

9/11 and Your Mental Health

“Where were you?” A question that is asked all across America every year on September 11th. Chances are you remember.

You probably remember not only where you were when you heard the news, but maybe even what you were wearing or who you were with. You probably also remember the hours, days, and months that followed.

September 11, 2021 marks 20 years since the horrific, unforeseen terrorist attacks against the United States of America. This day can elicit an array of negative, difficult-to-process emotions in people across the country ranging from sadness, stress, and anger to anxiety and fear.

Derick Johnson, APRN, Psychiatry, OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center

“Things that happen in your life that are meaningful you will always remember – be it positive or negative. And that’s natural. Historically, people will say that they remember where they were when Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. They remember where they were when JFK was shot. People will always remember events like those, and you can’t erase those memories. It’s all about how you deal with them if they are of a particularly emotional component for you.” (:30)

According to studies done by JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), it has been found that the psychological effects of a major national trauma are not limited to those who experience it directly, and the degree of response is not predicted simply by objective measures of exposure to or loss from the trauma. This means that even if you were not directly impacted by 9/11, or if you were not living in New York City when the tragic events unfolded, the events that occurred on that day will stick with many Americans for the rest of their lives.

Some people may struggle more than others on 9/11 when they recall the events that occurred that day, especially with this year being the 20th anniversary. Johnson assures us that this is actually quite common – especially when it comes to large-scale tragic events.

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“People have short-term stress response, or acute stress response. And every time it is replayed, they usually revert back to that same response that they had when the event first occurred.” (:15)

These feelings may occur if you are watching TV segments or reading about 9/11, in conversation with loved ones, or they can arise completely out of the blue. If you are struggling with anxiety, stress, fear, or anything else from a mental health standpoint surrounding 9/11, Johnson reminds people that they are not alone in those feelings – and that talking about it, whether with a loved one who you trust or with a professional mental health expert, can help.

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“Understand that you are not feeling this by yourself. Understand that there are people around who are willing to help, willing to listen. You also have professionals like myself who have an open door policy as far as communication. And understand that what you are feeling is not absurd. It’s real. It’s genuine. And it’s natural.” (:25)

In addition to letting yourself feel all of the negative emotions that 9/11 may bring, Johnson recommends remembering and allowing yourself to feel all of the good that came in the aftermath of the attacks. Neighbors came together. A country united.

It is important to also remember this when talking to children about these events. There is now an entire generation of young adults and children who were not alive on September 11, 2001. While it is important to not avoid the topic, you can also focus on the unity that came after tragedy.

“Reflect on what happened after 9/11 and how you saw a lot of great things and unification in the country. You saw teamwork. You saw people going out of their way to help. You saw just some of the characteristics that we really need as a country today. I would say to reflect on those things and try to bring those things back.” (:27)

If you are struggling with the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001, know that you are not alone. For those who may find they need extra support, [OSF SilverCloud](#) is a secure, anonymous and interactive online platform to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety, or stress.