



PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-HELP GUIDE FOLLOWING A TERRO- RIST ATTACK



Co-funded by the Justice Programme of the European Union



ISBN: 978-84-946991-2-2

PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-HELP GUIDE FOLLOWING A TERRORIST ATTACK

MARÍA PAZ GARCÍA-VERA¹, JESÚS SANZ²,
NOELIA MORÁN³ Y CLARA GESTEIRA⁴

It is clear that terrorism today is a serious global threat that affects a large number of people every year. After suffering a terrorist attack, it is very common for people to experience a variety of emotions that, at the very least, cause discomfort and are not easy to understand.

Experts explain that *"victims include, of course, the deceased (in a terrorist act, in this case), but also those who are injured (either physically or psychologically), and even their families, according to an extended use, particularly in our country, and to their legal coverage. In other words, victims consist of direct victims, or those affected in a broad sense, as well as survivors⁵."* Recent research data show that the psychopathological consequences suffered after a terrorist attack appear both in direct (injured), and indirect (relatives of the injured and deceased) victims.⁶

This guide has been adapted based on the modifications contained in the book by García-Vera, M.P, Labrador, F. J., and Larroy, C. (Eds.) (2008). Psychological support to victims of terrorist attacks and natural disasters. Self-help guide and psychological intervention guidelines drawn up after the March 11 terrorist attacks. Madrid: Complutense Publications.

-
1. Tenured professor at the Complutense University of Madrid
 2. Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid
 3. Associate Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid
 4. Researcher at the Complutense University of Madrid
 5. Rodríguez Uribes, J. M. (2015). The concept of victim of terrorism (pp. 95-96) in Rodríguez Uribes, Victims of terrorism in Spain (pp. 91-116). Madrid: Dykinson.
 6. García-Vera, M. P., and Sanz, J. (2016). Psychopathological effects of terrorist attacks on adult victims and their treatment: Current status. Papeles del Psicólogo (Psychology papers), 37, 3-13

SELF-HELP GUIDE FOLLOWING A TERRORIST ATTACK

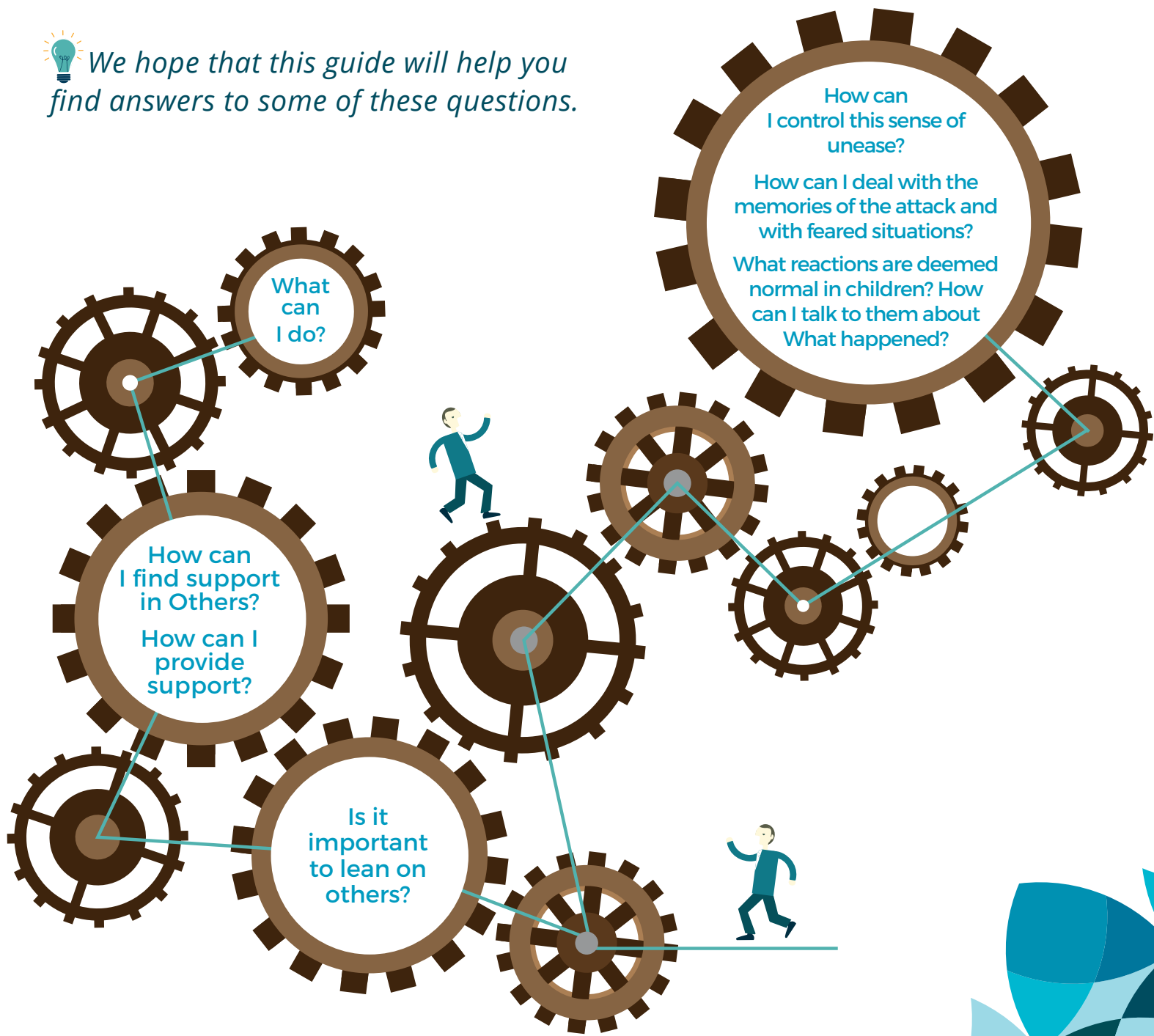
This guide has been created with the goal of helping those somehow affected by a terrorist attack. We thank you in advance for its dissemination, so that it can reach and help as many people as possible.

This guide will help you to better understand what you are possibly going through. If you have suffered a terrorist attack, either directly or indirectly, you may be probably considering questions such as the following:

- > What is happening to me? Is it normal that I feel this way?
- > What am I supposed to think?
- > What physical symptoms are deemed normal?
- > What am I supposed to feel?
- > What am I supposed to do?
- > What is the expected evolution of these reactions?
- > Do I need help?



We hope that this guide will help you find answers to some of these questions.





➔ WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME? IS IT NORMAL THAT I FEEL THIS WAY?

Terrorist attacks pose a break from our view of the world: a more or less safe and pleasant place to live in. These events alter people's lives and may lead us or someone close to us, to go through really tough times.

The reactions that we are going to discuss below are deemed normal human reactions to stressful events, such as terrorist attacks, which cause people to feel defenseless, vulnerable, terrified, and fearful of losing their life or that of their loved ones.

It is important that everyone understands what we are going through, if we have been affected by an attack. It is necessary to understand that our reactions are the way in which our body tries to cope and overcome what happened. Reactions as diverse as not being able to sleep, not remembering what happened, feeling guilty, or being unable to feel anything, may scare us and make us think that something is wrong with us, that "we are going mad", but they are just normal responses that are aimed at protecting us from suffering and from experiencing new losses.

When those affected come to understand that these reactions are normal, they are one step closer to accepting them and making them disappear, to move on with their lives in the healthiest possible way.

We hope that these pages will help you understand what you are going through, as well as what is nor-

“
TERRORIST ATTACKS ALTER
PEOPLE'S LIVES AND
GENERATE UNPLEASANT
EMOTIONAL REACTIONS,
WHICH ARE COMPLETELY
NORMAL
”

mal for you to think, feel and do in these situations. After explaining what normal reactions are, we will show you simple guidelines to control them and thus, contribute to accelerate your natural recovery process.

➔ WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO THINK?

You might think that life makes no sense, that it is not worth living, that it is a matter of luck, or wonder why this happened to you or your loved ones. People tend to have the idea that the world is a place where things happens for a reason, and where we will be able to control the difficulties that arise.

The horror and lack of control involving a terrorist attack fit poorly in our way of thinking and seeing the world. We cannot find a sense to what happened and, in an attempt to assimilate it, our body comes up with common reactions that, while violent and strange in some cases, are normal when trying to find order in this sudden chaos. The reactions that we are going to discuss below are deemed normal, and are part of the assimilation and organization process of what happened:

- **Images and thoughts about the event** coming to your mind are deemed normal, even if you don't want to think about them or try to keep them out (flashbacks).
- **The same goes for nightmares** about subjects more or less related to the attack and its consequences.
- **Chaos in your recollection of the attack is deemed normal.** You may feel like you are missing parts of a larger puzzle.
- **Concentration, attention and memory problems may also appear,** and make you feel

upset, as if you were not your regular self or as if something serious happened to you.

- **It is normal to wish for the "worst"** and even want to take revenge on those who caused the attack, but it is not healthy to devote too much time to these thoughts, because they cause great unease, and may eventually turn against us.
- **It is normal to be wary of everything and everyone, wary of the world in general,** and of human beings, as they are capable of committing such cruel acts.
- **It is normal to doubt everything that you believed in,** to lose confidence in a just world, to doubt your system of values, your faith, everything that had guided your life up until then, and your way of doing things, everything that you believed in, and that gave you strength and a sense of confidence.
- **Feelings of guilt** for having done, or for having failed to do this or that to avoid damage are also normal, but it is important to accept that these situations are inevitably beyond our control. Sometimes guilt comes from things said, done or not done to the deceased. In these cases, we need to weigh the importance of such statements in everyday life, instead of now, from the perspective of what happened.
- **It is normal to realize your own vulnerability,** and to think you may lose everything in a matter



of a second, including people close to your heart, or your own life. The illusion of control that we are used to living with simply vanishes.

- **It is normal to seek logical explanations to what happened: why, what, for what purpose, or just how anyone can do something like that.** It is normal to try and use logic and wonder why something like that happened to this or that person, who was a kind human being. Sooner or later we will have to accept that it is impossible to provide logical answers to illogical questions.
- **It is normal to feel lonely and to think that nobody can understand us,** or get used to the idea of what we are going through. But even the most common clichés and inappropriate advice may have been said with the sole intention of offering support, and you will feel better if you remain open to that possibility.
- **It is normal for you to avoid thinking about what happened,** sometimes by denying it or even forgetting aspects of the attack, but don't panic, it is a normal response to mitigate your suffering during the early stages.

➔ WHAT PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS ARE DEEMED NORMAL?

As part of our body's response to try and overcome the situation, a number of physical symptoms, which far from being pathological, are normal responses of our body in its effort to survive, take place. These responses, which are typical in situations of intense threat, alert our physical resources to operate to the fullest in a dangerous situation, and it is possible that we remain activated and our reactions continue, if our body continues to believe that the threatening situation is not completely over.

- **It is normal to experience an excess of activation, high levels of tension, to be easily startled, to feel nervous, or to experience excessive sensitivity to signals that did not trigger any responses before the attack (for example, noises), to feel agitated or suffer from tachycardia,** as a consequence of the maximum alert situation following an attack, which can last hours, days, or even weeks.
- **It is normal to feel intensely fatigued, or to experience vague and nonspecific body aches, as well as sleeping difficulties, loss of appetite, or tiredness,** as a result of our metabolism acting at levels significantly above our regular requirements.

➔ WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO FEEL?

What we feel is related to our way of seeing what happens to us in the world. If what just happened is an attack that made us lose our confidence in others, and in their goodness, then it is normal to feel anger. If we interpret that it will not be easy to overcome this, and that things have no hope of improving, then it is logical that we feel sad and hopeless. If what happened distorted our beliefs about the world, we may feel that this is no longer our world. If what happened makes us see dangers and threats everywhere, we will so feel anxious that we will be under the impression that this feeling will never stop. This is what our emotions, or lack thereof, will be like: another reaction to our interpretation of what happened, and a way to cope.

- **It is normal to feel hate and anger, to feel betrayed, misunderstood, abandoned, unsafe or suspicious**, among many other intense negative emotions related to others, who will be no longer trustworthy in our view.
- **It is normal to feel sad, hopeless and apathetic** in a world that is no longer interesting or trustworthy, and is a place where there is no hope for a better future.
- **It is normal to feel anxious and fearful** of what may happen, since the world has become a threatening place, where at any moment everything important may be lost without any reason.
- **It is normal to feel more irritable and impatient** at people close to us, as a result of living under stress for such a long period.

• **But it is also normal that we feel unable to feel, weep, or suffer proportionately to what happened, as if we were infused with a sort of emotional anesthesia** that prevents us from mourning, that shocks us, or even frightens us, but this is no more than a normal protection mechanism to protect our mind by blocking those feelings, thus sparing us from suffering excessively. It is expected that these emotions gradually fade away, although they may arise once again when signs recalling the situation reappear. These may include odors, noises, specific times of the day, activities, people, memories or images.



➔ WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?

Amidst all the normal reactions that people usually have in the face of a terrorist attack, perhaps one of the most common and widespread are those of avoidance. We previously commented that it is normal to avoid thinking or to even deny what happened in the early stages. Such avoidances also affect what we do. To mitigate the suffering caused, it is normal to try and pull away from anything that may hurt us, and avoid everything that is related, in one way or another, to the attack (places, people, situations, etc.). This type of avoidance is sometimes unconscious, involuntary, or non-intentional. .

- **It is normal to avoid everything that is related to the situation in which the attack occurred, including similar situations, people, or activities.** For instance, it is normal to not want to come into the station where it occurred, to travel by train or to simply travel, as well as to avoid those that somehow remind you of what happened, images on television, or even talking about it with other people.
- **It is normal to seek support in drugs to overcome the situation** but you must be careful because, although there is nothing wrong with using them initially as an aid to withstand the situation and help you rest, medication should always be prescribed under medical supervision, and you must be aware of the fact that it is not the most appropriate treatment option to overcome a traumatic situation.

- **It is normal to try to seek solace or forget about what happened by drinking alcohol in moderation,** but it is important not to do so excessively, and bear in mind at all times that alcohol is not a solution to overcome trauma and may indeed worsen things as it increases the risk of lack of emotional control.

- **It is normal to isolate ourselves from others,** especially when we think that they cannot help or understand us, because what happened makes us wary of human beings in general.

The fact that these stress reactions are normal and very frequent at first, it does not mean that those who do not react in this way do so "abnormally". We should always bear in mind that there is no single way to cope or react to these experiences. It is as normal to either emotionally collapse or not, as it is to either run or stand still, forget or remember every detail, or to let off steam or not wanting to talk about it. There is not a single way of reacting.

While most of the reactions that we may have after a negative event -such as a terrorist attack- are ne-



gative and may be a cause for concern, we should not ignore that positive reactions may also arise as a result of traumatic events. In fact, it is common for some people to change their way of thinking, their priorities in life, and begin to value the company of others, to spend more time with friends, or to feel they need to make better use of their time enjoying their family.

➔ WHAT IS THE EXPECTED EVOLUTION OF THESE REACTIONS?

When one goes through a traumatic event, for instance, a terrorist attack, people may react -as we have seen- in different ways to handle the situation. These are logical survival responses deemed absolutely expected and normal, but which may make people feel overwhelmed with the feeling of having lost control of their lives.

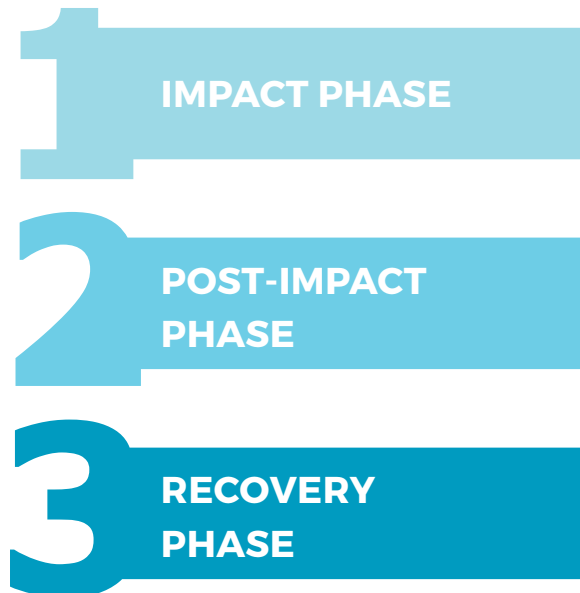
However, we know that most of these reactions are temporary, and that most people will overcome the situation, that these reactions will gradually disappear, as will their suffering, and that they will eventually move on with their lives.

There is no single way to react to a terrorist attack. Normal reactions are many and varied, and so is their evolution. Not all people evolve in the same way, not all go through the same stages, and when they do, they don't need to do so in the same order or for a specific time period. The reactions to an attack are personal, as is the process that each person goes through, their pace and stages.

However, research on the effects of terrorist attacks and disasters tend to categorize the reactions in stages, ranging from the time of the attack itself to recovery. For the purpose of providing some guidance, we could speak of three distinct phases:

Impact Phase

People react at the time of the attack by protecting their life and that of others. This is a survival response. At present, some people may be unable to react or do so in a disorganized way, as they feel stunned, aghast, unable to act in the right way. They feel shocked, blocked, and even immobilized or disoriented, and may wander back and forth. In the case of attacks with many victims, some people may react with excessive demands towards rescue services, as if they were the only victims. Conversely, others have



altruistic reactions and risk their lives trying to save other people, even if they are strangers.

Any reaction that would seem surprising and amazing in any other situation, becomes normal at this point. For this reason, we should not judge our performance during the event, or try to assess it and think whether or not it met our expectations and those of others, if we could have done things differently, or if we failed to do something. Survival reactions are not the result of reflection. Our degree of control in these situations is, whether we like it or not, very small.

Post-impact phase:

Once the impact phase caused by the blasts during the attack is over, the priority shifts to rescuing and ensuring survival. Some of the previous reactions may be extended, or new ones may appear. Confusion, lightheadedness, and denial of what happened are common reactions in this phase. Some people may walk for hours, feeling disoriented, without even being able to provide relevant information about where the people who accompanied them when the bombs went off were. Reactions related to a high alert and activation state, such as tremors, rapid heartbeat, feeling of inability to breathe or vomiting, frequent jolts, sudden and uncontrolled flashbacks, and deep sadness and hopelessness, are also frequent at this time. This may be accompanied by intense emotional reactions and outbursts of anger, hate, crying, screaming, or wailing.

Recovery phase:

This is a prolonged phase that is estimated to begin weeks after the impact, after the rescue phase of the

victims is over, and continues until those affected go back to their daily routine and activities. Its duration depends, to a great extent, on the damage suffered. Activation reactions, sleeping and concentration difficulties, nightmares, difficulty to deal with one's own memories, situations related to the attack, feelings of guilt, disorganized memories, even partial memory loss, as well as other reactions that we already discussed in previous sections are quite common.

At the beginning of the recovery phase and soon after the attack, there is usually a period of time in which the victims receive a great deal of support and protection that stems from solidarity reactions from society. Then, they move on to a disillusionment and abandonment phase, when the support initiatives organized begin to withdraw, tributes and expressions of support cease, and victims begin to suffer the reality of their loss, and the problems and constraints of bureaucracy, while facing all the changes and losses resulting from their new situation. It is necessary to keep on providing accessible social and psychological support for the most severely affected during this phase.

Feelings of guilt, trying to give logical explanations for what happened, sleeping and concentration difficulties, fatigue and difficulties in interpersonal relationships and at work are also common. However, in time, these reactions usually decrease, and those affected manage to regain some sense of normalcy. Even if we have sad memories, and things change for good after the attack, we must realize that this experience will always be part of us, as this will allow us to feel that we have regained control of our lives.







➔ DO I NEED HELP?

Some people need help to overcome a traumatic event. People who have directly experienced the tragedy, young people who have gone through other misfortunes, or who are more sensitive, may need professional help. That may be your case if reactions do not decrease after several weeks from the attack:

- » You continue to feel nervous, tense and anxious most of the time
- » You cannot carry on with your daily obligations or work
- » You drink too much or have started using other drugs
- » You need pills to be able to get some sleep
- » You are easily startled
- » You cannot stop thinking about the event
- » You continue to have nightmares about what happened
- » You cannot control the appearance of images on the attack
- » You cannot recall what happened
- » You feel groggy, confused
- » You are having a hard time accepting what happened
- » You get angry at people around you all the time
- » You feel sad and no longer enjoy the activities or company of others as you used to
- » You cannot find meaning in life and have lost hope
- » You behave very differently to the way you did before
- » Your suffering is increasing
- » You feel incapable of feeling
- » You feel guilty
- » Your emotions of rage, anger, helplessness, hatred or resentment are on the rise
- » You cannot talk about what happened with those closest to you

In case you show any of the above symptoms and you wonder if maybe you need help, it would be advisable to fill out the following questionnaire. This is a short questionnaire to determine the presence or absence of symptoms that may interfere with the development of your normal life. After filling it out, follow the scoring instructions and, if you get a score higher than indicated, then it would be advisable for you to seek professional support from a psychologist specialized on victims of terrorism.

Instructions: Below you will find a series of issues that people sometimes face, as a result of being exposed to highly stressful experiences. Please read each one of them carefully and circle the number on the right that best indicates how much that issue has bothered you in the last month.

PCL-5⁷

In the past month, how much were you bothered by:	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremadamente
1. Repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories of the stressful experience?	0	1	2	3	4
2. Repeated, disturbing dreams of the stressful experience?	0	1	2	3	4
3. Suddenly feeling or acting as if the stressful experience were actually happening again (as if you were actually back there reliving it)?	0	1	2	3	4
4. Feeling very upset when something reminded you of the stressful experience?	0	1	2	3	4
5. Having strong physical reactions when something reminded you of the stressful experience (for example, heart pounding, trouble breathing, sweating)?	0	1	2	3	4
6. Avoiding memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the stressful experience?	0	1	2	3	4

7. PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 © F. W. Weathers, B. T. Litz, T. M. Keane, P. A. Palmieri, B. P. Marx, and P. P. Schnurr – National Center for PTSD, USA, 2013. Spanish adaptation: J. Sanz, M. P. García-Vera, P. Altungy, B. Reguera, R. Navarro, C. Gesteira, N. Moran and J. M. Shultz - School of Psychology, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain, 2016.

7. Avoiding external reminders of the stressful experience (for example, people, places, conversations, activities, objects, or situations)?	0	1	2	3	4
8. Trouble remembering important parts of the stressful experience?	0	1	2	3	4
9. Having strong negative beliefs about yourself, other people, or the world (for example, having thoughts such as: I am bad, there is something seriously wrong with me, no one can be trusted, the world is completely dangerous)?	0	1	2	3	4
10. Blaming yourself or someone else for the stressful experience or what happened after it?	0	1	2	3	4
11. Having strong negative feelings such as fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame?	0	1	2	3	4
12. Loss of interest in activities that you used to enjoy?	0	1	2	3	4
13. Feeling distant or cut off from other people?	0	1	2	3	4
14. Trouble experiencing positive feelings (for example, being unable to feel happiness or have loving feelings for people close to you)?	0	1	2	3	4
15. Irritable behavior, angry outbursts, or acting aggressively?	0	1	2	3	4
16. Taking too many risks or doing things that could cause you harm?	0	1	2	3	4
17. Being "superalert" or watchful or on guard?	0	1	2	3	4
18. Feeling jumpy, or easily startled?	0	1	2	3	4
19. Having difficulty concentrating?	0	1	2	3	4
20. Trouble falling or staying asleep?	0	1	2	3	4

PCL-5 scoring instructions

A symptom is considered to be present when one of the following options is checked: “a little bit”, “moderately”, “quite a bit” or “extremely”. Each of these items is scored from 1 to 4. Items checked as “not at all” are scored as 0. The total score of the scale (ranging from 0 to 80) is obtained by adding the scores of the 20 items. A score equal to or higher than 33 is deemed clinically significant. In such a case, it would be advisable to visit your psychologist to assess the need for specialized psychological care.

➔ WHAT CAN I DO?

While it is logical to think that in these situations there is nothing we can do, our way of acting can ease the assimilation process of what happened, and help our suffering evolve positively, as well as prevent future problems and pain from appearing. Here are some general suggestions on how to act to facilitate your recovery process. Later on, we will address the need of leaning on others, as well as simple self-help techniques that you can use to reduce your sense of unease and gradually move on with your life.

General guidelines to facilitate your recovery process:

- Embrace the fact that you feel bad, even terrible, due to the situation. Unease and other negative emotions must be accepted as a normal part of people's lives, especially in situations like these.
- Try not to seek logical explanations for what happened, as it's quite likely that you will not find any. These tragedies don't happen for logical reasons.
- Take all the time you need to mourn, if you need to. It is a good thing to let those feelings out, instead of trying to contain or hide them. But don't force yourself into it. Sometimes, people need some time to be able to cry or feel discomfort. Remember there are many ways to deal with these situations.
- Try to go back as soon as possible to your daily routines, obligations, house chores, and going out with people. If you find it hard at the beginning, create a plan and force yourself to follow it from the start.
- Try to gradually deal with places, situations, people and thoughts that remind you of what happened, and work as hard as you can to do so, even if this means going through hard times at first.
- Try to set achievable goals for each day and commit to them. Give them the importance that they deserve, and celebrate every time you fulfill them.
- Try to rest and sleep enough, in situations like this it is necessary to sleep more time than we usually do.
- Do something that makes you feel a bit better: a warm bath, listening to music, sunbathing, playing with your kids, going out with friends or playing with your dog. Try to feel your best in the way that better suits you.
- Try to realize that it's fine to feel negative and positive emotions at the same time. Negative and positive feelings can coexist on a day-to-day basis, after this kind of situations. You may burn with hatred towards those who committed the attack, and at the same time feel affection for the people who are with you.
- Do something to feel useful in helping people as affected, or even more affected than you: donate blood, give money, take part in protests and show your solidarity to those who suffered the situation.

- Try to isolate yourself at some point from everything that is going on, and rest from the intensity of emotions and activities that you are living.
- Little by little, you will learn to deal with the situations, places, people and thoughts that remind you of what happened. Do so at your own pace, but do not abandon the idea of achieving this goal. It is quite likely that this will generate a sense of unease at the beginning, but this feeling will decrease and favor your recovery.

➔ IS IT IMPORTANT TO LEAN ON OTHERS?

Leaning on others is important for many reasons:

- Support from others is important so that those affected feel that there are still many people who can be trusted. It helps compensate for the disappointment and the loss of confidence in humans that typically occurs after an attack, thus preventing that the lack of confidence stemming from an aggression perpetrated by few, applies to all persons.
- Support from others can also help facilitate expressing positive feelings, such as affection, friendship, and the unconditional presence of family and friends. It is fundamental that these positive feelings prevent negative feelings from monopolizing our emotions.
- Support from others is key, particularly immediately after the attack, as it can protect us from hurting ourselves, carrying out absurd actions that we are unable to properly assess at the time, and which may create irreversible consequences (such as aggressions to others or suicide attempts).
- Leaning on others can also help us achieve many of the goals that we set for ourselves every day, as it will be easier for us to go, for instance, to the place of the attack with someone trusted who can help us think of something else, or make us feel safe.
- Support from others can also help us solve unpleasant bureaucratic procedures, make difficult decisions, and carry out obligations that create unnecessary pain, if we or people close to us have been directly affected.
- Support from others, their company, even if we don't need them around, but just their mere presence, and eagerness to do whatever we need, may just be enough for us to feel stronger to address difficulties.

For all the above reasons, it is essential to have the support from others after an attack, and where possible, to offer support to others, as both options are compatible: direct victims of an attack find solace in offering their support.

➔ HOW CAN I FIND SUPPORT IN OTHERS?

Support from others is, as pointed out above, important for many people during the recovery phase. However, this support is often not what we expected, and we find it difficult to express our needs, even to those who are closest to us. Below you will find some guidelines about how you can lean on others, and communicate your needs to them:

- When people close to you offer their support, don't analyze whether you can ask them this or that. Just tell them naturally what you need. Just think that if you have people around you, supporting you, it's just because they look forward to being able to help you, and it will make them happy to do so. You can tell them what specific duties you need help with, and they will actually feel thankful for that.
- When asking for help to those supporting you, we encourage you to leave them the choice of saying no, or to set limits on what they are willing to do. If necessary, tell them that you fully understand if they choose not to fulfill your request, as this will strengthen the support relationship between you both. Making people do things is definitely not a wise idea.
- Whenever you feel ready, talk about what happened and tell others how you feel. This can be of great help to you. Don't be scared if, at the beginning, you can't get yourself to do so, or if doing it makes you feel bad. It's a normal reaction. Don't give up, try again in the following days or weeks.

You can also decide to keep that to yourself. But even if that's the case, be open to the possibility of doing so later.

- If you feel unable to speak, then try expressing what you feel regarding the attack in writing. You can hand these texts to trusted people and, if you feel like you can't do that either, keep your mind open to doing so later on.
- In the first days following the attack, it is essential to keep in touch with someone with whom you can share your fears, concerns, and feelings. Someone with whom you can talk about yourself.
- Don't ask those supporting you to feel what you feel, or to suffer the way you are suffering, and least of all, to do what you are doing to get by. Each person is different, and no one, absolutely no one, feels or deals with pain in the same way. Not even those who have suffered serious losses, just as you have.
- Sometimes it helps to know and lean on people who have gone through similar experiences, including other victims, but even in these cases, bear in mind that no one is equipped to fully un-

derstand how you feel, and experience a pain like yours.

- Even if the support from other people affected is quite valuable, don't forget to spend time with people who have not been affected by it as much as you. This will allow you to put your mind to something else, and where possible, to recover a much-needed sense of normalcy.
- It's important to value the support from others, and to acknowledge it accordingly. People who go and beyond to give you some support need to

know that you realize their efforts, and deserve acknowledgment. Do not assume that they already know. People are not able to guess what others are thinking.

- When those supporting you make inappropriate comments, or comments that you don't feel comfortable with, try not to make a big fuss out of it. People don't always know how to behave in these situations. Think about how important it is to have them around you, offering their support, and how that effort is worthy of leaving the possibility of them having the best intentions open.



➔ HOW CAN I PROVIDE SUPPORT?

Sometimes it is hard for us to offer our support, we don't know whether it's best to approach someone or not, to call someone close on the phone to find out how they are doing. We don't want to force those affected to meet us, but we want to help should they need us: How should I act? We hope that you find these guidelines useful:

- If you wish to provide support to people affected that are close to you, don't hesitate to contact them and offer it to them. Don't expect them to call, you do that, and ask them what you can do for them: give them specific examples of chores that they may not be able to do (for instance, calling other people, preparing food, picking up their children after school...) State clearly that you look forward to sharing moments with them, and having the satisfaction of being with them and being of help.
- If you wish to offer effective support to people affected by the attack who are close to you, make sure to keep in touch with them. At the beginning, many people show up to give support, but as time goes by, victims risk losing such support when they need it the most.
- When offering support, try to show affection, let people see in your eyes the sincere nature of the help you are offering, don't let them think you see it as an obligation. Don't be afraid to "bother" your relatives or friends. Offer to do anything you deem appropriate, but allow them to say "no".

- If you wish to offer your support to people who have been affected but with whom you don't have any previous relationship, you may follow the same guidelines in terms of offering support and asking them to tell you what to do for them, but it is important to be more careful and respect their right to intimacy. Consider that they may feel "overrun" if you treat them in a way that they deem inappropriate, given your relationship.
- When trying to provide support to people who have been directly affected by an attack, remember that, except expressly stated by them, they should be able to decide over the things that affect them. You need to ask their opinion and know their needs. The best possible support offers and provides possibilities, creates solutions, but is not overwhelming or takes away control of the situation from those who wish to maintain it.

➔ HOW CAN I CONTROL THIS SENSE OF UNEASE?

The feeling of discomfort that appears after suffering an attack is characterized by excessive tension and a prolonged state of anxiety. Below you will find some simple guidelines on how to reduce such discomfort and its possibility to appear.

Breathe well to reduce tension

The excessive stress and alertness generated by an attack can cause people to breathe shallowly, at an accelerated pace. This makes the amount of air reaching the lungs insufficient, and prevents blood from

being properly oxygenated, thus increasing the feeling of unease. With proper breathing, you will ensure better oxygenation, reduce fatigue, and mitigate the feeling of stress and tension.

Breathing is a very simple technique and its practice produces great benefits. Start by doing these exercises 3 to 4 times a day, to learn and decrease your overall level of activation. But you can also do them anytime you find yourself tense or feel bad.

» HOW CAN I DO THESE BREATHING EXERCISES?

- Find a quiet place that will allow you to do the exercises slowly and without interruptions. The first few times you practice them, you should not surround yourself with elements that may distract you, and without any noise.
- Lie down in a comfortable position
- Place one hand on your belly (below your navel)
- Slowly and softly inhale through your nose for 2 or 3 seconds
- Try to direct the air to the bottom of your lungs
- Feel how the air fills the lungs and moves the hand placed on the belly, but not the one placed on the stomach, or the chest
- Try to hold the air inside the lungs, mentally counting from one to three
- Slowly exhale through the mouth and take 3 to 4 seconds to completely empty the air in your lungs
- Make a final exhalation and feel how the tension in your body decreases
- Repeat the exercise 3 more times
- If you notice a slight dizziness, do not panic, just interrupt the exercise, breathe normally until it goes away: sometimes the excess of oxygen causes slight dizziness



- Choose 3 or 4 moments during the day to practice these exercises consistently and regularly to lower your overall levels of activation and automate this skill, so that you can use whenever you find yourself in a stressful situation
- After your first attempts, it would be advisable to carry out the exercise in stressful situations

Speak in a more positive way to feel better

We talk to ourselves all the time, although we usually don't pay much attention to what we tell ourselves. Our internal dialogs are closely linked to our feelings and our way of acting.

If we tell ourselves: "I'm going crazy, my life is spoiled, I'll never enjoy anything or anyone", we will feel really bad, scared, sad, and hopeless, and may not even find the strength to drag ourselves out of bed or go out. But if we change this dialog to: "These reactions are very unpleasant, but they are normal, and I will gradually recover. I may not be the same, but I want to be better than I am now," we may feel more hopeful and willing to do something to get by.


The phrases we tell ourselves determine what we feel and do. So, whenever you need to face a stressful situation, use words in a more positive way:

» HOW CAN I TALK TO MYSELF IN A MORE POSITIVE WAY?

- If you are in a situation that makes you feel bad, use positive instructions in your internal dialog to not worsen the situation. You can tell yourself:

"Everything will be fine", "it will be an unpleasant moment but it'll go away", "I will be OK, I've gone through worse", "there's no need for perfection, but I will do my best", "maybe I'll learn something from this", etc.

- Try to direct your dialog towards your goals, to what you want to achieve in that specific situation. You can tell yourself: "The important thing is to heal the wounds and that's what I'm here for."
- Try not to focus your dialog so much on your emotions or in how you are or not by telling yourself: "I'm a coward, I'm getting sick, I'm going to faint."
- If the feeling of discomfort continues, try to figure out if you are maintaining a negative dialog with yourself: "I'm going to be sick", "I will not be able to do this", "I'm not good at this", and if so, try to lead your dialog to a more positive place.
- When you know in advance that a situation will generate discomfort, focus on your internal dialog before going through it, as it will be easier for you to establish a positive dialog from the beginning.
- After going through it, spend some time acknowledging your success, and feeling proud for what you accomplish: "I did it", "It took me a lot of effort but I did it, I am brave, I am capable of many things." Focus on your achievements, even when you don't fully succeed.



THE PHRASES WE TELL
OURSELVES DETERMINE
WHAT WE FEEL AND DO.
SO, WHENEVER YOU NEED
TO FACE A STRESSFUL
SITUATION, USE WORDS IN A
MORE POSITIVE WAY

➔ HOW CAN I DEAL WITH THE MEMORIES OF THE ATTACK AND FEARED SITUATIONS?

Once we manage to reduce the discomfort of the first days or weeks, we will need to deal with many situations that we had been avoiding. The guidelines mentioned above and your social support can help you move on.

We often avoid our own memories from a traumatic experience, but we must gradually force ourselves to learn to endure. We propose some simple recollection exercises. However, the exercises described below should never be done in the early stages, nor should anyone be forced to carry them out. Many people need help to realize them and some may not be able to do so without specialized psychological support.

How can we help ourselves remember?

The exercise of forcing yourself to think about it, to remember it, is based on the fact that people affected by an attack may avoid remembering what happened during the early stages. This is actually a healthy reaction that can help avoid their suffering. However, remembering what happened can help you assimilate it, and thus give a new meaning to your life. Forcing yourself to not think about the attack could even make thoughts reappear more intensely.

If you choose to avoid thinking about it either because of how distressful it is to you, or because your

recollection is chaotic and unclear, there is an exercise that may help you with that.

It's about sharing the experience, and letting your memories of what happened just flow. This may be a very hard exercise, which can cause great suffering, especially for people who have been directly affected by the attack. Hence the importance of sharing this experience with others, whether close relatives or professionals. When you feel ready to begin, find a quiet and relaxing place:

- Give a first-person account of what happened. You were there, you suffered, saw and felt everything that happened at that time.
- Tell it in the present tense. It is essential to revive the event as if it were happening: "I'm at the station platform", "I'm entering the concert hall", "I'm walking down a street full of restaurants."
- Describe everything you saw, felt, heard and thought. This means, everything that the event generated in you. To help you share the experience, you can try to answer some of these questions: How do you describe what is happening? Where are you? What are you doing now? Who is you with? How long does it last? What are you doing to survive? What are your first thoughts? What were you thinking when they evacuated you or did you leave the premises on your own? What happened next? What thoughts of that situation continue to appear in your mind? What were you feeling at that moment? What did you feel after it happened? Is there anything that you particularly remember? How are you feeling right now?

- This is not an examination that focuses facts, but a tool to organize your memories.
- Remember it is key not to just remember what you did, but the feelings and thoughts you had back then.
- It is normal to feel bad, but that must not stop you from feeling, you need to make those feelings bearable to you.
- Although at first, you will probably be scared by the intensity of the emotions that you feel, as you read, hear or talk about what happened, you will see how your emotions become more tolerable. Therefore, it is important to do this exercise as many times as necessary. You will see how it becomes less difficult to think or talk about it.
- There are several ways you can carry out this exercise. All of them are valid. Choose the one that makes you feel less uncomfortable: write the story as if it were a diary; record it all at once or gradually and then listen to it, or tell it to a person close to you.

Confronting feared situations

Patiently and slowly you will need to address the situations that make you feel anxious or cause discomfort to regain some normalcy. In time, you will be able to travel by train again, and enjoy reading on your way to work. You will also be able to talk about what happened with others. However, this takes time and effort, and you may have to endure a certain degree of discomfort until you get used to it. Try to confront these difficult situations gradually, beginning with those that will generate less stress

and getting used to them first. You can do this with the support of others, using breathing patterns, and everything we've seen about maintaining a positive self-dialog. But do not fool yourself, you will quite likely have to go through a high level of discomfort that will only decrease by hanging in there, resisting and assimilating it, until our body relearns that one can be in these situations without assessing them as threatening, and stops feeling bad about them.

This is not about running away from these situations, drinking alcohol or using drugs to be able to endure the pain. This is about the fact that everyone is entitled to recovering the possibility of boarding a train, going out at night relaxed, going to a concert, walking through a town, traveling with a backpack, or separating from your family without thinking that they will die. Some people need psychological help for coping with such situations successfully.





➔ INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN

L Children are a special category of victims. Some are directly affected as they suffer the death of relatives, classmates, or neighbors, and this entails breakdowns that are very difficult for them to assimilate. Following a terrorist attack, many children are faced with some extremely harsh and incomprehensible situations and images. Here are some recommendations for parents and families to help them cope with this situation.

What to tell a child

- Never lie. You cannot tell them that some trains collided or that their father went on a trip and he won't be back for a long time. Bear in mind that children are not stupid or deaf, and will probably find out the truth through other people, quite likely in a more harsh and painful way. If this happens, they will feel deceived. If there is bad news to give to any child, isn't it preferable that they come from people that the child loves and trusts?
 - Tell them only what they will understand. We must consider the children's age and level of understanding to explain what happened. It would be as absurd to give excessive explanations to a three-year-old, as to avoid giving them to an 11-year-old.
 - Do not give more information than the one the child needs and can assimilate. In general, children themselves set the limits, either asking more details or changing the subject.
- Always answer their questions about what happened. When it comes to the death of someone close, they might not dare to ask at first. In such case, we must tell them even if they don't ask.
 - Take this opportunity to convey certain values such as solidarity: teaching them to value the solidarity gestures of people, for instance. Many children will want to "collaborate" in some way, with smaller flowers or drawings. Older children may attend demonstrations.
 - Clearly explain to younger children the cruel nature of what happened. This is not to scare them, but it is important for them to know where you stand on this.
 - Avoid exposing them to images of the victims and injured that appear in the media, especially on television. Whenever this is not an option, take this time to teach them about the respect that they deserve.

How can I tell them that they have lost a significant person in their lives?

- Find an appropriate, comfortable place, where there will be no interruptions, and where you can talk as long as needed.
- Speak naturally, without solemnity, or adding drama to the event.
- Convey the news slowly, exploring what the child already knows and what he/she thinks or fears. When giving more serious news, you may split the information to give them time to assimilate the information gradually. First, you explain the attack,

then that there are people from their family who were injured, and then passed.

- Make sure the child understands that the deceased had no other choice, that their death was not something they wanted, and that they did not want to abandon him /her, and that death happens without anyone being able to control it.
- With the right emotional tone, make them realize that adults around them have not lost control. Children can and must perceive that adults are sad, or cry, and feel just like them, but still manage to maintain control of the situation. You should not say the following in front of a child: “I want to die too” or “what will become of us?”.
- Try to find, despite how difficult it can be in such circumstances, positive aspects of the event to bring some comfort to the child. You can tell them, for instance: “he did not suffer”, if we are talking about the death of someone close in an attack.
- Always provide the greatest emotional support, children must feel supported and loved. It is important to express such support, which should be adjusted to their age and the relationship we have with them. Hugging and caressing them, which can show affection in some cases, may be inappropriate in others.
- Help them solve the problems that their loss generates: “Can I go to the same school?”, “Will I go to a new house to go to live near my other grandparents?”, “Will I lose my friends?”, “Will we have money?”.

- We should give explanations about death that are consistent with the child's education and with the explanations that may be given by other close people.

What else can you do?

- It is recommended that children, to the extent of their abilities and ages, participate in services or rituals that they can understand, and in the case of children aged 8-10 years, to take decisions on whether they feel like taking part.
- It is important that they are surrounded by their friends, not just their family during the service. It is also significant to remember those who are no longer with us on their anniversaries. In these situations, those closest to them may feel sadder or more sensitive.
- It should be borne in mind that the explanations about death and its circumstances must be adjusted to the child's age and experiences, as well as to their understanding of the concept of death. In children, fears and nightmares about their own death or close relatives may appear. Discuss them and clarify any issues that may generate greater discomfort.
- We must help them solve their doubts: Why are people are buried? Why, if the sky is up? Clarify, to children who will have this information and participate in the burial or cremation, that being cremated does not cause their loved ones any pain, and that being buried will not suffocate them.



- Help them understand loss: children can have a hard time understanding what happens when someone dies. Talk about death naturally, explaining that death is part of life, even if sometimes life is shortened and death appears prematurely, as is the case in attacks or accidents.
- Use relatable examples: a child who lost his beloved pet, a distant relative, a friend of the family.
- You should not use phrases that may confuse children, such as "Dad is sleeping", "he is gone for good", "he left us", which can worsen the situation by making the child feel abandoned, betrayed or unloved.
- Help them to express their feelings, concerns and fears. We need to let them know that having those feelings is normal, and that not feeling anything or not being able to cry is too. They are all normal reactions and they should not feel scared by them. Help them put simple names to their complex feelings.
- You may ask them if there is anything that they would have liked to say to the deceased person, words that were left unsaid, or if they want to ask for forgiveness for something, or thank them for something. In this case, you may suggest the child to write a letter to the deceased, as naturally as possible. Depending on the age and the beliefs of the child and the family, he may keep it, take it to the cemetery, or leave it by the window so that a star finds it and reads it.
- It is highly advisable to write or keep photos of the deceased person: to build their life, including their death.
- It is appropriate to encourage, within the family setting, conversations about death and that of beloved people, as well as about the very concept of death.
- In case of many children being affected, each of them should be cared for on an individual basis and never as a group, so that we can adapt to the needs of each one, their questions, fears, beliefs, and their level of understanding in the explanations.
- You must try to restore the child's day-to-day life as soon as possible, including their eating and sleep habits, going back to school and their regular activities and, where possible, not removing them of their home, their neighborhood, and avoiding unnecessary separations from other people close to the family, as well as spending time with their friends.
- It is important to help them focus on the positive things that happen around them: the support of their friends, their strength to react, their ability to enjoy games, outings, meals, etc., everything that you can find with their help.

As grieving is normally a long process, this type of actions and special attention must happen over time. It is not enough to devote one day to explaining the situation to children. Maybe a question won't come up at the beginning, but may appear later, and their

thoughts may also change, and thus create new concerns and fears over time.

It will also be necessary to assess, throughout this process, if the child remains excessively active, nervous, has trouble eating, sleeping or concentrating at school. We should also pay attention to see if they go back to their usual state of mind, if they are able to enjoy the activities that they formerly enjoyed, and to whether there are things that they are no longer interested in, or if they have fears that interfere with their life. In such cases, it is possible that we may need to resort to the help of a psychologist specialized in this type of issues.

Who should talk to the child?

Close members of the family, parents, if possible, or at least one of them. Should you require assistance to do so, you may contact a psychologist, but do not leave this responsibility to others.

What reactions can we expect in a child?

- Many children, especially those under 7 years old, and some teenagers, react without any emotional response, for example asking if they can go play. Sometimes they may not cry or show any feelings.
- Quite often, little children may ask a “selfish” question, such as “Who will help me now with my homework?”
- It is quite common to see children, regardless of their age, refuse to talk about what happened in the following days, and even behave as if nothing had happened.

- Children may experience nightmares and night terrors, and raise questions and concerns about death; even in children who don't have victims in their closest circle.
- Children may have all the normal reactions that we have described in the case of adults and, in addition, depending on their age, they may experience fear of separation from their parents; typical behaviors of younger children, for example, thumb sucking, or bed-wetting, or making games related to the event, for example, re-enacting the attack, with ambulances or the police.



➔ NEED FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE TO VICTIMS OF TERRORISM

The results of research on the psychopathological consequences of terrorist attacks on victims of terrorism converge in asserting that, after a terrorist attack, both direct and indirect victims (and among the latter, especially direct relatives of the deceased and injured in the attacks), will need psychological follow-up and specialized care in the short, medium, long, and very long term ⁸. . The data also allow us to clearly establish the most appropriate treatments for psychological disorders often suffered by victims of terrorism ⁹.

The first psychological interventions after a terrorist attack should be aimed at enhancing people's resources to survive and adapt to the new situation, as well as at detecting those who may need help and to provide it effectively.

It is necessary to ensure that victims of terrorism receive treatments based on research, which have proved to be effective and useful in treating psychological issues that a person may experien-

8. García-Vera, M. P., and Sanz, J. (2016). Psychopathological effects of terrorist attacks on adult victims and their treatment: Current status. *Papeles del Psicólogo (Psychology papers)*, 37, 3-13.

9. García-Vera, M. P., Moreno, N., Sanz, J., Gutiérrez, S., Gesteira, C., Zapardiel, A., and Marotta-Walters, S. (2015). Effectiveness and clinical usefulness of treatments for adult victims of terrorist attacks: a systematic review. *Behavioral Psychology/Psicología Conductual*, 23, 215-244.

Moreno, N., Sanz, J., García-Vera, M. P., Gesteira, C., Gutiérrez, S., Zapardiel, A., Cobos, B., and Marotta-Walters, S. (2016). Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy in victims of terrorist attacks: an effectiveness study with mental disorders at very long term. Text under editorial review.

Gesteira, C., García-Vera, M. P. and Sanz, J. (currently in print) Effectiveness of a long-term cognitive-behavioral program for post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), depression and anxiety in victims of terrorist attacks. *Clínica y Salud (Medicine and Health)*

ce after living a traumatic event, such as a terrorist attack. We know now that there are psychological treatments, in particular, trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), which has proved effective and useful in clinical practice for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and of depression and anxiety disorders that victims of terrorist attacks may experience. Such efficiency has been demonstrated, even in cases with victims of terrorist attacks, suffering from these disorders in the very long term (15-25 years after the attacks)¹⁰. In summary, the results of our research currently suggest that TF-CBT would be the preferred therapeutic alternative for victims of terrorism who suffer from PTSD, at least while we await for more studies with additional favorable results on the effectiveness of exposure therapy to be published, and while there are no further studies on the specific effectiveness of other psychological therapies that have proved effective for PTSD derived from other traumatic events (anxiety control training and EMDR) over other psychological or pharmacological therapies which have never been tested on victims of terrorism and lack the adequate empirical support in terms of effectiveness for PTSD produced by other traumatic situations, or are less effective to treat it¹¹. TF-CBT is based on the application of cognitive restructuring techniques on the thoughts and beliefs that prolong post-traumatic symptomatology and interoceptive and live avoidance to trau-

ma-related stimuli. Such avoidance may, therefore hinder the recovery, reconstruction and reprocessing of the experience lived, as well as the processing and assimilation of everything that happened.

10. García-Vera, M. P., and Sanz, J. (2016). Psychopathological effects of terrorist attacks on adult victims and their treatment: Current status. *Papeles del Psicólogo (Psychology papers)*, 37, 3-13



