



Israel
Trauma Center
for Victims
of Terror
and War

About Feelings

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North to South, Summer 2006

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You, Me and the Next War

Resilience is not a magic word. Resilience is built of many details that, together, are supposed to reflect a message to citizens: "You are not alone, we can cope, we are capable, we have the abilities, we have strength. Together, we can do this."

Some say the last war came as a great surprise. Did it? For a long time before the war, residents of the Galilee saw Hezbollah on the other side of the border, so close they could almost see the whites of their eyes. However, routine life and relative quiet continued despite occasional disruptions.

In the end, the surprise came from another direction, from the belief that we are prepared, that we have a military who would make every effort to silence and crush any attempt to violate the quiet and that even if something happened, the local authorities and the government would come to our assistance. This faith was shattered at a very high price.

Go & Learn

A study conducted by the Community Stress Prevention Center, at Tel Hai Academic College (in cooperation with the Israel Trauma Coalition) found that residents of the north feel that the government and local authorities did not do enough; some even feel abandoned by the very people they expected to assist them.

Yet, as surprising as this may be, 98% still expect that the government and local authorities

will assist them, if there is another war. Another worrisome question is, why did the public have a sense of victory after the Al-Aqsa Intifada, in which 1,000 were killed and tens of thousands were injured (not including victims of psychological trauma) but after a war with fewer than 1/5 the number of deaths and many fewer injuries, people are left with the feeling of failure and defeat.

How can we cope?

I live in the Galilee since 1979 and I raised four children here, together with my late wife.

This was the first war in which I both assisted residents of the border area, together with other members of the Community Stress Prevention Center, and was a worried parent whose children were fighting to protect me, my home and the State of Israel. I am writing this article on the basis of my combined experience as a father and expert.

First, we, the citizens of Israel, must be told the truth. Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization that is external to Lebanon but rather a part of the Lebanese people.

Therefore, it will remain in place and banishing it means conquering

southern Lebanon and remaining there. Based on the lessons we've learned in the past, it is important to understand that an occupation of this type can be effective only if we remain in Lebanon for many years despite a large number of daily casualties.

The question is, are we willing to pay this price? It seems to me that most of us are not ready to pay this price. Therefore, it is important that we understand that this means repeated conflict, for which we must be prepared.

Let's be Practical

Planning is important on the level of the home and family. A building or neighborhood bomb shelter can be kept in usable condition even without municipal maintenance.

The people who are likely to use a shelter must make sure that it is in good, usable condition.

It would help if every house committee appoints one person to check what each neighbor can contribute to make the shelter a nicer place.

It is important for each family to prepare a list of things to take with them if they must go to the shelter, if they need to evacuate. In homes that lack a shelter, it is possible to prepare a more protected space.

Contingency Plan

Consider past experiences, think about what helped you then and might help you now. Does it help to be involved, to be active, to do something physical or to rest and do relaxation exercises? Is it important for you to take on responsibilities? Does it help you to talk about and understand the situation? Do you find religious faith or ceremony helpful?

When you identify what helps you and your family members, write it down and make a type of contingency plan for coping. Agree with other members of the household how to activate the plan, if necessary. Most important, remember there is no one way to reduce stress and improve functioning; different ways are effective for different people.

You Are Not Alone

None of the above is intended to reduce the responsibility of the government and local authorities. The authorities must prepare emergency command and control headquarters, supply responses to different scenarios, establish assistance teams, open information centers and distribute essential supplies. Above all, they must develop cooperation and coordinate everyone who is expected to act in an emergency. Leadership is critically important in an emergency.

Professor Muli Lahad, President of The Community Stress Prevention Center

A Mid-Summer Thunderstorm



A winter storm erupted suddenly and a thunderclap shattered the night air. Ordinarily this would be a routine occurrence but this year the first thunderclap (and the second and the third...) made some of us ask "Have the missiles started again?" It wouldn't be such a big deal if we knew that the war had resolved the issues and quiet had truly returned, but the sudden thunder froze us and the question, "Was that another missile?" reminded us that, even when all seems quiet, we are sitting on a powder keg.

Comic scene from a crazy movie

There is no doubt this war was traumatic for residents of the North. The period during which the missiles were fired, day and night, with every intention of killing us, was difficult. Yet there were moments that might have seemed like a comic scene from a crazy movie, if they were not so real and frightening.

Since we shared our protected room (MAMAD) with devoted animal lovers, when an alarm sounded, we needed to immediately catch 4 cats, 3 birds and 2 dogs. Imagine this: each person is responsible for gathering and moving several animals into the safe room as quickly as possible. Some animals learned to head for the safe room by themselves but not all. Just try to catch a cat who has decided this is an excellent time to play "hide-and-seek". Even if the explosions in the background threaten to shatter the windows, why isn't this a good time to play?

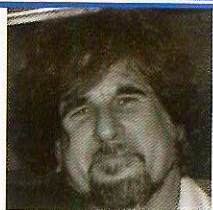
Sitting in a crowded, closed room on a hot summer's day, the birds always have something to say and the dogs "complain" about the crowding, but everyone generally behaves extremely well because they understand that something unusual is happening and this is the time to demonstrate responsibility and maturity.

A little humor, with all seriousness

Even now that the immediate danger has past and we can look back at some of the things we experienced and find humorous moments - the war was truly a difficult experience, a serious trauma. Proper treatment and facing the fear makes you understand that under no circumstances can the next war be managed like the last one. As difficult as it is for us to accept, the next war (or rather the continuation of the last one) is already, unfortunately, close at hand. This is one fact that all of us seem to be aware of.

Nimrod Lev is a musician

www.rbmusic.com: for a free download of "I've become a prisoner" (with Karnit Goldwaser), a song dedicated to the kidnapped Israeli soldiers.



We, Them and You

In the last year, I have traveled to Sderot, together with NATAL's Community Outreach Unit, which I head, in order to support, encourage and assist both professionals and residents. Although the visits were emotionally complex, they were also moving and, sometimes, inspiring. Despite the love and appreciation they expressed, I felt that a complicated sense of abandonment and anger hid behind the residents' warm feelings. One of them expressed it well: "You return to the good life in the center and we remain here, exposed in the turret."

November 2006 was a "cursed" month, the most difficult ever for residents of Sderot. A barrage of 800 Kassam missiles, as counted by the Sderot police, was fired at the city and its surroundings, causing several deaths and injuries. I spent many days in the city and discerned a significant change in its residents. A feeling of painful coolness mixed with despair and helplessness enveloped the city.

Astonishing Resilience

The road from Yad Mordecai to Sderot was completely empty, which increased my fear and driving speed.

I hurried to my first meeting with a single mother of three children

who reported serious, paralyzing anxiety, especially in her two younger children (6 and 10 years old). She reported that they refused to go to the bathroom or take a shower alone, sleep alone or leave the house alone. Fortunately, Shoshana (not her real name) was already waiting for me in the parking lot.

Together, we climbed three flights of narrow, dirty stairs to her cold dark apartment.

Poverty was written all over. As shocked as I was by neglect and poverty, I was even more troubled by the emotional disconnection between the family members, which was conspicuous throughout the entire meeting. The mother was careful to show me all of the scars left by shrapnel, evidence of a difficult incident that occurred approximately one month before. She described her economic difficulties and the terrible loneliness she suffered (the relationship with her family had been severed and her husband abandoned her and the children two years previously).

She showed me her last pay slip and asked, "How can I possibly support a family on such a miserable salary?" I was silenced by feelings of stress and helplessness. Shoshana continued to tell me the

difficult, touching story of her life without interruption. It seemed that a long time had passed since someone had been willing to listen to her. I shared the pain that I felt for her and her family and stressed that her ability to keep working and fighting for her children in such difficult circumstances was a sign of her amazing strength and hardiness. For a moment, I noticed a tear glimmering in her eye and I knew that I had touched her heart, if only for a moment.

Just as I was about to leave the apartment, Shoshana stopped me, suddenly looked out the window and shouted "Color Red!" Before I understood what was happening, she grabbed the children, dragged them into the hallway, hovered over them and pulled me towards them. I joined the huddle of humanity but felt a little uncomfortable. After all, I am not one of them, I'm just an occasional visitor. The children began to moan and tremble. I tried to calm them with breathing exercises.

Although they were cooperative and followed my instructions faithfully, it was clear to all of us that it would take a long time to relieve their fears and return to routine life. I parted from the family warmly and promised to visit them again. As I walked down the stairs, the mother waved at me and called out in a melancholy voice: "Don't forget us, we are waiting for you!"

Dr. Rony Berger has long had a warm spot in his heart for Sderot. More than once he has wondered why he feels close to a city that many Israelis could place on the map only after the Kassams began to fall.



*Kassam rocket hitting Sderot. Photo: Amir Cohen
(people in the picture are unrelated to the article)*

Mutual Support and Familial Unity

The second family lived in an area of well-kept private homes that would not embarrass many in the center of the country. Two of the family's five children waited for me at the entrance with glaring eyes. I gathered the entire family (the mother and five children; the father was at work) around their improvised shelter and discussed the events with them. The mother opened with a strident attack against the state and the government, claiming that they had been abandoned for the last six years. She complained that for the last six months the family's life (including sleep) had been

contracted to the area of the living room. The children neither left the house nor played with friends nor went regularly to school. She had a simple suggestion for the politicians: "They should come live here for a month and we will go live in their houses."

Then each of the five children (ages 7-23) told the frightening stories of the Kassam falls they had witnessed. Clearly and fluently, they described the difficulties they have faced since the Kassam fire began. One spoke of being unable to go to the bathroom alone and another said he feared going to school. The third complained that he was unable to concentrate and was having difficulty with his matriculation exams. The fourth

claimed that he suffered from pains and headaches while the last was angry because her mother limited her social life. Despite this, it was evident that mutual support and family unity was helping them cope with the situation. I felt the family members' distress but I also left strengthened and optimistic.

At the end of the evening members of the family asked if I would come visit them again and help them. I answered positively and told them that I would be coming to Sderot with several other psychologists from the center of the country.

"What! You live in the center and not in the region?" they asked.

I answered positively.

"You're going back there now?" they continued.

"Yes" I answered.

"You mean to tell me that you and your staff will come to us in Sderot, once a week?" the mother asked with a surprised look.

"Why not? It's a nice city, with good people and a pastoral atmosphere," I answered.

The mother smiled and said doubtfully, "We'll wait and see if you return and if they come in at all." On my way home from Sderot, the words "we/us," "them" and "you" echoed in my head and I wondered if different existential experiences had created barriers between us that cannot always be bridged. Although I had left Tel Aviv as part of "us," on my way home I felt that I had tasted some of what it means to be "them" and wished in my heart that "they" would soon feel part of "us."

**Dr. Rony Berger, Director of
NATAL's Community Services**