



## ADAA Statement on Terrorism

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Terrorism can be generally defined as an attack that is meant to instill fear and disrupt routine, with the purpose of bringing attention to a cause. While anger, worry, sadness, and shame are natural responses to terrorist attacks, it is important to know that terrorists' methods prey on natural human thought error biases to be effective.

### Physical Risk of Terrorism

Terrorists seek to take advantage of people's natural tendency to inaccurately assess risk. People innately ascribe more risk to events that are recent, dramatic, unforeseen, or intentional, while deemphasizing more common events that actually pose a greater risk. For example, in all of 2015, there were 98 recorded shark attacks worldwide, six of which were fatal. Despite the rarity of these shark attacks, media outlets covered them over multiple segments for multiple days. In comparison, a far more common and risky event, car crashes, received comparably little media coverage, despite the fact that car wrecks killed an average of 89 Americans per day in just the first half of 2015. Because car crashes are a more common and less sensational risk, people naturally worry less about them than shark attacks. This same natural fallacy happens after a terrorist attack; we worry even though our actual risk level is largely unchanged.

### Psychological Risk of Terrorism

While relatively few people are physically harmed by terrorism, a great many people suffer the psychological consequences. For example, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Americans reported feeling angry (65%), worried (27%), and ashamed (22%). In fact, research shows that indirect exposure to terrorism may lead to many of the same psychological symptoms as direct exposure. As a result of the divisive nature of terror and the hyper-vigilance it elicits, some people may inappropriately place blame on others or themselves. These feelings are common, and in many people they will naturally dissipate. However, for a substantial minority, they may persist.

### Coping with Terrorism

Everyone responds differently to stress as a result of terrorism. While it can be natural to respond to the resulting fear and anger with persistent worrying and ruminating, avoidance/withdrawal, and unhealthy behaviors such as drinking, isolation, or aggression (e.g., hate crimes), these often maintain the negative emotions. Rather, people

*"The distinguishing feature of terrorism is fear and this fear is stimulated by threats of indiscriminate and horrifying forms of violence directed against ordinary people everywhere."*

-The Geneva Declaration on Terrorism

#### Americans Are...

- 4 times more likely to be struck by lightning than killed by terrorism
- 110 times more likely to die from contaminated food than by terrorism
- 1,904 times more likely to die from a car crash than by terrorism
- 35,079 times more likely to die from heart disease than by terrorism

#### Healthy Coping Strategies

- Maintain routines
- Share feelings with loved ones
- Acknowledge feelings
- Don't worry about things you cannot control
- Exercise regularly
- Limit media exposure
- Volunteer

should make a concerted effort to engage in healthy coping strategies. Maintaining a stable routine can be the first step in healthy coping. Finding social support among trusted family, friends, and community members is also helpful to maintain a sense of strength and unity in the face of uncertainty. Research suggests that volunteering and regular exercise also help people cope with intense emotions following trauma. If symptoms that interfere with life and activities a lot persist, mental health professionals can help with further coping strategies or with eliminating the stress reaction altogether.