NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

For Haunted Survivors, the Towers Fall Again and Again

By ANDREW JACOBS

Inez Graham is at war with her memory. She spends most of her days sobbing and afraid, battling images of flames and falling debris and trying to quell the soundtrack of screams in her head. A ringing phone, a plane overhead or a passing truck make her hunker down in fear. She refuses to go outside. She tells friends not to visit and says the smell of smoke, like some unseen phantom, lingers around her home in Newark.

She tries to stave off sleep, but when she finally dozes off, the nightmares are always the same. She is back at the World Trade Center, barefoot and breathless, trying to outrun the tidal wave of concrete and glass. But in this version, her daughters are with her, and she cannot save them. "I want the old Inez back," she said, giving in to another round of tears. "But I just can't get that day out of my head."

Those who escaped from the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 will never get that day entirely out of their heads. But two and a half weeks after the unfathomable happened, there is little uniformity in the ways that survivors are coping.

Many, like Mrs. Graham, 40, are utterly traumatized, unable to imagine anything resembling their lives before the disaster.

Others, like Lynn Simpson, a 50-year-old who worked for a public relations company, find themselves rattled, but spiritually intact in a way even they do not entirely understand.

Ms. Simpson, who made it through the wreckage of the 83rd floor of 1 World Trade Center and was then enveloped by the storm of falling rubble, says she feels remarkably whole, although the bruises on her arms and legs have yet to fade. "I was in a state of shock for a few days, but I'm very happy to be alive," Ms. Simpson said. "Right now, I'm overwhelmed by the feeling that life is precious."

Those who specialize in trauma-related disorders say symptoms can sometimes take weeks or even months to emerge.

"Just because someone isn't feeling stressed right now doesn't necessarily mean they won't have trauma symptoms two months from now," said George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University who studies grief and trauma.

But experts also say that they have no way of knowing who will heal and who will be plagued by chronic unease, although studies of other cases suggest that fewer than 25 percent of those who escaped will experience symptoms of traumatic stress three months from now. There is, however, a wild card: the continuing threat of further terrorist attacks, some psychologists say, may exacerbate and prolong the distress.

"This is uncharted territory," said Dr. Russell J. Kormann, a post-traumatic stress specialist at Rutgers University's Anxiety Disorders Clinic. "We don't have an idea who is going to be affected and to what degree. It's something thousands of people will be dealing with for years to come."



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Inez Graham, left, and Dee Howard were in an ambulance at the edge of the World Trade Center when a tower collapsed, forcing them to run for their lives.

Thousands may be dealing with the trauma for years.

Mrs. Graham cheated death without physical injury. She and her best friend, Dee Howard, both employees of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, made it down 61 flights of stairs just minutes before the first building cascaded down around them. At a time when thousands of people are mourning their dead, friends tell them to be thankful they are alive. But being survivors has brought them little comfort.

"People say, 'Don't give in to the fear, don't let evil win,' all these clichés, but they don't know what I'm going through," said Ms. Howard, 37. She had lived with her fiancé in Irvington, N.J., but lately she has been staying with her parents in East Orange, N.J., too petrified even to venture out on their terrace. "I'm trying to get better, but I just can't."

Others are coping with similar feelings of distress.

Robin Seaberry, 38, one of a handful of people who escaped from the 101st floor of the south tower, cannot step into elevators or venture into the subway. "I'm afraid of everything, even my own kids," she said. "I can't eat, I can't sleep, and when I close my eyes, I see faces on fire. I feel like I'm going crazy."

Some, like Toshiko Homma, have yet to speak about Sept. 11. Ms. Homma, who was badly burned on her face, legs and hands as she tried to escape from 1 World Trade Center, said watching news footage from that day makes her physically ill. "I'm sorry, I can't talk about this anymore," she said from her home in Queens before abruptly hanging up the phone.

Ash Mead Pollard, 45, an asset manager for Deutsche Bank who helped rescue Ms. Homma, describes himself as a "tough guy." But in the past two weeks he has been confronting an aspect of himself

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THE HAUNTED

For Some Who Survived, The Towers Keep Falling

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he never knew. He jumps out of bed when he hears an airplane, the rumble of the subway makes him shudder, and he can no longer listen to the music he once adored. He is so jarred by noise that he disassembled all the telephones in his temporary office and used tape to muffle their rings. Last week, as he drove over the Whitestone Bridge, he panicked when the cars in front of him came to a sudden halt. Imagining a bomb on the bridge, he turned his car around and took a lengthy detour to get to his home in the Bronx.

"I usually handle stress well, but I feel like I'm losing control," Mr. Pollard said. He escaped the collapse of the first tower by ducking inside a nearby firehouse, only to be enveloped by debris from the second tower the moment he emerged.

Others say they are coping well.

Many of those who have regained their footing say they never imagined that their lives were in danger.

Adam Mayblum, 35, who worked for a small investment firm in 1 World Trade Center, said that throughout his descent from the 87th floor, he assumed that the worst was over. Since then, he has cried a few times (he lost a close colleague) and he is still unnerved by abrupt noises, but Mr. Mayblum said he was ready to move on.

"It's been much harder on my family than it's been on me," he said, though he later questioned whether his psyche had escaped unharmed. "Maybe it hasn't dawned on me yet. Maybe I haven't absorbed the calamity of it yet."

For many survivors, the anxieties and troubling flashbacks are mixed with guilt. Teresa Veliz, 31, an office manager for a software company, is haunted by the memory of an elderly man, too exhausted to move, who sat down in the stairwell as she hustled by. "I feel bad because I don't know if he made it out," she said.

Many of those who escaped the buildings cannot shake the image of firefighters ascending the stairs to their deaths. Others feel guilty for not helping friends and co-workers, less nimble or less lucky, who perished. Nearly everyone is grappling with enormous grief.

For some, the losses are too much to process. Richard Fern, 39, a technical support manager for Euro Brokers, started working again at the company's New Jersey office, but he cannot ignore the absence of 60 colleagues who didn't make it out of 2 World Trade Center. A cousin who worked at the trade center also died.

"I've been really busy, to the point where I can't really dwell on what happened," said Mr. Fern, one of only three people who escaped from the 84th floor. "I guess that's a good thing. Anyway, I'm not very good at showing my emotions."

Grief counselors have been telling survivors to talk about their experiences, but Dee Howard and Inez Graham say each retelling brings on an unbearable rush of panic. "Everyone wants to hear the tragic details, but they don't really care how I feel," said Ms. Howard, who like Mrs. Graham is taking antianxiety medication. "They just want me to get on with my life."

Still, both women have come a long way since Sept. 11, when they emerged from a thick cloud of dust, holding hands, barefoot and clearly in shock. A head-to-toe coating of ash made them look like Kabuki actors, their intricately woven braids cemented in place. Ms. Howard was mute. The only thing Mrs. Graham could say was that she needed to get home to Newark, though the two of them were walking toward Brooklyn.

Ten minutes earlier they and a third woman had been sitting in an ambulance at the edge of the World Trade Center, terrified, soaking wet from the building sprinklers and gasping for air, their lungs assaulted by smoke and soot. But just as a paramedic prepared to give them oxygen, the building began to topple. "Nez! Run!" Ms. Howard shouted, and the two stumbled onto Church Street. Ms. Howard still regrets not dragging along the other woman, a stranger who remained inside the ambulance, which they later learned was destroyed by falling debris.

The two made it a few yards before being overcome by the suffocating blackness. After briefly losing one another in the pandemonium, they vowed not to let go of each other's hands.

On Wednesday, the two held hands again for the first time since that day. Until a reporter brought them together, they had been too fearful to travel the three miles that separated them. They hugged each other tightly, Mrs. Graham trying to comfort her friend, who could not stop crying. "It's going to be all right," Mrs. Graham said. "It's going to be all right."

After a few minutes, Ms. Howard let go, stepped back and dried her eyes. The two women looked at each other, and for the first time in two weeks, they laughed.

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