person. There's lots of other factors that determine whether (a person will) be resilient or not.

"Part of it has to do with who they are, their circumstances, the resources at their disposal, their own trauma histories. They're less resilient if they have health problems or a history of traumatic reactions, or lack economic resources."

After 9/11, many psychologists estimated the emotional turmoil would result in high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, perhaps 35% of those exposed to the attack. But studies have found much lower rates, even among first responders.

How children have fared

Several studies have examined the effects on children, positive and negative alike.

Lawrence Aber, a professor of applied psychology and public policy at [New York University](#), was among researchers who conducted two major studies of kids in [New York City](#) compared with national samples. The [New Yorkers](#) in one study, conducted within months of the attacks, were in grades 4 through 12. The other study, started about five years before the attacks for those in grades 1 through 6, were studied again in the six months after 9/11. Both studies found "much higher rates of children's mental health problems after 9/11 than would be expected."

There were also some positive outcomes, including an increased desire to help others and to be charitable.

Aber says, "Ongoing domestic and community and school violence represents a much bigger threat to children's mental health than 9/11 ever did. As bad as 9/11 was, it was not nearly as impactful on children's mental health as exposure to everyday violence in their homes and in their schools and in their communities. Harsh physical punishment in their homes or children who are bullied or witness violence in their neighborhoods have enduring effects."

Yuval Neria, director of the Trauma and [PTSD](#) Program at the [New York State Psychiatric Institute](#) at Columbia University, says he was surprised so many people are so resilient.

Neria says just a small proportion will develop trauma-related problems, such as PTSD, substance abuse, depression or cardiovascular disease.

The fact that most don't suffer long-lasting emotional consequences has made psychologists rethink many of their old beliefs, says Patricia Watson of Bend, Ore., associate director of the terrorism and disaster programs at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress at the University of California-Los Angeles. She also works with the National Center for PTSD at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., and is co-author of an article in a soon-to-be-published special issue of an American Psychological Association journal devoted to 9/11 research.

Watson says experiences in the aftermath of 9/11 have shown that not everybody needs psychological intervention after a trauma.

"A lot of people feel right after a disaster we should rush in and try to help everyone," she says. "We're finding that rarely more than a third of the population really has chronic psychopathology in most disasters. In 9/11, some research indicated some PTSD after one month, but at six months, it was down to 0.6%."

What seems more important to focus on than counseling is immediate needs: safety, housing, food, clothing, basic coping.

"We're hopefully increasing their own self-sufficiency," Watson says. "You are supporting their own resilience."

Trying to be supportive is also what those working on the 9/11 Memorial Museum are hoping to accomplish, suggests Pivnick, a consultant for the museum, set to open next year.

Exhibition designer Tom Hennes says Pivnick was enlisted "to avoid re-traumatizing people or traumatizing people through those exhibits."

Pivnick advised having "a lot of exits, so if people want to leave at any point, they don't have to wait to get to the end."

But on this year's 10th anniversary, there will be a different mood across the [USA](#), suggests Washington, D.C., psychologist Chris Courtois. The fact that Osama bin Laden was cornered and killed this year will make a big difference in the way people view this anniversary compared with the past nine years.

"There was a sense of being disempowered or 'Why didn't we catch this guy?' I think we would have felt more powerless had he not been caught.

"Now we're not just the powerless nation who couldn't catch him. We're back to having more of a sense of control."