



## Getting Beyond Terrorism: Life in a War Zone and its Impact on Our Family

By Dr. Batya L. Ludman, Psy.D. FT.

“2,990 terror attacks during 2005 ‘truce’ (The *JerusalemPost*, p 3, January 2, 2006).”

The above headline startled me as we began the calendar year 2006, and helped wake me up from my somewhat dream-like state. How does one comprehend that there were just under 3,000 attacks launched against Israeli targets after a self-declared Palestinian truce in January 2005? In truth, according to the article, we Israelis are doing well because there was a 60 percent reduction in fatalities and 30 percent reduction in Israeli casualties during attacks in 2005. Sounds almost like cause for celebration, but is it?

My husband and I had dropped off at a distant bus stop our 19-year-old son for a much-awaited day of leisure with his army unit. Army conscription in Israel is mandatory. For the next three years, his job is to protect and defend his country. When he finishes, my next son enters the army. He enters the service at age 18, a mere child, and we will breathe a tremendous sigh of relief when he finishes his service and is supposedly out of danger. But as we all know here, no one is ever out of danger. Our basic right to exist is threatened daily. Here, a trip to the mall, lunch in an outdoor café and a bus ride to school are all done with the awareness that something could happen. Statistically, it is extremely rare but one of the goals of terrorism is to terrorize and instill fear. Numbers seem inconsequential and no one here takes anything for granted. Sadly, adults are no longer naïve, and our children have learned that assumptions most children make about safety are not valid in their world. On this particular day when we returned home, traffic was unusually heavy. We walked into the house and mindlessly did our usual thing. For Israelis, the usual is to check the news. We subtly do this all day long with little awareness that the rest of the world may hear news once a day and sometimes is happy with reading yesterday’s news. Since the start of the Intifada in September 2001, it’s easy to obtain up to the minute news. For as long as I can remember, if you are riding a bus and the news comes on, the driver turns up the volume so the entire bus, now eerily silent, can hear what is going on. As such, we have always heard about a terrorist attack within minutes after its occurrence. This is especially significant in that after a bombing, the phone lines often get overloaded right away. Each of our children carries a cell phone. We don’t consider this a luxury item.

That morning we were greeted with the news that there had just been a bombing outside the shopping mall in Netanya, a town 20 minutes from where we live. We immediately called our friends and loved ones, both to ensure that they were OK and to let them know that we were OK. This is what we have done in the short six years we have lived here. As it happened, we had been seconds from the site of this bombing when we dropped off our son, just an hour before. Sadly, most of us here have had these “near misses” and have been to places that ultimately become terrorist targets.

Knowing that you were just there sets off a “what if” reaction as most of us personalize these attacks. We *all* feel part of each attack as if we had the misfortune to be there (direct exposure), knew someone who was there (indirect exposure) or were fortunate enough to have escaped this time. On this day, five people were killed and more than 50 were wounded. Wounded is a misnomer as in our small country; each and every one of us is impacted by every bombing. If not directly injured or killed, we are friends, family, responders or part of the extended community. We all have been wounded in some way. Physically we may look fine, but we bear the scars of battle. How does this impact on our children?

Terrorism is alive and well in 2006 and if it has not yet arrived in your neighborhood, I can promise you that it is simply a matter of time. My children know this fact quite well as does every Israeli (Ludman, 2006). Sadly, we have learned from experience. As I was preparing a lecture on death and dying, a friend reminded me that this talk will be very different when given in Israel because after all, every Israeli child knows death intimately. Every single member of our society, be they a child or adult, seems to know someone or know of someone who was killed as a result of terrorism. Sadly this includes my three children, the youngest of whom is only 11 years old. Last week she casually commented that she reported a suspicious object while on crossing guard duty. Fortunately it was nothing but our children are the eyes and ears within the community and are very aware that things can and do happen. They know that terrorism is not fought on a battlefield but rather involves everyday citizens doing everyday activities.

How do our children cope with terrorism? In short, they do extremely well, but as with everything, it is not without a cost. My children are incredibly naïve with respect to many things—drugs, sex and other age appropriate issues. However, they sadly recognize that this is not always a kind and caring world, and have learned that people would actually celebrate their demise and do so by handing out candies after a bombing. Teaching love in an atmosphere of hate presents many challenges (Ludman, 2004a; Ludman, 2004b). They have learned that our safety, while extremely important, can never be fully guaranteed. They have had friends who were injured or even killed by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They have come to learn that death does not simply impact on the person or family but rather on the entire community. When someone is injured or a life prematurely ends, people suffer these losses forever. It takes its toll on everyone. Families may become devastated, impoverished and dysfunctional. Sadly, there have been so many wounded

and killed, we no longer remember each victim by name as we once did. At the height of the Intifada, some children who came to see me professionally reported sleep difficulties, trouble focusing, increased anxiety and concerns about personal safety. These were short-lived and seemed directly related to their perceived level of threat, media coverage and parental coping responses. As parents seemed to become more comfortable in dealing with their “abnormal circumstances” children seemed for the most part, to do fine. Their maintaining a sense of awareness and hypervigilance to their environment seemed to have an adaptive and calming function. They could scan their environment, see that all was OK and for the most part move on. Avoidance was seen as adaptive and not pathological.

Schools and communities have attempted to normalize the child’s environment by making sure they discuss a bombing afterwards, hold emergency drills and that children know how to deal with anything suspicious. Children for the most part appear confident, competent and unafraid. They are doing surprisingly well with much less post-traumatic stress disorder than one might predict. As a community, we grieve, mark the anniversaries of deaths, memorialize loved ones through various projects, and move on. We have no choice. We pick and choose where we go and how, but we continue to get out and enjoy life. We do not give in to the psychology of terror (Ludman, 2004b). While I suspect that all of us engage in slightly more risk-taking behavior as we live very much for the present, never knowing what tomorrow may bring, this is not necessarily bad! Nonetheless, terrorism must be seen as psychological warfare. It is sudden, unexpected, violent and traumatic. Its impact is far-reaching and can result in increased fear, stress and anxiety, poor decision making, difficulty planning, economic hardship and decreased self-esteem, among other problems. Add to it the threats of disrupted water, communication, power and transportation services, biological warfare and a mass casualty event and it is impressive that as a community we are not paralyzed. While certainly more vulnerable, and continuously threatened by the possibility of an all out war, we live our lives fully between attacks. This is resilience at its best. Not always having a sense of prolonged and repeated exposure to terrorism is a real blessing and we make the most of it.

The show and life must go on and while we appreciate what we have for the moment, we know that in an instant, things can change. We have tremendous faith. Life is seen as fragile, precarious, precious and very meaningful. We feel fortunate to be able to be here as every step we take echoes with thousands of years of history. We make the most of it, take nothing for granted and appreciate the smallest things in life. Life is passionately embraced. We are too busy to sleep, children are out having fun, and cafes are full at 11 at night. We refuse to let terrorism paralyze us.

The past five years have been exceedingly difficult for us all. While things are not quiet (and just in writing this article there have been two more major suicide bombings), there is a perceived sense of increased calm. Is the war over? We pretend that for the moment it is at least better, but we’re all a bit superstitious and afraid to hope that we have seen the end of bombings. Perception is important and while it may not match the facts, few people will state out loud that things seem safer. We seem to be returning to a new sense

of normalcy. We have incredible strength and coping skills. We recover after each trauma, yet each time are a bit more vulnerable.

We want to believe that all is fine. The risks and stressors that we live with daily are for the most part outside our control and most of us have accepted that. Whether due to a belief that someone is watching over us, or a belief that when our number is up, it's up, due to personality, support from others here, or how one finds meaning in life, we all find our own ways of making peace while living in a terrorist haven. It is impossible after all that I've written to convince you that we feel completely safe with a late night walk in the park or having our children meeting their friends to socialize on a weekend. I feel safer going into a mall here where I and my car have been checked at least three times before entry. This is a great country for children and adults alike. We have accepted that we can't predict or plan but who really can?

We effectively deal with trauma by focusing on resilience and strength. People here have tremendous faith and social support networks are very strong. Perhaps it is for these reasons that people require little therapeutic intervention. For those that do, cognitive behavioral therapy interventions for the most part are highly effective. Often my role as both parent and clinical psychologist is to do little more than validate and support our appropriate reactions to events. While never normalizing events because they are indeed so abnormal, people need to know that their response is indeed normal and they are doing OK. After a recent bombing, an adolescent said, "No one was killed and only 30 were injured." Sadly, while this is indeed resilience at its best, here and throughout the entire world, we are injured when we no longer notice each and every life that will be forever changed. Expecting the unexpected has become a routine aspect of how we live our lives and in a crazy way, we have come to accept it.

#### **A Later Post Script (Dated July 10, 2006)**

As I write this I have just finished two very long days of a full week course in medicine and terrorism. The course has 12 participants from all over the world (myself included) and is excellent yet incredibly intense. Medical, army, and government personnel as well as psychologists are discussing everything from shrapnel wounds to debriefing. We have seen the inside workings of a trauma unit, and we watched videos of bus, hotel and restaurant bombings. Coupled with the very difficult two weeks we have just had as our country breathlessly awaits word on whether our kidnapped soldier is OK, and having lost several soldiers to acts of terrorism at the same time, the full impact of terrorism becomes all the more real to all of us, once again. Despite this, we carry on our "normal" existence and find for ourselves a world that for the most part we consider safe. I went for a long walk alone in the park at dusk, my daughter is off celebrating her friend's bat mitzvah at a big dance hall, one son is off learning how to teach first responders, my oldest child is guarding our country and we all feel this is just another normal day. I guess that is the best postscript I can offer.

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