

It's okay to keep those feelings inside, new study suggests

June 1 2008

Contrary to popular notions about what is normal or healthy, new research has found that it is okay not to express one's thoughts and feelings after experiencing a collective trauma, such as a school shooting or terrorist attack.

In fact, people who choose not to express their feelings after such an event may be better off than those who do talk about their feelings, according to University at Buffalo psychologist Mark Seery, Ph.D., lead author of a study to appear in the June issue of *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

The study investigated the mental and physical effects of collective traumas on people who are exposed to a tragedy but who do not experience a direct loss of a friend or family member. It focused on people's responses to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, but the results may generalize to include responses to other collective traumas.

The findings have important implications for expectations of how people should respond in the face of a collective trauma affecting a whole community or even an entire nation, says Seery, an assistant professor of psychology..

Seery says the results should not be interpreted to mean that expressing one's thoughts and feelings is harmful or that if someone wants to express their emotions they should not do so. "It's important to remember that not everyone copes with events in the same way, and in

the immediate aftermath of a collective trauma, it is perfectly healthy to not want to express one's thoughts and feelings," he says.

Seery points out that immediately after last year's tragic shootings at Virginia Tech University there were many "talking head" psychiatrists in the media describing how important it is to get all the students expressing their feelings.

"This perfectly exemplifies the assumption in popular culture, and even in clinical practice, that people need to talk in order to overcome a collective trauma," Seery says.

"Instead, we should be telling people there is likely nothing wrong if they do not want to express their thoughts and feelings after experiencing a collective trauma. In fact, they can cope quite successfully and, according to our results, are likely to be better off than someone who does want to express his or her feelings."

Using a large national sample, Seery and co-researchers tested people's responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, beginning immediately after the event and continuing for the following two years. In an online survey, respondents were given the chance to express their thoughts and feelings on the day of 9/11 and a few days afterward.

The researchers then compared people who chose to express their thoughts and feelings versus those who chose not to express.

If the assumption about the necessity of expression is correct -- that failing to express one's feelings indicates some harmful repression or other pathology -- then people who chose not to express should have been more likely to experience negative mental and physical health symptoms over time, the researchers point out.

"However, we found exactly the opposite: people who chose not to express were better off than people who did choose to express," Seery says.

Moreover, when the researchers looked only at people who chose to express their thoughts and feelings, and tested the length of their responses, they found a similar pattern. People who expressed more were worse off than people who expressed less.

"We assessed various alternative explanations in secondary analyses, but nothing else accounts for this effect," Seery says.

Source: University at Buffalo

Citation: It's okay to keep those feelings inside, new study suggests (2008, June 1) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-06-it-okay-to-keep-those.html>

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