

50 years later, the Kennedy assassination still haunts a generation

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President John F. Kennedy
Photo: The White House

As children, Baby Boomers absorbed the violence, shock and sense of vulnerability -- and can't forget.

(HealthDay)—Alan Hilfer remembers precisely where he was when he heard the news 50 years ago today.

Hilfer was 15, and his high school German-language teacher was sobbing in the hallway. He and his friends asked the teacher what was wrong, and she said, "The president's been shot and I think he's dead."

Alarmed and confused, the boy had no idea what that meant for the country or for his future, remembers Hilfer, now director of psychology at Maimonides Medical Center in New York City.

Most Baby Boomers tell a similar story with the same clarity half a century later, a collective memory that psychologists see as the hallmark of a generation transformed forever in one stunning minute.

All across the country on Nov. 22, 1963, America's children were in school when the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas was announced. For many of them, the first sign of something wrong was seeing their teachers cry. And when they were sent home early, there was respected CBS newscaster Walter Cronkite struggling to keep his composure in front of the TV cameras.

"The authorities being shocked is pretty scary for kids," said Ronald Eyerman, a sociology professor at Yale University and the author of a book on the cultural sociology of political assassinations.

"It scared us," agreed Hilfer. "It made us feel that all of our goals and dreams, which Kennedy amplified, could be destroyed in a heartbeat. It made us all aware of the vulnerability of life."

The images—from the sniper shots to the very public shooting of assassin Lee Harvey Oswald to JFK's funeral cortege and even his small son's final salute—made an indelible impression on an entire generation that remained glued to the TV as the events unfolded.

Most Baby Boomers who were children when the charismatic 43-year-old president was shot say the assassination affected their lives in at least some way. Others say it had a profound impact.

For some, Kennedy's killing created a sense of fear and vulnerability in their lives, much like 9/11 did for another generation of children four decades later, Hilfer said. Others say the assassination inspired them to join the Peace Corps. Or go into public service, medicine, nursing, social work, law or teaching.

But all shared one common reaction: their sense of innocence about the world had been shattered, Hilfer added.

Unlike random acts of violence, people instinctively know that an assassination is an act against an entire community or nation, Eyerman said. "It's a crime against everyone," he added.

Historians are quick to point out that the period of time before Kennedy's assassination wasn't as peaceful and idyllic as some may nostalgically recall. Baby Boomers typically remember something about the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the Cold War. And they haven't forgotten "drop drills" and air-raid siren tests done to prepare the nation in case of a nuclear attack from what was then the Soviet Union.

But somehow those events didn't feel so personal, Hilfer said.

Watching a young president in the prime of life being cut down in the back of an open convertible really hit home, Hilfer said.

Ironically, an assassination can create a "community of feeling," a sense of unity that comes from the shared horror and sadness that follows, Eyerman said.

But after that single moment in Dallas, a cascade of events soon followed that roiled America: more assassinations, divisions over the Vietnam war, urban riots, and social strife—events that pitted young against old, right against left.

"It's very similar to what happened in 9/11," said Sarah Feuerbacher, clinic director at the Center for Family Counseling at Southern Methodist University, in Plano, Texas. "In the days afterwards, everyone came together.

"But afterwards, the fallout occurs," she added, dissolving the sense of common ground and shared experience.

Feuerbacher said most Baby Boomers don't realize that they probably suffered some level of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after witnessing JFK slumping in the convertible and Jackie Kennedy scrambling over the trunk.

Viewing even just one traumatic event like the assassination can produce all the symptoms of PTSD, Feuerbacher said.

"The fact that he was not only killed, but it was caught on live camera, individualized the trauma so that it was like watching a family member die, an entirely new playing field for the world," she noted. "Boomers all had a bit of PTSD. If you had not experienced the assassination, your life would have been different. You wouldn't have felt that vulnerability at such a young age."

Feuerbacher warned that just seeing a 50th anniversary special or news report about the assassination can be harmful to the elementary-school children of today. Fifty-year-old TV footage can seem violent, and young children may not realize that what they're watching happened half a century ago.

"Watching it on television is different from going to a museum. To actually see it occurring on television is a very real experience for a young child," she said.

For Baby Boomers with teenage children or grandchildren, Feuerbacher suggested telling the teens: "I remember right where I was when we heard Kennedy had been shot."

Share the experience firsthand, she added: "It's a teachable moment to

help make real something they're only reading about in a textbook."

More information: To learn more about [coping with a traumatic event](#), visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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