



## **Trauma Response in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Wilma Bass, MFT and Vanessa Watt, MFT

### ***New Dilemmas***

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought disasters and traumatic events into the living rooms of every home. With rapid media access to global events coupled with the modern distribution of news, most of the population in the United States has been subjected to repeated images of horror and terror over and over again. In the past ten years we have seen more global and far-reaching acts of terror on U.S. soil than we had in the previous 100 years.

In 2001, the United States experienced the major September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. In addition, natural disasters began to proliferate with massive impact. Chernobyl, Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina as well as numerous earthquakes world-wide immediately come to mind. A generation of individuals previously accustomed to feeling reasonably secure on home ground are now facing new dilemmas.

These far-reaching catastrophic events, however, come with no blueprint for treating the traumatizing fallout that follows

such disasters. What type of impact does this relentless onslaught of disasters have on the mental health of both the greater society as well as the individuals within? What happens when an individual is personally exposed to a traumatic event on top of the constant bombardment of external traumas? How does one feel safe in an insecure world? These are vital questions to consider as we begin to treat trauma victims in the workplace.

Modern media coverage is largely instrumental in upping the ante in terms of one's psychological reaction. In a culture relatively new to home-based terrorism, the mass of U.S. society has not yet learned how to cope with the possibility of attacks on home ground. In an interview with Dr. Marc Gelkopf<sup>1</sup>, a psychologist in Israel, he reports that Israelis, having lived for years with terrorism, have coped by getting and giving support to each other and creating solidarity. The United States, in a newer position dealing with the specter of terror,

needs to be sensitized to the reality that people have not yet adjusted nor developed effective coping strategies, and that, in fact, there will be a cumulative effect of trauma build-up in individuals.

### ***Implications for the Workplace***

Corporations and businesses have an obligation to understand what this outside impact will have on the workforce, should they become direct trauma targets, and how the cumulative effects of exposure to grand-scale disasters might exacerbate the symptoms of a person personally involved in a traumatic incident. It is vital to a corporation's recovery after a critical incident that they take into account this cumulative impact of national trauma on their employees when they are personally exposed to a traumatic incident.

This understanding requires the workplace to be *more* prepared rather than *less* prepared. To be *more* vigilant rather than *less* vigilant. The stark reality is that the impact of crisis events on their employees may have far reaching implications for the health and recovery of even the most successful businesses. With so much focus on recent natural and human-made disasters, it would be fair to assume that corporate America would by now be prepared and ready to respond to a workplace disaster, should it happen. Even

before the United States experienced monumental acts of terror on its soil in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, workplace violence had become a not infrequent occurrence. With the increase of pressures and stressors in modern society, workplace violence has seen an increase.

Alarming, a recent statistic from the Disaster Preparedness 2006 Report<sup>2</sup> states that 39% of U.S. companies **still** do not have a plan in place that will guide them through the effects of such events -- they are without *any* formalized or structured plan at all. If we factor in that within three years most businesses can assume that they will experience some form of critical incident if they have not already done so, this statistic becomes exponentially disturbing.

### ***The Crisis Response Plan***

What business can do is formulate a basic Crisis Response Plan. The purpose of this is to expedite recovery in the face of an out-of-the-ordinary traumatic incident.

The Plan should set out a specific recovery strategy and identify the key players in that response strategy, Built into this plan should be the recognition that the business itself might not be equipped to fully carry out the response, because they themselves might all be impacted. Hence it is extremely important to factor in external resources to assist the company in managing this recovery stage.

In addition, it is essential to recognize that the cumulative effects from past and current natural disasters and terrorist acts might exacerbate employees' symptoms. In other words, the company might be dealing with multiple trauma impacts that surface and are triggered by the one critical incident that happens to them. This poses a heightened challenge to companies and what they might be dealing with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to workplace traumas of yesteryear.

A Plan by itself does not carry much weight unless it is carried out and implemented by professionals trained in traumatic incident work. Considering the multiplicity of trauma that can occur in individuals, nothing short of a consistent, individualized plan for each corporation should be developed. Also a back-up support system of trained professionals familiar with crisis protocols and various symptoms of trauma is crucial in gaining the fastest recovery response time possible.

That is where professional organizations dedicated to trauma response come in. Such organizations have realized the value of having trained professionals on

site to help expedite the highest quality of care. The required systematic approach, with room to customize each business's specific needs, allows the impacted company to receive the highest quality, most expeditious care in the quest for the best trauma recovery

### ***Summary***

In summary, it is evident that relentless exposure to disastrous and catastrophic incidents via the media and the internet has created a nation carrying an internal well of traumatic stress symptoms. When a workplace crisis occurs, the level of impact is therefore magnified by this accumulation, resulting in higher acuity and greater incidence of post-crisis symptoms. The importance of a solid and sound Crisis Response Plan is emphasized, with the added necessity of external professional support on hand to help a business recover properly and effectively from a trauma in the workplace.

*Wilma Bass, MFT and Vanessa Watt, MFT are co-founders and directors of Trauma Outreach Associates, Inc., a counseling corporation for family and workplace, based in San Francisco, California.*

1. Bleich, A. et al. (2003). Exposure to terrorism, stress-related mental health symptoms, and coping behaviors among a nationally representative sample in Israel. *JAMA*, 5, 612-620
2. Disaster Preparedness 2006. Institute of Management and Administration, Inc. (IOMA)

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582 Market Street, Suite 717, San Francisco, CA 94104 Phone 415-772-9999 Fax 415-723-7444 [www.traumaoutreach.com](http://www.traumaoutreach.com)  
A Counseling Corporation for Family and Workplace