

COMMENTARY

Terrorism and mental health

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Abstract

Modern societies today are facing different problems among which terrorism has emerged as a difficult issue. The impact of it on mental health is tremendous. The violence of terrorism affects all individuals of all age groups. There exist some differences between war and terrorism. The victims are at high risk of developing variety of mental health related problems. Early emotional support from family and friends, and rehabilitation from different concerned government and nongovernment agencies expedite the process of recovery. Lots of socio-economic-political problems also emerge out of terrorism. All intellectuals of society including psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, behavioural scientists, need to think on this issue.

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Terrorism today has evolved as a global menace. The people of the world were all shaken by this menace especially after September 11 twin tower attack by terrorists in New York. Though the phenomenon of terrorism has been on this planet since long time, that particular event has awakened the whole mankind against terrorism. No part of the world today is left unaffected by this disturbance. Its impact is felt at every doorstep of society nowadays. Modern societies today are facing different problems among which terrorism has emerged as a difficult issue, which disrupts the society from different angles. The mental health of our people also is facing a great threat due to terrorism. Detailed scientific studies are required to explore and understand the problems related to mental health arising due to terrorism. Terrorism disrupts the process of steady social progress, and increases the nature and extent of human suffering. It causes not only the physical damage, economic disruption, social problems, but also causes psychological damage on the individuals of the society.

Terrorism is defined as illegal or threatened use of force or violence, an intent to coerce societies or governments by inducing fear in their populations, typically with ideological and political motives and justifications. The impact of it on mental health is tremendous. The psychological and sociological twins of causes for terrorism have been quite interesting, and subject of intense study in recent times. Psychologically, terrorism can be an expression of: i) frustration-aggression, ii) negative identity, iii) narcissistic rage, iv) as result of mental illness, v) terrorist as a suicidal fanatic. Thus the terrorist activity is always associated with violence and torture either physical or psychological or both, and physical-psychological

trauma. Whatever may be the psychological construct of the terrorists, the psychological impact on victims is the much more serious subject of discussion and thought because the terrorists violate the basic human rights of the victims and breaks their psychosocial balance.

Violence in terrorism is usually a collective violence, though sometimes may be to one individual as an exemplary punishment for group effect. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of violence, it is the use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maladaptation, or deprivation. The violence of terrorism affects all individuals of all age groups; however, women and children are more vulnerable to the psychological implications.

In past, the psychological impact of war had been described as – “irritable heart” (among American civil war veterans), effort syndrome (World War I veterans), combat stress reaction (World War II veterans), and posttraumatic stress disorder (Vietnam War veterans). The symptoms described in these conditions were mostly physical—fatigues, breathing difficulty, muscle and joint pain, increased heart rate etc. But there exist some differences between war and terrorism. In war, the particular society unites to fight against a common known enemy in a well demarcated area for short time, while in terrorism the threat is unseen and unspecific, and long lasting. Terrorist activities are organised violence against people. For all these reasons, the psychological impact is much more on the victims than those affected in the war or any other victims of natural disaster like earthquake, food, cyclone etc.

These victims are at high risk of developing variety of mental health related problems including depression, anxiety disorder, dissociative disorder, acute stress reaction, posttraumatic stress disorder, paranoid disorder, suicidal behavior, timidity, aggressive behaviour, poor social performance, sexual abuse etc. These impacts are influenced by many factors viz. magnitude of trauma, socioeconomic status, employment status, age, sex, coping capabilities, alienation, amount of support etc.

Following a terrorist attack, an intense emotional and physical reaction is observed in most of the population affected. This is a natural reaction to such a sudden, unexpected, devastating and disastrous situation of the victims. However the reaction is highly individualistic, depending on what the event means to the individual and amount of trauma on him. Greater the severity of trauma experience, greater is the impact on the individual, especially of long lasting psychological effect. Early emotional support from family and friends, and rehabilitation from different concerned government and nongovernment agencies expedite the process of recovery.

Some other psychological reactions may be seen constantly in terrorism affected population like sense of insecurity, fear of getting a extortion note, fear of being kidnapped, threatened, tortured, fear of harassment by security personnel, fear of forced recruitment by militants, feeling of hopelessness, helplessness and a bleak future, fear of expression, loss of trust on governance, fear of sexual harassment etc. Lots of socio-economic-political problems also emerge out of terrorism including economic loss and social problems like prostitution and child labour, unemployment, migration which leads to problem of societal alienation.

So terrorism is not only a major problem for the politician to tackle, but time has come that all intellectuals of society including psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, behavioural scientists, need to think on this issue and find a solution to this problem. To conclude, terrorism related violence leads to both physical and psychological damage, which is very much disabling and devastating. To contain this problem all citizens of the society need to unite to fight against this menace and find out a permanent solution to it.

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