

Preparedness – A Reminder for the Public

Irwin Redlener, M.D.
Associate Dean & Director
The National Center for Disaster Preparedness
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health
(212) 305-0338

The attacks in London directed entirely toward civilian populations using public transportation are a stark reminder that the threat of terrorism remains real. Public officials' highest priority is doing everything possible to prevent such attacks. Nonetheless the possibility of future attacks can never be completely ruled out.

In its most extreme forms, terrorism can include targeting of civilian populations with chemical, biological or radiological weapons. Such horrific scenarios are not out of the question. Most likely situations would involve attacks like those in London or last year's Madrid incident where conventional explosions affected people in the immediate vicinity of the targeted area. You are not likely to be personally caught up in such situations but keep in mind that emergency response decisions may impact transportation or communication for a period of time. As such it is essential that you do all you can to prepare in order to protect your family and decrease your and your family's stress level.

It is normal and expected that the community's response to the tragic events in London trigger anxiety and concerns. You may feel uneasy or anxious for a few days and may even choose to take extra measures of caution for yourself and your family as well as to enlist the moral support from friends and family. Those are normal and adaptive responses to stress. However, if you feel overwhelmed and have difficulty carrying out everyday activities, we advise that you seek professional support.

What about the public? What should citizens do – or not do – at a time when threat levels are raised and we are painfully reminded that living with a certain level of risk is a reality of our times? Of course, this isn't a question of terrorism, alone. We are also concerned about natural disasters or severe flu pandemics that are also capable of putting many people at great risk.

Here are some general guidelines from the experts at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness:

1. We must *not let fear overtake our lives*, interfere with our on-going priorities or keep us from doing what we normally would. This message is crucial for everyone, particularly for children who rely on their parents and benefit from structure to have a sense of safety and wellbeing.

- a. First of all, parents should practice self-care and engage in activities that help them stay calm and able to communicate effectively with their children.
 - b. Once you feel confident and less anxious, you will be better able to reassure your children who may be concerned or confused. Families should continue daily routines, vacations plans and all usual activities.
2. It is advisable to review your *family's emergency plan* or make one if you haven't already. The plan should include:
 - a. Knowing where your children are and what would happen if there were an emergency limiting your ability to reach them. Do you have someone who will back you up to pick up the kids from school or camp if you can't get there?
 - b. Having a predetermined meeting place for everyone if you can't get home.
 - c. Finding two additional phone numbers you can use to help get and give information to family members. One number can be local, and the other should be in another state.
 - d. Making sure elderly or disabled relatives are considered in making an emergency plan.
3. Take *prudent steps to be personally prepared*. We recommend the following:
 - a. Be aware of your environment. Upon entering a passenger bus, subway, commuter train or public place, familiarize yourself with its emergency exits and procedures.
 - b. Report suspicious activities or packages.
 - c. Be aware of exits and emergency plans for the buildings where you live and work.
 - d. Wear comfortable shoes.
 - e. Carry a flashlight (with spare batteries) and a whistle.
 - f. Have a bottle of water.
 - g. Carry a handkerchief which can serve several functions, including leaving a situation where smoke may be a problem.
 - h. Carry 24 hours worth of vital prescriptions
4. Pay *special attention to children* who may be exposed to repeated television images and discussions of the recent terror attacks. Depending on the child's age and disposition he or she may not say much, but express anxiety in other ways. Changes in sleep patterns, behavioral changes, loss of appetite, increased clinginess or greater anxiety in being separated from parents may be signs of acute anxiety in children. Here's what we recommend:
 - a. Limit exposure to coverage and discussions of terrorism.
 - b. Be aware of your child's behavior and offer support, comfort, direct contact and expressions of reassurance.
 - c. Answer questions when asked with honest, short answers in detail appropriate to the child's age.

- d. Stick to family routines and make extra efforts to have the family eat together, read to small children and other activities than demonstrate your availability to the child.
- e. Know when a child's behavior requires professional advice. This may occur if a child is having persistent nightmares, loss of appetite, severe separation anxiety and the like.