Peer-support Groups for Cross-border Victims of Terrorism: Lessons Learnt in the UK after the 9/11 and Paris Attacks

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When people become victims of terrorism in a country other than their own, they often face diverse legal, financial, cultural and political difficulties. This paper addresses peer support groups in their various forms (e.g. therapeutic support groups, victim association gatherings, online forums, etc.), as an effective way of helping people affected by cross-border terrorist attacks to deal with the complex problems they face, thus alleviating some of their suffering. It focuses on two major international incidents affecting British nationals: the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015. The author was an initiator of peer-support systems for the UK-based bereaved and survivors following both atrocities. Here, she draws on her experience to highlight the benefits and identify potential challenges of such peer-support groups in tackling some of the complex problems individuals affected by cross-border terrorist attacks encounter.

Keywords: terrorism, peer support, cross-border terrorism victims.

Introduction

Terrorist attacks seem prevalent within this time of global upheaval. For those directly affected, the trauma of such attacks may take a lifetime to heal, if it ever does. Such traumatic reactions become even more severe when peo-
people become victims on a foreign soil, as they often face additional complexities to those living in the ‘host’ country.

This paper examines peer support groups as an effective way of supporting people affected by cross-border terrorist attacks. Setting up support groups for victims of terrorism, however, is not without challenges, which is also explored. The focus is on two major international incidents that affected British nationals, the first being the attacks of 11 September 2001 where 67 British citizens died and several other victims had UK family connections. As one of the bereaved relatives, I was actively involved in organizing peer support in the United Kingdom (hereinafter referred to as UK) after the attacks. The second is the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, where my role as a trauma psychotherapist within a service funded by the Ministry of Justice brought me into contact with British survivors of the attacks. I subsequently became a creator and facilitator of a peer-support group for UK-based survivors.

Despite the many possible benefits from and, in my experience, people’s expressed preferences for peer support, the setting up of such groups remains an ad-hoc rather than a systematically planned support service in the UK. My intention here is to raise awareness of the importance of post-terrorism peer-support groups, especially in cases involving more complex problems such as cross-border victims of terrorism.

Victims of terror abroad: Main challenges

People become victims of terrorism abroad while travelling overseas on business or holiday, or while visiting relatives, attending a concert or having many other everyday experiences. When an attack happens on foreign soil, the aftermath is not just shockingly traumatic but also very complicated, rendering those affected even more vulnerable to secondary traumatisation.

To understand the challenges cross-border victims face, it is important to first understand the basic needs and then how issues concerning distance and culture affect the meeting of those needs. Collective experience of members of Disaster Action (hereinafter referred to as DA) – an umbrella organization founded by the bereaved and survivors of disasters – indicates that the need for information is very important to victims of disasters, as described by Eyre and Dix (2014: 56):
“Alongside physical comfort and safety, the need for information is one of the most fundamental, urgent and significant needs of those involved in disasters […] Our experience tells us that in the immediate and short-term aftermath information needs relate to getting basic answers about: who, what, where, when and how the disaster happened […] In the longer term, information needs tend to focus on finding out why the disaster happened, whether it might happen again and learning lessons.”

The authors further state that other needs, such as social, practical and emotional, are also often mentioned by members of DA and tend to be linked. (Eyre, Dix, 2014: 57). For cross-border victims of terrorism, obtaining the information about the terrorist attack can become additionally difficult due to the geographical distance, language and differing police protocols (Victim Support Europe, 2017). While self-help and mutual support normally occur informally among those who live locally to the site of the atrocity, and some natural sharing of information takes place spontaneously, this is different for those who are dispersed.

Regarding physical, practical and emotional needs, financial support tends to be one of the main areas of concern (Barker, Dinisman, 2016). Indeed, in the aftermath of terrorism, victims are highly likely to experience financial losses and difficulties; although they are normally entitled to financial compensation, for those living abroad it can become unclear how to access such funds and obtain competent legal help (Victim Support Europe, 2017). This, in some cases, results in victims having to have legal involvement with two national systems. Financial help is often, also, available through humanitarian organisations but, again, the focus of people who donate to the funds, as it is for the charities dealing with disaster funds, tends to be on the disaster’s locality. This can bring further obstacles for victims from other countries, who may live far away from the points of distribution or may even be unaware of such funds. Struggling to get help from disaster funds in another country while conversing in a foreign language, from my observation, can become a source of secondary traumatisation in its own right, if the process is perceived to be overly bureaucratic and cold instead of humane.

Additionally, access to appropriate psychological help is likely to be complicated, as specialist programmes for trauma support for particular terrorist attacks tend to be set up in the locality of the disaster as part of the coordi-
nated government response to the attacks, whereas in the countries where the isolated victims reside it is unlikely that programmes specific to that disaster would be put in place if the number of victims is relatively small. The victims will enter the mainstream system of psychological treatment, with varying availability of trauma treatments and often with long waiting times (Barker, Dinisman, 2016). Below, I will illustrate these problems and how some of these difficulties were tackled in the UK after the September 11th attacks and, 14 years later, the Paris attacks.

The UK families of September 11th

On the morning of Tuesday, 11 September 2001, four simultaneous terrorist attacks shook the United States of America (hereinafter referred to as USA) – the main ones being the attacks on New York’s World Trade Centre, where nearly 3000 people perished as the Twin Towers collapsed.

Among them, 67 British nationals and several other individuals with UK family connections died there that day. Some were UK residents who went to New York for a few days on a business trip, while others were living in the USA permanently. My own brother, who was a dual Canadian – Serbian citizen, went to New York from his home in Toronto, Canada, to attend a conference on the 106th floor of the North Tower. No one survived from this floor.

After these attacks, the relatives needed information about their missing loved ones. Although it is not unusual in any disaster for people to be considered ‘missing’ for some days, with 9/11 this uncertainty continued for weeks and months. Waiting for news and information was agonizing for the families, and their anguish was aggravated by confusing and often contradictory information from the media.

The main place for support was the Families Assistance Centre, which was opened in New York in the first week after the attacks. Its purpose was to provide a one-stop shop for all support services the families required, from police updates to financial and psychological help. Many UK citizens visited the centre briefly during their visits to New York, but they could not make repeat visits over the months that followed or access the services from a distance.
Forming of a 9/11 family association

In addition to the stress of dealing with my own loss, I encountered numerous practical difficulties in obtaining information from the USA regarding victim identification processes and how best to access charitable funds, which I needed to finance another fact-finding trip to New York. I was aware that the USA had many support groups set up for the bereaved, and I knew I would benefit from meeting other people in the same situation, but such support groups were unavailable in the UK. At the time I did not know any other affected people in Britain, so I channeled my energy into finding other 9/11 families.

After encountering ambivalence from officialdom, I met members of Disaster Action – a charitable organisation established in 1991 by bereaved families and survivors from terrorist attacks and other disasters. Based on their collective experience of mutual social support, they instantly understood my need to be part of a group, and in many instances had learned from the experience of initiating and facilitating peer groups themselves. DA organised the first meeting of all UK-based 9/11 families six months after the tragedy. At that first meeting in a London hotel, the September 11 UK Families Support Group was formally created. Along with three other people I had never met before, I became one of the initial trustees, and I remain in that position to this day.

How did the family association help?

The benefits of having the group varied over time, and was not limited to mutual understanding and emotional support. Initially, most of us felt the victim identification process was the pressing issue so the group organised regular briefings from senior police representatives. The value here was being able to access official information first-hand about how the identification process was progressing in New York instead of dealing with conflicting information from the media.

Another early benefit of the group was sharing information and experiences in accessing charitable funds. Although foreign families had high expenditure related to their loss – for example, travel to the USA and many international phone calls – their access to humanitarian funds was limited because of their distance from the USA, the place from where such funds
were being distributed. Furthermore, many group members were unaware of funds being set up to help them. As a group, we made sure that the list of available funds was distributed to the members and we shared experiences in dealing with the complicated application processes.

With the passage of time, the organisation became identifiable as a cohesive, representative group, enabling government and others to consult with us over decisions such as memorials, and for us to have a say. This included the creation of the September 11th Memorial Garden in London, a focal point for commemorations. Over the longer term peer support has been primarily about overcoming isolation and being in the company of others who share a common experience, albeit one which is profoundly difficult and unique to deal with. It is for this reason that the group has been a lifeline for many and continues to meet.

**UK victims of the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015**

On 13th November 2015 in Paris, 130 people were killed and many more injured in attacks by three coordinated ISIS terrorist teams targeting restaurants, cafés and the national football stadium. The deadliest attack, though, took place at the Bataclan theatre, where over a thousand people were enjoying themselves listening to an American rock band. At 9:40 pm, halfway through the concert, three gunmen wearing suicide belts burst in, firing indiscriminately into the crowd, killing 90 people and leaving hundreds of others injured. The ordeal went on for over two hours.

The attacks that night affected numerous British residents. This is unsurprising given Paris has strong connections with London in many ways, including that the train journey between the cities takes just over two hours. One British person was killed at the Bataclan and around 15 British people, among others, managed to escape, some with physical injuries such as gunshots. For all involved, it was a horrific and profoundly traumatising event.

I met some of the survivors in my role as a specialist trauma psychotherapist with ASSIST Trauma Care – a charity commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and Victim Support to provide specialist one-to-one psychotherapy to people affected by homicide or terrorism. The survivors I was working with as a psychotherapist were struggling with many practical and legal issues, which
were causing them further distress and secondary trauma. For example, some took many weeks to find out about our therapy service, which is available for free in England and Wales. Their search for appropriately qualified psychotherapists through the National Health System was something of an ordeal. Such a distressing situation could have been avoided if the survivors had access to information about available services. Based on my experience of supporting victims after terrorism, I recognised that without an information sharing infrastructure there is an even greater need for mutual support among survivors.

These survivors felt isolated and somewhat lost and disoriented after returning to the UK. Their experience of support from the government was mixed: those who had physical injuries tended to be recognised as legitimate victims and were put in touch with victim support services. However, those who had minor injuries or walked away without physical wounds did not seem to be recognised as victims; as such, they struggled to understand what their rights were and what sort of support was available to them. For example, the specialist trauma service I am part of is available free of charge to all the bereaved and survivors of terrorism, but many survivors were unaware of its existence.

Creation of support group

I decided to initiate a facilitated support group for survivors, who did not know each other, could meet, connect with others and support each other. Following my own experience after September 11th, I facilitated a support group for British people affected by the 2004 tsunami as part of the Tsunami Support Network run by the British Red Cross. Having witnessed firsthand the benefit of such a group, I became committed to starting a group for Paris survivors, with the help of a fellow psychotherapist. I also consulted my colleagues from DA about their collective experience from many previous disasters.

In running any kind of post-disaster support group, the key challenge is outreach. Because of data protection, I did not have a list of affected people but the group was promoted informally by two survivors through a Paris-based social media site dedicated to victims of the attacks. Although I attempted to promote the group more formally through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it gave no support in disseminating information
about this service. However, the grassroots approach reached most survivors and the first meeting was held in March 2016 – four months after the attacks. My colleague and I facilitated the meetings, which were held monthly and lasted for two and a half hours.

Benefits of the group

As this group is still ongoing, it is too early to evaluate it formally. A group member said the following (Barker, Dinisman, 2016: 55):

“It was not easy to find a support group in the area where I live; I could not find a suitable group with people who have had similar experiences. Therefore, I travel once a month, for several hours, to participate in a group intended for victims of the Paris attack... I find comfort, support and advice in talking to other people who experienced the same event as I did. We can share our feelings and experiences, receive practical advice, and exchange information on how to better cope with what we are going through.”

The group has also helped each other make sense of the events of that night. As a Paris survivor said, “What happened at the Bataclan is like a puzzle that I’ve been able to piece together by talking to other people”. Group members also shared information about resources available to them. For example, the French government was paying out lump sums as compensation to each survivor but some survivors never knew about it as they are not part of any formal information sharing network.

Within the meetings members discussed the upcoming criminal trial and important milestones, such as the first anniversary of the attacks. Also, dealing with the media has been a constant topic. The survivors have expressed a wish to expand the group to include survivors and bereaved of more recent attacks, such as the Tunisia shootings and Brussels attacks (both in 2016) and Westminster attacks (2017). Our intention is to build on the example set by Disaster Action by connecting the group members with people affected by previous terrorist attacks and developing their role as peer facilitators for future support groups.
Recommendations

Based on the experiences of these two groups of people affected by terrorism, fourteen years apart, here are some key recommendations for future psychosocial support services:

- As the main challenge faced in setting up the peer support groups outlined above included overcoming resistance by individual and organizational gatekeepers (for example, to enabling information-sharing), it is recommended that lead government departments should include peer support initiatives in the psychosocial preparedness, planning and response. Such planning can be built on the good practice of government funded post-disaster peer-based support initiatives, such as the Tsunami Support Network created in the UK after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 and run by the British Red Cross. This network, which provided information meetings for the bereaved and survivors as well as regional support groups, a bespoke website and helpline, received high satisfaction ratings from the participants in an independent audit by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2006: 15). Although the network was set up in response to a natural disaster, the model can be applicable across other types of disasters, including terrorism. Another model that can be applied is the Norwegian psychosocial model for the bereaved following terrorism, which was put into place following the Utoya island shooting in 2011 (Dyregrov et al., 2014).

- When a Humanitarian Assistance Centre (HAC) is set up as a single point of assistance for victims, needs of remote and cross-border victims could be met by establishing additional satellite HACs, or by providing additional telephone support lines and single point support websites (Cabinet Office, 2016). Additionally, a proactive outreach by case workers should be applied, with a particular attention to cross-border victims due to their complex needs.

- Access to relevant information about assistance is likely to improve if the main referrers, such as the police, are aware of the enhanced definition of a victim of terrorism in compliance with the Directive 2012/29/EU\(^1\). Such

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awareness would likely result in the understanding that a ‘witness’ of a terrorist attack has rights as a victim and is entitled to be referred to victim support services. It is, therefore, recommended that awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes are set up for the main referrers in order to clarify the definition of a victim of terrorism and comply with the obligations under the EU Directive.

Conclusion

The value of group support in helping address the impact of collective traumatic experience has been highlighted by interventions and experiences following previous disasters. International experience and evidence, including from USA (Boss et al., 2003), Norway (Dyregov, Strauma, Sari, 2009), and Israel (Possick, Shamai, Sadeh, 2013) has reinforced what the UK has learnt (Eyre, 2006): that, in addition to individual therapy, participating in appropriately facilitated support groups brings emotional, social, and other benefits. Peer support is even more important for those impacted by terrorism abroad because of cross-border complexities, and such problems can sometimes be resolved through ‘power in numbers’ to tackle legal issues, to lobby the government or to organise visits to the country of the disaster.

Peer support can be organised in different formats, such as a family association, as in the example of the UK September 11th organisation, or smaller, therapeutic support groups as in the Paris attacks, or even telephone or Skype group meetings. Ideally, there should be a range of group formats on offer for each disaster, as different people may have a preference for a different kind of group – for example, some people may want to meet others at an informal, social event, whereas others may prefer a more formal, facilitated group.

Funding peer support seems an unresolved issue, in part because of a general lack of clarity of responsibility between the ‘host’ country and the country of residence. In my experience, the best arrangement is when countries involved coordinate and co-operate accordingly to ensure parity of services between local and remote victims.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that support groups cannot, by themselves, resolve all issues stemming from cross-border difficulties. Stronger international cooperation in the provision of support for victims
of terrorism is required. International organisations, such as Victim Support Europe and the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Working Group on Supporting and Highlighting Victims of Terrorism, who facilitate cross-border collaboration, are offering much hope for the future by advancing the promotion of the rights of, and support to, victims of terrorism.

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Grupe za podršku za prekogranične žrtve terorizma: Lekcije naučene u Velikoj Britaniji nakon napada 11. septembra 2001. godine u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama i napada u Parizu

Kada ljudi postanu žrtve terorizma u stranoj zemlji, često se suočavaju sa različitim pravnim, finansijskim, kulturološkim i političkim poteškoćama. Ovaj rad se bavi različitim oblicima grupne podrške (na primer, terapeutске grupe podrške, okupljanja udrženja žrtava, forumi na Internetu i slično) kao efikasnim načinima pomoći žrtvama pogođenim prekograničnim terorističkim napadima u razrešavanju kompleksnih problema sa kojima se suočavaju, čime se donekle ublažava njihova patnja.

Fokus rada je na dva glavna međunarodna incidenta koja su pogodila britanske državljanke, od kojih prvi čine napadi u SAD 11. septembra 2001. godine, a drugi napadi u Parizu koji su se dogodili 13. novembra 2015. godine. Autorka je bila inicijatorka sistema grupne podrške u Velikoj Britaniji za ožalošćene i preživele nakon oba napada. Na osnovu svog iskustva autorka je ukazala na prednosti i potencijalne izazove sa kojima se suočavaju grupe za podršku prilikom rešavanja nekih od složenih problema ljudi pogođenih prekograničnim terorističkim napadima.

Uprkos mnogim prednostima i izraženoj potrebi žrtava terorizma za grupnom podrškom, uspostavljanje takvih grupa je i dalje pre ad hoc nego sistematski planiran i organizovan sistem podrške u Velikoj Britaniji. Namera autorke je da se podigne svest o značaju grupe za podršku nakon terorističkih napada, posebno u situacijama koje uključuju kompleksne probleme sa kojima se neke od žrtava suočavaju, poput žrtava prekograničnih terorističkih napada.

**Ključne reči:** terorizam, grupe za podršku, žrtve prekograničnih terorističkih napada.