

TESTIMONY
OF DR. MICHAEL LONSKI
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AND DR. EVELYN LLEWELLYN
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TO THE US CONGRESSIONAL SUBCOMMITTEE
ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER 8, 2004

THE WORLD TRADE CENTER ATTACKS FOREVER ALTERED THE WAY MANY PEOPLE SEE THE WORLD.

THE ENSUING GRIEF, TRAUMA, STRESS, ANXIETY AND DESPAIR WORSENER EXISTING PROBLEMS. IT REACTIVATED NEGATIVE COPING HABITS SUCH AS SUBSTANCE ABUSE, SMOKING AND OVEREATING. IT OVERWHELMED PEOPLE'S ABILITIES TO CONTROL THEIR EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND RESULTED IN INCREASED VIOLENCE, DEPRESSION AND, ESPECIALLY, ISOLATION.

JUST CHECK THE CORNER NEWSSTAND TO WITNESS THE BREAKDOWN IN 9/11 VICTIMS' COPING ABILITIES: POLICEMEN SETTING BOMBS IN TRAIN STATIONS, FIREMEN BRAWLING WITH CHAIRS, VOLUNTEERS ROBBING BANKS, DWI'S, EXTRA-MARITAL AFFAIRS.

PEOPLE IN NEW YORK ARE STRATCHING THEIR HEADS AND WONDERING, WILL IT EVER END?

WE'RE HERE TO TELL YOU, FROM A MENTAL HEALTH STANDPOINT, THAT THIS IS JUST BEGINNING.

IN NEW YORK, 9/11 WAS A MUSHROOM CLOUD WHOSE FALL-OUT IS JUST NOW MAKING ITSELF KNOWN.

MY NAME IS DR. MICHAEL LONSKI, AND I AM A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND CO-FOUNDER OF LIFE MATTERS. WITH ME TODAY ARE DR. EVELYN LLEWELLYN, A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, CO-FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LIFE MATTERS. STEPHEN CAREAGA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FIREFIGHTERS NATIONAL TRUST, WHO SO GENEROUSLY UNDERWRITES MUCH OF OUR FIRE UNION-ENDORSED WORK WITH ACTIVE AND RETIRED FIRST RESPONDERS AND FAMILIES IN THE FIRE DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK. AND BOARD MEMBER LOU CHINAL, A 9/11 SURVIVOR WHO RETIRED FROM THE FDNY AFTER 29 YEARS AND WHO GUIDES AND SERVES US.

LIFE MATTERS IS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION CREATED TO MEET THE URGENT NEED FOR COUNSELING-OUTREACH AND CRISIS-INTERVENTION FOLLOWING 9/11.

WE TEACH PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND, COPE AND ULTIMATELY HEAL THEIR TRAUMA. WE HAVE “EMBEDDED” CLINICIANS, TRUSTED PEERS AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL IN FIREHOUSES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS -- GIVING US THE UNIQUE ABILITY TO QUICKLY FIND AND HELP PEOPLE BEFORE THEY TAKE ACTIONS THAT HARM THEMSELVES OR OTHERS.

WE HAVE HELPED MORE THAN 30,000 PERSONS REMAIN HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE AND INVOLVED ON THE JOB AND IN THEIR LIVES SINCE THE TERROR ATTACKS. WE CONTINUE TO SERVE AN ESTIMATED 15,000 NEW YORKERS A YEAR.

LET US PUT THOSE NUMBERS IN PERSPECTIVE FOR YOU.

THE RED CROSS AND NYS PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE ESTIMATE THAT THERE ARE BETWEEN 125,000 AND 150,000 MANHATTAN RESIDENTS WHO HAVE FULLY DIAGNOSABLE POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER, OR PTSD.

MT. SINAI RESEARCHERS WORKING WITH GROUND ZERO WORKERS SAY MORE THAN 40 PERCENT ARE SUFFERING FROM MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES.

A RECENT STUDY BY THE SMITHERS INSTITUTE AT CORNELL’S SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL AND LABOR RELATIONS FOUND SIGNIFICANT EVIDENCE OF CONTINUED DEPRESSION, STRESS, ANXIETY AND GRIEF – AND AN INCREASED RISK FOR DRINKING PROBLEMS -- AMONG ACTIVE FDNY MEMBERS POST-9/11.

SO IN THREE YEARS WE’VE REACHED BARELY 20 PERCENT OF THOSE WHO NEED OUR HELP.

LET ME EXPLAIN WHAT SOMEONE SUFFERING FROM POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS GOES THROUGH, AND WHY THIS IS A PROBLEM FOR US ALL.

PTSD SUFFERERS MOVE ON A VERY PREDICTABLE COURSE FROM SHOCK TO UPSET TO DYSFUNCTIONALITY.

KEY TO THEIR TRAUMA IS THE PERCEPTION THAT THE WORLD IS NOT A SAFE PLACE, AND THAT THOSE IN CHARGE OF PROTECTING US HAVE FAILED TO DO SO.

THEY ARE CONTINUALLY FLOODED WITH UNINVITED THOUGHTS, FLASHBACKS, DAYDREAMS AND REVERIE, NIGHTMARES AND NIGHT TERRORS.

EVERYTHING BEGINS TO LOOK LIKE A THREAT. TO PROTECT THEMSELVES, THEY WITHDRAW EMOTIONALLY, BUFFER OR MEDICATE THEMSELVES OR ACT OUT. THEY ENGAGE IN NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS TO FEEL GOOD, TO FEEL ALIVE -- OR SIMPLY TO FEEL ANYTHING AT ALL.

THEY BECOME SO PREOCCUPIED WITH WARDING OFF REMINDERS THAT THEY LOSE THEIR PERSPECTIVE OF RIGHT AND WRONG.

THEY FAIL TO DISCRIMINATE BETWEEN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL TRIGGERS.

THEIR JUDGMENT BECOMES IMPAIRED.

ANYONE SUFFERING FROM PTSD CAN BECOME A TIMEBOMB.

THEIR EXPLOSIONS AND IMPLOSIONS ROCK US ALL.

SUICIDE. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. MURDER. DIVORCE. CRIMINAL ACTIVITY. INAPPROPRIATE SEXUAL ACTIVITY. FEARED AND ACTUAL DEBILITATING DISEASE AND PREMATURE DEATH.

THE LOSS OF THE TALENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF PEOPLE WHO WERE OTHERWISE VITAL AND VALUED MEMBERS OF OUR SOCIETY.

THAT TRAGEDY ENVELOPS SPOUSES, CHILDREN, FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

AND THE CYCLE OF TRAUMA, GRIEF AND LOSS IS THEN RENEWED. WE LOSE ANOTHER GENERATION AND TERROR WINS; NO FURTHER ATTACKS, JUST COLLATERAL DAMAGE FROM THE ORIGINAL IMPACT.

THOSE IN NEED MUST UNDERSTAND THAT HELP IS AVAILABLE AND SELF-HELP IS POSSIBLE.

THOSE IN POWER MUST COMMIT THE RESOURCES REQUIRED TO PREVENT WHAT UNIFORMED FIRST-RESPONDERS CALL A “BLEVE” (BOILING LIQUID EXPANDING VAPOR EXPLOSION) -- OR BE PREPARED TO SUFFER IN THE FALLOUT.

WE MUST REBUILD VICTIMS’ TRUST.

HELP THEM RE-CONNECT WITH THE WORLD.

IN OUR WORK WE CONTINUE TO FIND WAYS TO RESPECT PEOPLE’S PRIVACY AND INTEGRITY WHILE REACHING THROUGH THEIR SELF-PROTECTIVE ISOLATION.

THROUGH FLEXIBLE, TESTED AND TRUE, THEORETICALLY BASED PRO-ACTIVE OUTREACH, EDUCATION AND SUPPORT WE WALK WITH THEM TO PATHS OF HEALTH, RESILIENCY AND HOPE.

AT ISSUE IS NOT JUST ONE MAN’S UNEASE, BUT A FAMILY’S ABILITY TO FUNCTION AND ULTIMATELY, SECURITY FOR US ALL.

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