

## Incidents Most Likely to Traumatize Rescue Workers



[Photos by Jim Macmillan, Philadelphia Daily News.](#) The photo to the right is an award winning picture of dawn breaking over the ruins of the World Trade Center on 9/12/01.

**"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgement that something else is more important than fear." - Ambrose Redmoon**

Rescue workers often become very traumatized through working bomb scenes and other disaster sites. The following events and quotes have been taken from traumatized Rescue Workers who had worked in numerous rescue efforts. These events, commonly and predictably induce symptoms of PTSD in Rescue Workers.

### 1. Witnessing a Death:

#### A. If the Death Was Violent/Body Torn Apart

"I had just gotten to the hotel; it was in flames. The hotel management had locked the doors because of the casino. I found out later there were over 500 people locked inside. They were crawling out the windows, they were running, they were screaming. Suddenly, a giant fireball exploded. I watched it burn the people in the windows into black distorted forms. The people who were running inside were stopped in their tracks. The screaming coming from inside stopped. When I saw the bodies later, they didn't look human. It was horrible."

"We were outside the building, when it started to collapse. People started jumping out the windows to their deaths. One fell right in front of me. I saw his face right before he hit the ground. I'll never forget it."

#### B. If a Victim Died in Their Arms

"The guy ran out of the building; he was burned and bleeding. I held him; he knew he wasn't going to make it. He looked right into my eyes and said, 'Promise

me you'll tell my wife I love her'. I promised, but I don't want to do it."

### **C. If the Victim is a Peer... a Fire Fighter; Police Officer; Paramedic**

"We had a kid working with us whose father had been a fire fighter for years. He was just out of high school. He got in the burning building where the smoke was thick and forgot everything I taught him. Instead of crawling on the floor, the kid panicked and tried to run out. The smoke got him. When I saw his body, I started to cry. I had to tell his old man that his son was dead. I trained him; it was my fault he died. I didn't do my job."

## **2. Finding Bodies, Pieces of Bodies:**

### **A. Fellow Rescue Workers Who Have Been Killed**

"I was pulling debris off the body. Then I realized it was John. I almost threw up. If the body is of a child, particularly if the worker has children the same age."

"I saw the bodies of the babies; they were lying there bleeding and pale. My son is that age. How can anyone kill babies? I started thinking, 'What if I lost my son; what if my son had been killed?' I drive myself crazy with my thoughts."

### **B. If They Know the Family/Were Friends with the Victim**

"I had to go into that room and take John's body out. I didn't want to go in there, but I didn't say anything. John and I have been friends for years. He was blown into pieces. The only reason I knew it was him was the spot on the back of his head. I keep seeing his head with his face blown off. I can't even look his wife in the face."

### **C. Experiencing Guilt, Following the Death Because A) The Dead Person Replaced Them; B) They Were Unable to Rescue Them; C) They Had a Disagreement Just Prior to the Death**

"I could hear the woman screaming from inside...'Help me; help me'. But we couldn't get to her. I heard her scream as she died. It was awful! I'm supposed to save people and I couldn't save her. I couldn't get to her. I can still hear her screaming."

### **D. The Smell and Taste of Decomposing Bodies (No Mask Can Filter or Disguise This Smell and Taste)**

"We were working AirEgypt, shoving out what was left of the bodies. The smell was so horrible; it was the worse smell I've ever smelled. I've worked on other disasters, but this smell was so much worse. Nothing would get rid of it. It got in our clothes and our hair and in our skin. It wouldn't wash out. I couldn't sleep at night because of the smell. I kept thinking, "Why are we doing this?"

"For days after I left the site, I could taste the bodies, I could smell them. I knew it was crazy; I was imagining it...but it was real."

#### **E. Bodies of Children, Adolescents**

"We were digging through the rubble, looking for pieces of the bomb, when I pulled out a child's hand. Everyone in my group froze. The first day that we were on the site, we had talked and laughed and joked. By the third day, no one talked, no one laughed. No one would take a break to eat; no one wanted to leave to go to bed. We became obsessed. We found pieces of the truck, but we found scalps and feet and pieces that used to be someone that was loved."

#### **F. Viewing a body in a particularly unusual way**

"I went into the makeshift morgue. There were pieces of people everywhere; pieces of bodies; I'd never seen anything like it. None of the bodies was in one piece. Then I saw a body that was whole; he almost looked alive. I had seen his picture. For some reason, that's the one that got me."

"We pulled out a victim. The body didn't have any damage, not even a scratch. But the head....the head was smashed like a pizza box. It looked like a cartoon; it was horrible. I keep seeing it."

#### **G. Observing Pain & Grief in Family Members of Victims**

"I went to so many funerals; I saw so much pain. It didn't make any sense. I began to feel numb inside. I was supposed to go to more funerals, but I just couldn't."

#### **H. Seeing Pain Frozen on the Face of a Body**

"When we pulled Rita's body out of the rubble, her face was twisted with horror and pain. I knew how she felt when she died. It kept running over and over in my mind."

#### **I. Putting Themselves in the Place of the Dead Comrade and/or Imagining the Pain of Their Own Family Attending Their Funeral**

"I helped to carry a guy from another station out; he'd run up the stairs to help when the building exploded. I didn't know him well, but he was my age and I knew he had a wife and kids, just like me. I started imagining that I had died; I saw my wife and mom crying. I saw my kids at my funeral. I knew what it would do to them. It really got me."

#### **J. Having a Personal Relationship with the Victim**

"I went into the Embassy and I saw the blood all over the wall. I wouldn't go in there until they had removed her body, but I knew it was her blood. I knew where she died; I knew her head had been smashed. She came to my house all

the time with family; her daughter is crying all the time. My daughter is asking if I am going to die. I feel like I'm falling apart."

**K. Personalizing the Victim. It is Easier to Deal with a Dead Body When Nothing Personal is Known About Their Life. Becoming Acquainted With Their Family, Their Personal Life, Finding Out They Had Young Kids or How Much Pain Their Family is in Because of the Death, Can Dramatically Increase the Chances That a Rescue Worker Will Become Traumatized.**

"I helped to carry the bodies of the babies out of the nursery. I didn't want to know their names or see their families. I avoided everything that would give me any information about them. Later, I thought I was doing fine. Then, one day, I was at the mall with my wife and some friends. We were looking in the window of a book store. My eyes focused on a newly published book on the bombing. The children I had carried out were there, their names were there. I started to cry uncontrollably."

"The kids would put little drawings on our cots; they would thank us for helping; they would say they loved us. In one way, it made it better; in another it made it worse. What I was doing became connected with the people who were in pain. In other locations I never put the bodies together with the loved ones; when I did that, it really got me."

"Every morning the family members would line up at the site and would hug us, as we went in to work. They'd say, 'Thank you for looking for my daughter'; or 'Bless you for looking for my mother'. Then we would find a body in really bad condition. The next day, one of the people would be gone. I knew the body we found the day before was their loved one. I knew how much they were going to hurt. I hated it."

**3. Finding Personal Items of a Victim; This Can Be More Traumatizing than Viewing the Dead Bodies:**

"I was searching the rubble when I found the billfold of one of the Agents who died. I opened it up; there were pictures of his family. It really got me. I knew how he had died; I knew it was horrible. I kept imagining what he must have thought when he died and how his family misses him."

"I can deal with the bodies, the body parts. I know they aren't in pain anymore. It's the personal things that get me. We found a teddy bear of one of the kids who died. Then one of the guys found a pair of pajamas with a fire truck on them; he said his son had the same pajamas. My kids are the same age of the kids who died. It's the personal items that get me the most."

**4. Believing One's Own Death or Critical Injury is Imminent and Certain:**

"I was standing on the pile when the whole thing started to collapse. I thought, 'This is it; I'm dead!' Somehow the engineers and their machines did something to prop it up. I close my

eyes at night and I see myself dying."

### 5. When Something Unexpected Happens:

"We had been pulling body parts up from the ocean; they were lying on the dock. No one wanted to look at them. All of a sudden, one of the parts began to move. I watched in horror; it couldn't be. Then a crab crawled out of the cavity. There were crabs and fish everywhere. The Red Cross served us lobster for dinner; I'm sure they wondered why none of us ate it."

### 6. If the Rescue Effort is in Another Country, Some Part of the Culture or Other Factors Can Be Traumatizing:

"The bodies in the Embassy Bombing were bad, but what really got me were the throw away children. They were two and three and four years old...wearing big boots. They were starving and sniffing glue because it was the only way they could reduce their pain. I spent every cent I had buying bread and peanut butter and feeding them. My daughter is three and I kept seeing her face on one of the children. How can anyone throw a child away? How can people in that country walk by them and ignore their pain?"

"We were digging up mass graves for evidence of war crimes. Everywhere we went, children followed us. They watched as we dug up their mothers and fathers. The army had gone through the cities, murdering everyone. I don't know how they murdered so many people in such a short time. Sometimes they missed a child, or some part of the family was out of town. The children were alone; no one to love them. We nicknamed one kid 'Velcro' because he was so dirty that when he hugged us, he would stick to us."

### 7. Spending Days on a Rescue Task Without Finding Anything Positive:

"The first few days, we hoped against hope we would find some victims alive. We did find two of them, and that made all of the hard work worth it. But, when the medical people said that there was no chance that anyone was alive, it was really hard. All we were finding then was bodies and pieces of bodies."

"I'm a medic, and I wanted to help save some of the victims, any victim. But the workers didn't find any one alive; just pieces of people."

### 8. Feeling Helpless:

"The role of Paramedics, Fire Fighters and Law Enforcement Officers is to help; spending days finding only the dead or moving rocks seems meaningless and does not provide a sense of helping in the same way as putting out a fire, saving a life or putting a criminal in jail so that h/she can't hurt anyone else. Once there is no more hope that anyone will be found alive, a Rescue Worker's sense of being traumatized increases. Even the trainers of the cadaver dogs have to alternate the finding of dead bodies with volunteers, who hide so the dogs can find them. When rescue dogs find only dead bodies, they too, become depressed".

"Someone is probably alive under all this rubble, but we'll never get to them. I keep imagining that people are keeping themselves alive by believing we will get to them in time, but we

can't."

### 9. Guilt: Rescue Workers Can Have Survivor Guilt or Guilt From Some Other Incident Occurring Prior to the Bombing:

"I was supposed to be in the building, but John took my place and ran up the stairs. I had gone back to the truck to get my glasses when the second plane hit; John never made it out. I should have died in there; not John. It's my fault he's dead and not me".

"I kept running in and out of the building, finding victims and getting them out as soon as I could. Some of them died before I could get them out. I should have run faster; if I had run faster, more would have lived."

"I was desperate to get home to my family. I hugged my wife and kids; I didn't want to let them go. I am so glad that I didn't die; I had so many friends and co-workers who did die. I feel guilty that I am so happy to be alive. I don't think I can continue to be a fire fighter; I want to quit, but I feel too guilty to tell anyone that because so many people died doing the job they loved."

### 10. Lack of Support From Management:

"The bomb went off and I flew into the air. I thought I was going to be really hurt, but the shrapnel had missed me and killed some citizens. I had an officer from another agency helping me. His people came in immediately, gave him support, and took him off-scene. My agency left me there for 48 hours...no sleep, no support, nothing."

"Fairfax County sent their Search and Rescue Team over. There were about 77 workers, with five counselors for the workers and two for the dogs. They had two counselors for their dogs and my agency didn't send any counselors for us until months later."

"My supervisor ordered me to go to the other office to help with the rescue efforts. My baby was just two months old. I had to stay there for nine months, away from my husband and baby. I was sick. When I returned, I found my husband was having an affair and he left me. He said he didn't want a wife whose job would send her away with no concern for our baby."

"Someone decided since we had just been hired and had no experience in evidence collection, they'd put us in the morgue. I'd never seen that many dead bodies before. They kept running stories on the news about the crash and showing the families standing vigil. I haven't slept through the night since. I can't have sex with my wife; I don't want to do anything. No one talked to us to tell us how to handle this; they just acted like it was a normal part of life."

"The big boss came to the scene. We had been finding bodies of children all day; we were all falling apart. He saw that we had broken something and he screamed: 'who in the hell is going to pay for this'. He never said anything supportive, like: 'I really appreciate what you're doing; I know it's hard. Let me know what I can do to help you.' He never put his arm on our shoulder or shook our hands. He had come to the scene so he could talk to a television reporter and be on the news; looking important...he didn't give a damn about us."

These incidents were compiled from research and from the stories of the hundreds of law enforcement officers treated by Dr. Davis.

Citations for research available from Dr. Davis or are listed in her book, *Multi-Sensory Trauma Processing, a Manual for Understanding and Treating PTSD and Job-Related Trauma*.

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