

How social ties make us resilient to trauma

May 24 2017, by Daniel P. Aldrich

The May 22 [suicide bombing at a concert in Manchester, England](#) has claimed at least 22 lives. Once again we find ourselves mourning the loss of innocents and wondering how our societies can find normalcy in a world of suicide attacks, car rammings and mass shootings. Many pundits have already called for the United Kingdom and other societies to [increase their levels of security](#), add more police officers and install security personnel, bag checks and metal detectors in public places.

Hardening our society is one way to make us more resilient to hazards – that is, to allow us to bounce back from adversity more quickly. But we cannot armor our societies against all threats.

Millions of people in cities like Boston, Mumbai, Ghana, Tel Aviv and Tokyo use public transportation systems, attend concerts, go to parks, visit malls and walk in public daily. All of these locations are vulnerable to those who would do us harm, and we cannot police them all. Further, protecting against one type of physical threat, such as an active shooter, does little to shield society against other types of dangers, such as vehicular attacks.

My [research](#) on the role of social networks during and after crises provides an alternative approach. Rather than focusing on hardening our physical infrastructure, our societies become more [resilient](#) when we deepen and broaden our social infrastructure. Social ties provide emotional support, information and collective action at critical times.

We're here for you

During and after traumatic events, we need other people. Social ties measurably [lessen the effects of trauma](#) and allow us to grieve, work through our adversity, and create and offer support.

For example, our ongoing research on evacuees from the Fukushima nuclear power meltdowns has shown that factors such as health and wealth did little to ease survivors' anxiety over radiation exposure and worries about their livelihoods. Instead, having neighbors and friends who moved along with evacuees as they fled from their homes was the most powerful predictor of reducing [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and depression among residents.

Social ties – especially those mediated through social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and [NextDoor](#) – provide information and platforms to connect acts of kindness and solidarity to people in need. [Facebook's Safety Check feature](#), for instance, allows users to check in and announce they are safe following a natural disaster or terror attack.

In Manchester, residents offered rides, food, water and shelter to all, using social media tags like #roomforManchester. Taxi drivers took people home from the concert arena without charge. Similarly, after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016, locals offered shelter to stranded survivors with the hashtag #PorteOuverte (open door).

Anybody stuck in Manchester tonight I have a spare room and I just made some really nice soup. [#roomformanchester](#) please rt
xxx

— Robyn Alexander (@robynrobynrobyn) [May 23, 2017](#)

During the agonizing period when parents and spouses were waiting to hear news of loved ones at the concert, the social media tag

#missinginManchester helped them seek information. But not all shows of support involved [social media](#). Blood banks around Manchester received so many donations that they started [turning people away](#) less than 24 hours after the bombing.

These emergent collective actions were not coordinated by governmental authorities, but instead evolved from feelings of connection and decency. Sometimes they can even inject some humor into grim events. During a four-day lockdown in Brussels in November 2015 while police searched for one of the Paris attackers, residents started tweeting pictures of cats in battle gear.

BREAKING NEWS : Belgium Police using the new 200mph Hovercat during terrorist operations [#BrusselsLockdown](#)
pic.twitter.com/MnIpiOZT3x

— Jayce Light (@jaycelight) [November 22, 2015](#)

Strength in numbers

Scholars studying societies that regularly face terror attacks from rockets, shootings and knifings have similarly argued for the importance of [social ties](#) in building resilience. One study of [Israel](#) illuminated how community ties may be the most powerful way to help people deal with the reality of life as targets.

Manchester itself has faced bombings before. It was attacked multiple times during [World War II](#), and in 1996 an Irish Republican Army bomb [destroyed the downtown shopping district](#), injuring more than 200 people. Thanks to strong connections and community resilience, the city bounced back from past tragedies. As we struggle to find words to express our shock and sympathy for those who were harmed, we should not forget the healing power of [building connections](#) to each other.

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