A Terrorist Hijacking: Victims’ Experiences Initially and 9 Years Later

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Three victims of a terrorist attack were interviewed in order to determine the coping mechanisms they utilized during the attack, the psychopathology present after the attack and the ways they dealt with their psychopathology. Fantasy, the belief in one’s ability to positively influence his environment, altruistic actions, and dissociation reportedly helped those interviewed to cope during the incident. Depressive and post-traumatic stress phenomena comprised the major psychopathology present in those interviewed. Altruistic actions, symbolic repetition and mastery of the traumatic situation, self-esteem enhancing activities, avoidance of reminders of the incident and involvement in certain types of relationships reportedly helped these victims to deal with the sequelae of the attack.

KEY WORDS: terrorist attack; victims; coping; psychopathology.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism continues to plague the lives of growing numbers of people. Understanding of the ways in which individuals cope during terrorist incidents, the psychologic sequelae of such events and the measures used in dealing with these sequelae is fundamental to the treatment of these victims. To further the understanding of these three aspects of the terrorist experience, three former passengers of a bus that was violently hijacked by terrorists,

1Supported in part by the Therman Fund of Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia.
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which thus far has been the subject of minimal psychiatric investigation, were intensively studied.

Various studies have detailed the ways in which people cope with terrorist attacks. Soskis and Ayalon, in their study of a major terrorist incident in Israel, found that religious thinking and altruistic actions helped several individuals cope with the attack (Soskis and Ayalon, 1985). Ochberg found that actions taken by passengers of a Dutch train attacked by South Moluccan terrorists which buoyed self-esteem helped to diminish the stress of captivity (Ochberg, 1978). Ayalon found that flight into soothing fantasies was employed as a coping device by survivors of various terrorist events (Germain et al., 1987). Jacobsen, who was a hostage upon an airplane skyjacked by terrorists, suggests that group unity, when maintained, may help people cope with such trials (Jacobsen, 1973).

The pathologic sequelae of trauma most commonly result in the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), adjustment disorder, or brief reactive psychosis (Horowitz, 1986). These sequelae may endure for great periods of time. Children of Chowchilla, California, who were kidnapped, continued to experience significant post-traumatic symptoms four years later (Terr, 1983) and Nazi concentration camp survivors (Krystal, 1968) as well as prisoners of war from World War II still suffer from post-traumatic effects (Tennant et al., 1986; Kluznik et al., 1986; Goldstein et al., 1987). Relatively little work has been published concerning the duration of sequelae subsequent to terrorist attack. Six years later, the survivors studied by Soskis continued to evince “significant negative feelings and thoughts related to the hostage experience” (Soskis and Ayalon, 1985).

THE TERRORIST INCIDENT

On March 11, 1978, members of Al Fatah, a Palestinian terrorist group, hijacked two unarmed civilian buses carrying bus company employees and their families returning from a picnic. During the following 2½ hr, after herding together the passengers on a single bus, presumably to gain tighter control, the terrorists wounded, killed, and terrified the bus's occupants. The incident concluded with the storming of the bus by members of the Israeli armed forces. Thirty-three people were killed and 80 wounded as a result of the terrorist attack.

The three survivors interviewed were selected because of their willingness to be interviewed and ability to speak English. They were each fully informed of the nature and limitations upon confidentiality of the project. Lengthy, semistructured interviews were performed utilizing a modified version of an interview instrument previously employed by the author in the