

SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS

Rebecca Coffey

For Vermont Public Radio

September 2001

In the mid 1990's a psychologist named Ronnie Janoff-Bulman wrote a book called *Shattered Assumptions*. Her central tenet: The world is too scary a place for anyone to live without relying on self-protective myths like, "I'm invulnerable," "Couldn't happen to me." When events prove to us just how vulnerable we are they shatter our cocoon of assumptions, leaving us feeling naked as babes and exposed to an awful truth: In the blink of an eye anyone can be annihilated. Dr. Janoff-Bulman suggests that coming face-to-face with that truth is itself traumatizing.

Many Americans died in the recent terrorist attacks. Many were injured. But most of us weren't there and haven't suffered a personal loss.

Still, we have had our assumptions about invulnerability shattered. Physically unscathed and logistically quite removed from the scenes of catastrophe, we may be perplexed by our feelings and behaviors. I find myself flipping in and out of moods that seem weirdly chipper. Friends complain of nightmares or of feeling jumpy and quick to anger. Others say they have "gone numb." Certain scenes—like the impact of the second plane or people as small as dots leaping to their deaths—play endlessly in our heads like slow-mo video clips.

Mood swings, sleep problems, jitters, emotional deadening, and the "let's go to the videotape" phenomenon are scaled-down versions of the symptoms of what psychiatrists call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

Some information from the psychiatric literature:

- Symptoms can begin immediately after the trauma. They can also wait weeks or even years to begin.
- Depression, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, and all the other symptoms of PTSD can result not only from direct personal experience but also from witnessing a catastrophe. Tens, maybe hundreds of millions of people around the world witnessed the events of this most recent disaster, and they did so electronically, courtesy of television.
- Sometimes the symptoms of PTSD can be so overwhelming that they make people feel crazy. But reeling in the wake of disaster is not crazy. In fact, psychologists and psychiatrists rather standardly explain that anxiety, depression, persistent terror, and numbing are all very normal responses to events that are abnormal. It's the situation that's crazy, not the response.
- Some people are more emotionally resilient than others. But, in the end, everyone has a breaking point and anyone can succumb. Electronic witnesses who sit glued to the TV for days may be unnecessarily pushing themselves to the edge.
- Talking helps. It helps us understand how we feel and it helps us *be* understood.

No, those of us who were electronic witnesses to the terrorist attacks are not “survivors of catastrophe” in the sense that people in New York and Washington are. So

while we are shocked, saddened, and more troubled than we might have expected, we have probably not inherited a whole lifetime of troubles.

But our naïve assumptions about personal safety have been shattered, and that alone is a grievous injury, a deep one. It's going to be difficult to regain a sense of safety, to dig ourselves free of the ruins of despair, especially as we contemplate the gathering clouds of war. We can talk. Listen. Love. Weep and laugh both. These are primitive tools, but, well handled, they remind us that safety can come from within and from each other. They reveal that it is terrorism that is crazy, not the world in its entirety, and certainly not us in our sorrow and hope.

—END—