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Still stressed by September 11th: Am I overreacting? ^[1]

Hi Alice,

I watched the WTC disaster from across the river in Brooklyn. My view is of downtown Manhattan from most of my apartment. I also live on a flight path. I watch the planes come in for landing towards my front windows, and can watch them continuing on from my bedroom windows. I lost a close friend in the disaster, someone who was close to members of my family as well as myself.

My question is, could I be experiencing post traumatic stress disorder? I was numb for a while, then seemed to come out of it, which I found surprising. But lately it seems that I can cry at electronics commercials. Maybe it's the upcoming holidays and dealing with loss during this time.

In addition, I mentioned this (much more briefly) to my older sister and she scoffed at me and rolled her eyes. I can't forget her reaction. I felt as if she meant I was overreacting, and I am hurt and angry at her. I also feel guilty now for thinking that I may be experiencing ptsd. PS: I was laid off in September and have been spending more time alone than everyone else I know. HELP!!!!

Answer

Dear Reader,

September 11th was a trying time for the nation and it sounds like you were barraged by a number of challenging circumstances all at once. Living along any flight path would be scary for many in the aftermath of 9/11, and on top of that witnessing the crash, and losing a friend are all extremely stressful and unsettling events. This overload would cause a great deal of stress in almost anyone and there is no need to feel guilty about it.

Everyone mourns and recovers in her/his own time. Yours and your sister's responses to the terrorist attacks and the death of your family friend were very different, but this doesn't mean that one of them is wrong. With a tragedy the scale of 9/11, there is no over-reaction — it's an event that boggles the mind and the heart to try to comprehend. There are thousands of people in New York, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, and worldwide who are still impacted by the events of 9/11. It's important to remember that people react in many different ways to death, disasters, and violence.

The feelings you described are quite normal reactions to the situations you experienced during that time, and some of them could be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition where memories of extreme emotional stress result in psychological and physical symptoms. These symptoms can include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares
- Insomnia
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Feeling numb, or feeling nothing at all
- Avoiding people and places that remind you of the event
- Sweating
- Crying
- Flashbacks
- Panic attacks
- Increased breathing and heart rates

Over time, PTSD generally abates. However if you feel that you're stuck in these feelings rather than like you're moving through them, it might be worth it to seek help. You may find it helpful to talk to a counselor. Your counselor may recommend that you join a bereavement group where you can learn techniques to deal with grief as well as putting you in touch with others dealing with loss. You might also check out [GriefNet](#) [2], a website that links to a variety of resources related to death, dying, bereavement, and other considerable emotional losses.

In terms of the amount of time you are spending alone, studies show that spending time with others — whether talking about how you're feeling or just watching a movie or having dinner — helps people get through trying times with greater ease. It might be helpful to volunteer somewhere, take regular walks in a park, or do anything that will get you active, out of the house, and around other people. It might also be healthy to get out of the city if you can. Hiking upstate or going to the beach could provide a relieving break from your normal landscape and habitual window-gazing.

Although former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's post-9/11 leadership and support were stunning and incredibly helpful to a lot of people, that message from him and other politicians shortly after September 11th, to resume life as "normal," sent a message to some to "get over it," and that may have contributed to that guilt felt by many who just couldn't go back to the way things were, and who are taking some time to heal. Because nothing quite like September 11th has happened on U.S. soil before, we're all in this together, and still trying to figure out how to help each other and ourselves.

Alice!

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