

# New study links early explanations of 9/11 to long-term adjustment

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According to new research led by John Updegraff, a Kent State University professor, individuals who are able to quickly make sense of collective traumas such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks cope better in the long run.

The study, which appears in the September issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, suggests that finding meaning in the immediate aftermath of the attacks was an important coping response that helped many Americans adjust by reducing their fears of future terrorism.

Dr. Updegraff, an assistant professor of psychology, used a large national sample to examine Americans' responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, beginning immediately after the event and continuing for the following two years. Two months following the attacks, respondents were asked about whether they were able to make sense of the attacks.

"Most Americans were trying to find a way to explain why the attacks occurred, but less than half were successful in doing so", says Updegraff. Explanations ranged from blaming the events on either the terrorists or on American foreign policy, focusing on positive consequences of the attacks such as patriotism or greater appreciation of social ties, or interpreting the events in a historical or religious context.

"Regardless of how people explained the events, those who came to some personal understanding of why the attacks occurred fared better

over time than those who were unable to", Updegraff says. "They were less plagued by fears of future terrorism and less distressed by the attacks over the following two years."

These findings support the idea that being able to make sense of traumatic events helps people adjust. However, most previous studies have focused on direct personal trauma such as bereavement. This is the first study to find that meaning facilitates adjustment for individuals indirectly exposed to large-scale collective traumas such as terrorist attacks, school shootings, or natural disasters.

Source: Kent State University

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