Reflections of a Clinical Psychologist on the events of September 11, 2001

Robert Emery, University of Virginia

Shortly after 9 AM on September 11, 2001, my wife telephoned from the University of Virginia Law School to tell me that two airplanes had crashed into the World Trade Center. I ran to turn on a television in my laboratory in the Department of Psychology and, together with several graduate students and faculty members, watched the never-ending horror of the day unfold.

We watched in disbelief, as did the rest of America and the rest of the world. One of my students, a woman from New York City, was understandably hysterical as she frantically tried to phone loved ones in New York. As it turned out, not everyone was safe. Her closest friend had flown back to New York on Monday, September 10, after spending a long weekend here in Charlottesville. To make up for the lost time, her friend went to work early on Tuesday morning. She worked on the 96th floor of the World Trade Center.

For days following the attacks, I awoke each morning thinking—hoping—that this had been a terrible dream. I cancelled classes. I could not work effectively. I stayed close to my young children to reassure them and myself. I also tried to act as normally as possible around my children, in order to keep them from becoming too frightened.

Now I have begun to come to grips with the reality of the terror – even as I, like most of us, remain uncertain and concerned about the future.

I am a clinical psychologist and an author (with Thomas Oltmanns) of
the textbook, *Abnormal Psychology*. I am considered to be an expert on grief, trauma, and emotional distress, but I would not presume to tell anyone how they should react emotionally to the events of September 11, 2001. There is no right way to cope with trauma, with the fear of future attacks. There is no right way to grieve. Our definition of trauma has grown. It is bigger, more frightening, and even closer to home.

I feel inadequate in conversations with my student who lost her friend. What small words of comfort can bring relief after such an enormous shock?

There is no right way to react to the events of September 11, but it *is* right to react. It was -- and still is -- all right to be stunned, to cry, to feel numb, to grieve, to be filled with fury, to be frightened. It also is all right *not* to feel these emotions all of the time. It is all right to have fun, to laugh, to go on with your day-to-day routine, to forget for awhile.

For psychological as well as political reasons, we do not want to let the attack of September 11 shrink our world. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has been both comforting and on the mark psychologically in advising New Yorkers to be New Yorkers -- to go back to work, to go out on the town, to go on with their lives.

We overcome trauma by confronting our fears, not by giving in to them. We work through our numbness by facing -- in small steps -- the painful reality of our trauma. We grieve by allowing ourselves to feel -- both within ourselves and with others. We grieve by crying and by laughing, by reminiscing.
and by Letting go, by being depressed and by being angry. These conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable emotions all are part of our grief. Eventually -- sometime, somehow -- we are able to put the conflicting feelings of grief together, even if we never put them aside.

In working toward reconciling the irreconcilable, we can benefit both emotionally and in a broader sense by coming together with others who share our anguish, with others who have lived through the trauma. Many of us have felt the comfort of coming together as a nation after the terrorist attacks. I now sing my one-year-old to sleep with America the Beautiful along with my favorite lullabies. I tear up while singing the song, thinking about what I have lost and what I am so lucky still to have.

My goal in coping with the trauma and the grief is to resolve to appreciate and nurture those things that are truly important to me. I find comfort in this resolve. I believe that we can all help ourselves emotionally, and honor the victims of the attacks of September 11, if we can channel our sadness and anger into positive efforts to value and preserve those things that are most important to us personally – and to America.

Robert E. Emery is Professor of Psychology and Director of Clinical Training at the University of Virginia. He is co-author of Abnormal Psychology (Third edition, Prentice Hall 2002).