

There is No 'Right' Way to Cope with Tragedy, Researcher says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- After a collective trauma, such as Thursday's crash of Continental Flight 3407, an entire community (or even the nation) can be exposed to the tragedy through media coverage and second-hand accounts, according to Mark Seery, Ph.D., University at Buffalo assistant professor of psychology.

"Individuals potentially suffer negative effects on their mental and physical health, even if they have not 'directly' experienced the loss of someone they know or have not witnessed the event or its aftermath in person," Seery says.

In this type of situation, it is common for people to think that everyone exposed to the tragedy will need to talk about it, and if they do not, they are suppressing their "true" thoughts and feelings, which will only rebound later and cause them problems.

This is not always the case, Seery explains.

"Expressing one's thoughts and feelings to a supportive listener can certainly be a good thing, whether it is to family and friends or to a professional therapist or counselor. However, this does not mean that it is bad or unhealthy to not want to express thoughts and feelings when given the opportunity."

Seery's perspective results from his research of people's responses following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He and colleagues studied a

national sample of people, most of whom did not witness the events in person or lose a loved one. They did, however, experience the events through media coverage.

"We found that people who chose not to express at all or who expressed only a small amount in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy were better off over the following two years than people who expressed more. Specifically, they reported lower levels of mental and physical health symptoms."

From this research Seery concludes there is no single correct or healthy way to deal with a tragedy such as the crash of Flight 3407, which claimed 50 lives.

"People are generally resilient and have a good sense of what coping strategies will work for them," Seery says. "If they need to talk, they will talk, and friends and family can help by listening supportively. At the same time, they should not force the issue or make anyone feel like something is wrong with them if they do not want to talk about it."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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