

Coping with College Series

Anxiety and Grief Reactions to 911 Kimberly Hays, Assistant Director

It's been almost one year since the attacks of 911. Last year a palpable sense of terror and grief emerged as people all over this country tried to comprehend the meaning of the attacks. You may remember feeling shocked and fearful as you wondered whether you or your family were in danger. You may also remember deep feelings of grief and pain if you lost friends or family members.

Many people experienced similar reactions of sadness and loss even though they may not have known anyone personally that was killed in the attacks. A tragedy of that scope creates a sense of shared experience. Most people felt tremendous empathy and concern for the immediate victims of the attacks after watching images of people frantically searching for their lost family members or friends or hearing the victims' stories.

There are a variety of normal reactions to traumatic events such as 911 including both anxiety and grief. Anxiety reactions -- ranging from a mild sense of uneasiness, difficulty concentrating, increased arousal, or sleep disturbance, to more intense feelings of panic or flashbacks -- may be triggered. A flashback is a vivid type of "re-experiencing" in which an event is not merely remembered, but rather feels as if it is being relived.

Anxiety reactions may be triggered by many things including fearing for your own safety, a fear of future attacks, or concern about the world being a safe place. Tragedy like that experienced on 911 really shakes up our view of the world and can shatter our sense of security. This loss of security can result in anxiety symptoms.

Feelings of grief and loss may have also been triggered as you confronted actual losses of friends or family from the attacks of 911. Even if you didn't know anyone who died you may still have felt tremendous grief. Seeing the faces or hearing the stories may have provoked intense grief.

Additionally, many among us experienced a very different type of grief and loss. People who have been marginalized in this country due to racism or other types of discrimination may have felt a sense of loss and grief at not feeling connected to the greater community. Some international students may have felt a great sense of fear or loss especially if their friends and family were from the Middle Eastern countries. So for many reasons, people may have had intense feelings of grief.

Common reactions to grief include a feeling of heaviness or pain in the chest, sadness or depression, and a longing for what was lost. Sometimes people lose interest in things that used to seem important, cry easily, lose their appetite, have physical pain, or experience feelings of restlessness.

For many of us, grief and anxiety symptoms return when we pass through the anniversary of a traumatic event. As we approach the one-year anniversary of 911 it might be helpful to anticipate what your “anniversary reaction” might be. Cues in the environment may remind you of that time. You may not be aware that you are thinking about 911; but notice that you are having a higher stress level or feeling sad. Your reactions may be more severe if you have experienced other traumatic events in your life, if you have a history of difficulty with anxiety or other mood related disorders, or if friends or relatives are unsupportive of your feelings or needs.

If you find you are having anxiety or grief reactions during this anniversary time it’s important to take good care of yourself. Try to get adequate rest, and to eat well to prevent illness. Take some steps to alleviate stress. If you are having a stressful day and there are some things in your schedule that can be put on hold a while, do so. Sometimes we need to pull back and rest rather than push ahead full throttle.

Seek out supportive people and let them know you need to talk. People need support and a sense of belonging when highly stressed. For example, many people experienced a heightened sense of community after 911, and feeling this community will be important as we approach this anniversary. Expressing your feelings, fears or sadness to a caring person can also provide a type of healing.

If you find that symptoms are intensifying, are resulting in unhealthy coping (e.g. drinking too much, becoming irritable with friends), or are interfering with your daily functioning, it would be important to seek professional help. The Student Counseling Services can help you assess the situation and determine the next steps that would be helpful. Appointments can be made by phoning 438-3655, or by stopping by our office Room 320 in the Student Services Building. Our services are professional, confidential and free of charge. Please take good care of yourself as we approach the anniversary of 911. It’s important that we take care of each other and ourselves.