

MOODS

Serving People with Unipolar and Bipolar Illness, Their Families and Friends, since 1981

September 2021

9/11: A Personal Journey

Reprinted from the December 2001 MOODS.

By Anonymous Volunteer

I am a long-standing MDSG member and facilitator. Recently I drew upon skills I learned over the years in support groups to deal with two of the most horrific and life-shattering events I can imagine.

On September 11, I walked down 30 flights of stairs in Tower One of the World Trade Center. I was one of the very lucky ones. When the “earthquake” hit—or what I believed to be an earthquake at the time—my co-workers and I hesitated very briefly, just long enough to locate the stairs.

I walked down the steps hand-in-hand with a co-worker. At one point, we had to move to the left side of the staircase to allow the firemen to come up the steps. The atmosphere was pretty calm, considering. The only shouting I heard came later when smoke on the higher floors got too thick.

As I left the building, I did see two gaping holes in those commanding towers, but I just saw some glass on the ground, no injured people or debris. We were directed to the World Financial Center, and when I got near the Hudson River, I grabbed the hand of a colleague and walked north along the river.

The route was familiar to me, because it was the one I had taken last year during the Minds-in-Motion Walk-a-Thon for depression. But this was different; this time I was walking to a safe place, home on the Upper East Side. It took me four hours.

What followed were days of endless talking. I already knew the power of talking to those who had been through what I had; MDSG taught me that. After September 11, we, the survivors, endlessly told and retold our stories, but then feelings began to surface, too.

Many spoke of nightmares or fears—of riding over a bridge or even coming back into Manhattan. It was like being in a MDSG group and hearing someone talk about taking a shower at 4 p.m. and seeing everyone in the room nod, acknowledging that they, too, knew it can take a depressed person all day to get dressed.

From my years with MDSG, I knew I needed to reach out and talk to survivors of the tragedy who, unlike me, were not familiar with talking about their feelings, those who preferred to isolate themselves.

How many times as a facilitator, had I asked the silent ones in the support group, “Do you want to say anything?” Very often they said they just wanted to listen. This was true of many of my co-workers, too. Many seemed to be afraid to talk. And, while I understood this, I went ahead and urged survivors who lived near each other to get together and talk.

And, yes, I spoke to my horrified doctor and two therapists; they agreed that talking things over is beneficial, but they wanted to see me. I didn't want or need to talk to them. I needed those who'd been there and had escaped alive.

I had my breakdown four days later at 1:30 a.m. when I had a nightmare. I was lucky to have someone from our corporate counseling program to speak to over the phone at that hour. The very next day, however, my world again collapsed.

My father was taken to the emergency room. A month earlier, the family had learned his condition was serious, but we didn't think it was life threatening. After five days in the hospital, he passed away. He was hospitalized during Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which I celebrated in a strange fashion. I spent the morning in synagogue and then went over to the hospital to let my father know that I had put in a good word for him.

I rode in a car on the holidays and spent money—two things I hadn't done in 10 years, and only then because I was depressed. Through all this, I continued talking to co-workers, friends and family. I knew from MDSG that talk was healing.

After my father died, I spoke to my therapists and psychiatrist who again expressed disbelief. I stressed that the only way for me to get through this was to talk and let the grief overcome me when it would.

As I write this, it has been 17 days since the unspeakable event at the World Trade Center, and I look forward to hugging my co-workers—many of whom I have not seen since September 11. I have at times hugged MDSG members both to lend and to get support. I have cried along with them and offered tissues.

At a support group, a member said she had been told by her mother “whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” She said it seemed like just another throwaway cliché—like “just buck up” or “pick yourself up by your boot straps.” It seemed like a comment from someone who just didn't get it.

I now see this comment in a new light. If this is true, I

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More Thoughts About September 11th

Reprinted from the December 2001 MOODS.

By Li Faustino, PhD

By now, all of us have experienced shock on some level from the events of September 11. Many of us witnessed the attack from the street or on television; some escaped from the scene; most of us know someone firsthand (or by a degree of separation) who worked at the World Trade Center.

Surely, we have noticed that since the tragedy, we have experienced troubling symptoms of trauma—loss of concentration, insomnia, loss of appetite, crying, a feeling that our work is insignificant, and a sudden interest in Middle Eastern affairs among other things. People have moved forward in many ways, volunteering in the relief effort, running to city hall and getting married, getting

back to flying, going out with friends and shopping in New York City. Who ever you are, in the wake of the biggest terrorist attack on America, the process of grieving and growth are just beginning.

I think many of the coping skills needed to go on with our lives are similar to skills possessed by those who suffer from mood disorders. Setting up a support network, questioning the control we have over our lives and grappling with the idea of fate are concepts people with mood disorders have long dealt with.

Could it be that those already in therapy, taking medication, and dealing with an illness like depression or manic depression are better equipped to process this disaster? Who knows.

I do know that since September 11th, I have seen people, who I thought might not have much resiliency, bounce back quickly. I have seen people who felt almost helpless find meaningful work in volunteering, donating blood, cooking for

firefighters, giving applause on the West Side Highway to those involved in the recovery and just plain going on with their lives because they have a life and suddenly that was more precious than before.

I wish you all strength as you persevere in this world so dramatically changed. Never have I felt so close to people I know and the strangers I see on the streets. I know that each of these people has lost someone in the World Trade Center, lost a workplace, a home, a piece of their heart as the buildings collapsed, lost a familiar skyline, lost sleep, lost patience, lost an innocence of some kind.

I am confident we have not lost joy in our lives because we, especially those who have had mood disorders, have been striving for joy our whole lives.

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say, then I must be Hercules. While I don't believe my Herculean powers will last forever, I am very thankful to have had them to help me.

I know the effects of these two incidents on my life are far from over. I still hear about people I knew who are missing. The tears return when I hear another sad story. As for grieving for my father, this is not over either; the grieving process for him and the victims of the trade center has become intertwined. Sometimes I cry for everybody all at once.

Through these experiences I realize again how important a good support system is. I am extremely lucky to have so many caring and loving co-workers and friends. In addition, my doctor and therapists stood by in case I needed them.

Fortunately, I even had the support over the phone of a kind, corporate counselor with a very soothing voice, known only as Melinda, to whom

I spoke at all hours of the night. Above all else, I have a loving husband and family who allowed me to talk until I was blue in the face and have stood by me always. For this I am truly grateful.

At the many MDSG support groups we talk about how important a good support system is, but I know many people are not nearly as lucky as I am. Some complain about being lonely and isolated. A good place to begin to build a support system is at MDSG where you have the chance to talk to people who have experienced the same kind of suffering.

At MDSG, I have learned what compassion is all about. And I thank everyone there for teaching me how to better cope with such terrible life events.

I would like to dedicate this article to my father, because from him, I learned to keep on talking, and talking. Little did I know that someday a rush of words would help me heal a broken heart.

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