



Doctor Debug™

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Are We Well Yet?

By the time you read this, the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks will have come and gone. Most likely, however, your tears and fears will still be with you. The first-year anniversary of a traumatic event can re-trigger many of the original emotions of hurt, anxiety and sadness. They don't go away easily—and perhaps they shouldn't. What does this mean about our mental wellness?

Sensitivity Up, Functioning Down

Personally, since the Vietnam War, no other national tragedy has hit me quite as

hard. You probably know about this type of experience: Since 9/11, each and every nationally reported kidnapping, rape or murder just brings the sadness and hurt right back up. This is not a post-traumatic stress disorder unless it interferes with an important area of our functioning. However, most of us are so much more sensitive than we used to be that it almost feels like a disorder.

In addition to shock, fear, anger, resentment, guilt, helplessness and hopelessness, people across the country still report emotional numbness and trouble concentrating. Tension, fatigue, insomnia, body aches,

nightmares or upsetting thoughts and images have all been normal reactions.

In the immediate days following 9/11, polls reported that as many as 71 percent of adult Americans experienced depression, difficulty concentrating, hypersensitivity and sleeplessness. Sales surged for anti-anxiety medications, antidepressants and sleep aids. In April, emotions still ran high. "The mental health needs in the wake of Sept. 11 are seemingly endless," said Jan Holcomb, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Illinois. "For those already struggling with bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety disorders and other mental illness, it is particularly difficult to cope with the fear, shock and overpowering emotions of these horrible events, even six months later."

Bursting Bubbles

At least four big bubbles have been burst in the last year: U.S. omnipotence, personal security, financial wellness and national self-image. How could anyone hurt us so heavily? How could we be at risk? How could our lifetime savings disappear into a Wall Street black hole?

How could anybody really hate us so much?

On a personal level, these questions are much like the questions a dying person might ask. How could this happen to me? Why me? We are still assessing the losses. Something has died that is beyond the deaths of our fellow Americans. Our concepts of who we are and what is important in this world have been revised so rapidly that we can hardly keep up.

But while you and I have been feeling scared and intimidated, many folks around the world aren't crying for us. They see 9/11 as a well-deserved comeuppance for a world heavyweight bully. Any of you who have been at the painful end of a bully's tactics know exactly how that feels. When that bully finally came up against someone trickier, stronger or more intimidating *and* got what he or she deserved, I will bet good money you were dancing in the streets. Understanding the feelings of those who consider us bullies may be part of our "growing up." A clear recognition of our vulnerabilities and awareness of certain worldwide realities is vital to the process of our mental wellness.

Mental Wellness

Mental wellness is *not*, as some believe, the absence of mental illness. Unlike mental illness, which is a condition, mental wellness is a process. The most important characteristics of mental wellness are resilience, respect for feelings (both our own and others), knowledge and acceptance of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, knowledge of our strengths, ability to recognize, accept and talk about our mistakes and the ability to negotiate and associate with others.

Even though such increased sensitivity may be an uncomfortable feeling, I think we

are healthier than we were before 9/11. The tragedy and truth of 9/11 brings opportunities for growth. In a society that has often elevated materialism above spirituality and the values of ownership, power and prestige over community-mindedness and a more humane worldview, this may be a chance to reflect on our lifestyle choices and the true meaning of wellness. When it comes to mental wellness, sensitivity is more important than perfect functioning.

It has been said that any time we lose something, a little part of us dies. We have lost a sense of security, and it will never be fixed. It doesn't matter

how many border checkpoints we have, how many metal detectors are in place or how many devices and strategies we come up with to protect us, we now know we are vulnerable. We have been reminded.

We have lost a lot. And, maybe only a psychiatrist could say this, but, yes, some of what we lost may be good for us in the long run. A different and more caring perspective may rise out of the ashes of the 9/11 tragedy. That is my hope, and I am sticking to it.

—*Doctor Debug*
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Feeling bugged? Write to Doctor Debug, a psychiatrist with 27 years of counseling experience. Ask him about mental wellness, or send questions regarding personal, social, relationship, medication or sexual concerns.

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