

## **Public Perspectives on the Mental Health Effects of Terrorism**

### ***A National Poll***

This document summarizes the major findings from a nationally representative and census-balanced telephone study conducted in early December 2003 among 750 Americans 18 years of age and older. The “Public Perspectives on the Mental Health Effects of Terrorism” poll is a collaborative initiative of the National Association of State Mental Health and Program Directors, the National Mental Health Association and the Consortium for Risk and Crisis Communications. The poll was conducted by Widmeyer Research and Polling of Washington, DC. The margin of error for the study is +/- 3.5%.

The major **conclusions** are as follows:

1. Americans know that terrorism is psychological warfare designed to cause fear and distress among the public. And terrorists are succeeding: most Americans believe the U.S. will experience a terrorist attack in the near future. Besides worries about another attack, Americans say the intentional nature of terrorism and “fear of the unknown” are major reasons why they are experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.
2. Americans say the government is not doing enough to address the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism. There is a strong sentiment that public officials could do a much better job of communicating with the public about the issue and that the nation’s public health, medical and emergency response systems are not meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism.
3. Americans want access to programs that will help them cope with the fear and distress the threat of terrorism causes. The public wants the federal government to take the lead but wants the mental health community involved in the delivery of programs at the community level.
4. The mental health or psychological effects of the threat of terrorism are varied and widespread and Americans say the threat of terrorism has led to changes in their behavior. Noteworthy is that the threat of terrorism has strengthened, not weakened, American’s religious faith.
5. Americans identify certain groups of people that they feel are especially at risk of experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism. Parents with young children and Americans suffering from mental health problems are viewed as most vulnerable.
6. The public believes that media coverage of the threat of terrorism makes people more fearful. Americans say that network and cable news have done the most effective job at providing balanced coverage about the threat of terrorism.
7. The threat of terrorism reaches into every community in the U.S. Americans living in all parts of the country are concerned about the threat of terrorism and the demand for informational programs is widespread across the nation.
8. Americans display resiliency in the face of the threat of terrorism and many say that even terrible events like terrorism can have positive outcomes. Knowing where to go for help and counseling is a major factor in helping Americans become more resilient.



## MAJOR FINDINGS

- 1. Americans know that terrorism is psychological warfare designed to cause fear and distress among the public. And terrorists are succeeding: most Americans believe the U.S. will experience a terrorist attack in the near future. Besides worries about another attack, Americans say the intentional nature of terrorism and “fear of the unknown” are major reasons why they are experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.**

Americans understand the purpose behind terrorism is to create distress and fear.

- Three in four Americans (75%) say that creating fear and distress among the public is the most important objective of terrorists. In fact, nearly all Americans (93%) agree – 69% strongly – with the statement *the primary goal of a terrorist attack is to generate fear and distress.*
- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (87%) agree – 55% strongly – with the statement *terrorism is psychological in nature because it is meant to cause psychological suffering.*
- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (88%) agree – 44% strongly – with the statement *the threat of terrorism, in and of itself, creates public fear and distress.*

The threat of terrorism is a reality the public faces everyday and most Americans say a terrorism attack is likely, and soon. Other reasons the threat of terrorism causes fear and distress is because it is different in character than other threats, such as natural disasters.

- More than 4 in 5 Americans (85%) say it is likely that the U.S. will experience a terrorist attack in the near future. And more than 3 in 5 (62%) who say another terrorist attack is likely believe it will happen within the next year.
- By nearly a 2 -to-1 margin, Americans say people experience more fear and distress about terrorism (61%) than they do a natural disaster (33%). The reasons people give help explain why the threat of terrorism causes so much fear and distress:
  - Terrorism is intentional and caused by people (89%);
  - Terrorism is fear of the unknown (84%);
  - People can't comprehend the motivations behind terrorism (69%); and
  - There isn't information available about how to cope with terrorism (53%).

Women are more likely than men to voice concern about the fear of terrorism and express concern that their family members will experience fear and distress because of it. Because of their children, parents are much more concerned than the average



American that a family member will experience fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.

- Women are more likely than men to say they are concerned about terrorism (77% of women compared to 62% of men). Women are also more likely than men to say they are concerned about family members experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism (57% compared to 43%).
- Nearly 2 in 3 parents (65%) worry that a family member will experience fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.

“Fear of the unknown” is the single most important cause of worry about the threat of terrorism.

- In a forced-choice scenario, 39% of Americans identified fear of the unknown as their major worry, followed by belief that the government is unprepared to deal with the threat (21%) and certainty that terrorism will hit close to home (18%).

**2. Americans say the government is not doing enough to address the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism. There is a strong sentiment that public officials could do a much better job of communicating with the public about the issue and that the nation’s public health, medical and emergency response systems are not meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism.**

Three in four Americans (75%) say that public officials could do a better job of communicating with the public about the threat of terrorism and its impact on our national psyche and mental health.

Americans believe that public officials have been less effective at decreasing fear and distress associated with terrorism or encouraging people to seek help for that fear and distress than it has been at strengthening the resolve of Americans.

- Half of all Americans (50%) say that public officials are not effective at *encouraging people to seek help about fear and distress due to the threat of terrorism.*
- Nearly half of Americans (47%) say that public officials are not effective at *decreasing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.*
- Conversely, only 37% of Americans say that public officials have not been effective at *strengthening the resolve of people about the threat of terrorism.* In fact, 60% say that official have been very (13%) or somewhat (47%) effective.



Poll results show that the “stay resolute” message is getting through to Americans but they want public officials to address mental health impacts related to fear and distress.

- More Americans (54%) would rather hear public officials say “it’s natural to feel anxious and fearful about the threat of terrorism and here’s some advice on dealing with it,” as opposed to “we need to stay resolute as a country in the face of terrorism” (40%).

Many Americans do not think that nation’s public health, medical and emergency response systems are meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism.

- Nearly 3 in 5 Americans (57%) do not think that the nation’s *public health system* is currently meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism and 18% are unsure.
- Nearly 1 in 2 Americans (46%) do not think that the nation’s *medical system* is currently meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism and 19% are unsure.
- More than 2 in 5 Americans (44%) do not think that the nation’s *emergency response system* is currently meeting the mental health needs of the public that result from the threat of terrorism and 20% are unsure.

### **3. Americans want access to programs that will help them cope with the fear and distress the threat of terrorism causes. The public wants the federal government to take the lead but wants the mental health community involved in the delivery of programs at the community level.**

#### Americans want access to programs

More than 4 in 5 Americans (81%) say that it is important for the U.S. government to help citizens cope with the mental health effects of the threat of terrorism.

Americans want to be better informed about the issue think the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism command equal attention to developing security precautions.

- More than 3 in 5 Americans (63%) say that the fear and distress caused by the threat of terrorism would be reduced if the public was better informed about the mental health effects of terrorism.
- More than 3 in 4 Americans (77%) agree with the statement *people would feel less fear and distress about the threat of terrorism if they were provided with strategies to cope with these feelings.*



- Seven in 10 Americans (70%) agree with the statement *it is just as important for the government to develop programs that deal with the fear and distress people experience as a result of terrorism as it is to take security precautions at physical installations and airports to prevent terrorism.*

This desire for programs is reflected in the fact that only 15% of Americans say they have received information that was helpful to them or their family in coping with fear and distress related to the threat of terrorism.

#### Federal government to take the lead with local support from mental health professionals

When asked, on a “top-of-mind” basis, who should take the lead in developing programs to help Americans deal with the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism, more Americans say the “federal government” than any other option.

- One-third of Americans (33%) identify the federal government as the organization that should take the lead in developing programs.
- An additional 18% say the local government and 13% identify the state government (13%).

But when provided with a list of options of organizations that could play a role in developing programs to deal with the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism, Americans say local mental health professionals should play the most important role.

- More in 2 in 3 Americans (68%) say mental health professionals should play a VERY important role in providing information or developing programs to help Americans deal with the mental health or psychological impacts of the threat terrorism. Additionally, 61% of Americans say mental health associations should play a VERY important role.

What the poll results indicate is that Americans want federal leadership on this issue, but that the delivery of programs must be done by mental health professionals at the local, community level.



**4. The mental health or psychological effects of the threat of terrorism are varied and widespread and Americans say the threat of terrorism has led to changes in their behavior. Noteworthy is that the threat of terrorism has strengthened, not weakened, American’s religious faith.**

Mental health/psychological effects are varied and widespread

As a result of the threat of terrorism, Americans say they experience a variety of mental health or psychological effects that range from anger and sadness to fear and disbelief. Interestingly, nearly half of Americans (45%) say that one mental health effect of the threat of terrorism is a strengthened religious faith.

- As the table below illustrates, women are far more likely to say they have experienced emotional responses to the threat of terrorism. More than half of women say they have experienced anger, sadness, shock, worry and strengthened religious belief, but less than half of men say they have experienced these same emotions.
- Another notable finding illustrated below is that, with the exception of disbelief, parents are more likely than the average Americans adult (“all”) to experience these mental health effects as a result of the threat of terrorism.

<b>Mental health or psychological effects experienced by Americans as a result of the threat of terrorism.</b>	<b>ALL (%)</b>	<b>MEN (%)</b>	<b>WOMEN (%)</b>	<b>PARENTS (%)</b>
Anger	70	65	76	71
Feeling upset or sad	57	45	69	59
Shock	51	43	60	56
Worry	49	34	63	61
Strengthened religious faith	45	35	55	58
Disbelief	44	38	50	41
Fear	41	31	50	53

Other poll results show that one of the effects of the threat of terrorism is strengthened religious faith.

- By a 10 -to-1 margin, Americans say that the threat of terrorism has strengthened (40%), not weakened (4%), their religious faith. Half of Americans (50%) say that the threat of terrorism has had no impact on their religious faith.
- Six in ten Americans (60%) say that religious faith is a VERY important factor in becoming resilient in the face of the threat of terrorism.



The threat of terrorism has led to changes in people’s behavior

As a result of the threat of terrorism, over half of Americans (55%) say they have changed their behaviors in a number of ways. The most common behavioral response to the threat of terrorism is being more overprotective of you or your family’s safety (35% of Americans). But approximately 1 in 5 Americans also say their behavior has changed in other ways: being nervous about people who are different (22%); avoiding traveling (20%); and being increasingly alert at times and startling easily (19%).

- As the table below illustrates, women are far more likely to say they have experienced behavioral changes as a result of the threat of terrorism. In fact, women are nearly twice as likely as men to be overprotective of their own and their family’s safety (46% versus 25%), to exhibit nervousness about people who are different (28% versus 15%), to avoid traveling (26% versus 14%) and to startle easily (25% versus 13%).
- Parents are also more likely than the average American adult (“all”) to have changed their behavior as a result of the threat of terrorism.

<b>Behaviors people have shown in response to the threat of terrorism</b>	<b>ALL (%)</b>	<b>MEN (%)</b>	<b>WOMEN (%)</b>	<b>PARENTS (%)</b>
At least one behavior from the list below	55	43	66	63
Being more overprotective of you and your family’s safety	35	25	46	52
Being nervous about people who are different	22	15	28	29
Avoiding traveling	20	14	26	24
Being increasingly alert at times and startling easily	19	13	25	22
Being emotionally upset more often for no apparent reason	8	6	9	11
Keeping purposeful busy to avoid thinking about the threat of terrorism	8	3	12	8
Having more problems getting to sleep or staying asleep	7	4	9	9



**5. Americans identify certain groups of people that they feel are especially at risk of experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism. Parents with young children and Americans suffering from mental health problems are viewed as most vulnerable.**

More than half of all Americans identify parents with young children, people already suffering from mental health problems, seniors and children as groups they believe are especially at risk of experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism.

- As the table below illustrates, women are far more likely than men to identify specific groups of Americans as being at greater risk of experiencing fear and distress as a result of the threat of terrorism.
- Men are more likely than women (26% versus 19%) to identify people with drug or substance abuse problems as being groups especially at risk.

<b>Groups especially at risk of experiencing fear and distress about the threat of terrorism</b>	<b>ALL (%)</b>	<b>MEN (%)</b>	<b>WOMEN (%)</b>	<b>PARENTS (%)</b>
Parents with younger children	70	63	76	75
People already suffering from mental health problems	69	67	70	68
Senior citizens	61	51	70	63
Children	56	47	64	56
Americans not born in this country	45	34	55	45
Immigrants	42	38	56	40
People with drug or substance abuse problems	22	26	19	22



**6. The public believes that media coverage of the threat of terrorism makes people more fearful. Americans say that network and cable news have done the most effective job at providing balanced coverage about the threat of terrorism.**

More than 3 in 4 Americans say that media coverage of the threat of terrorism makes people more fearful. A major reason for this is that the media is too quick to label any emergency terrorism.

- By more than a 6 -to-1 margin, Americans say that media coverage about the threat of terrorism makes people more fearful and distressed (80%) as opposed to reassured (12%).
- Three in four Americans (76%) say the media has a tendency to raise the issue of terrorism too quickly when they are covering such events as power outages or other emergencies.

When asked which media they believe have done the most effective job at providing balanced coverage about the threat of terrorism, about 1 in 3 Americans (31%) say network news such as ABC, CBS and NBC and 1 in 4 (24%) say cable news.

- Other media identified by more than 5% of Americans as providing balanced coverage include major newspaper dailies such as the New York Times and USA Today (10%), talk radio (8%), local news (7%) and news magazines such as Time and Newsweek (6%).



**7. The threat of terrorism reaches into every community in the U.S. Americans living in all parts of the country are concerned about the threat of terrorism and the demand for informational programs is widespread across the nation.**

Although attitudes about terrorism differ somewhat by gender, age, income and education, poll results clearly indicate that Americans of all demographics are concerned about terrorism, think a new attack is likely and believe it is important to have access to informational programs on how to deal with the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism.

As the table below illustrates, there are some interesting differences:

- Women (77%) are more concerned than men (62%), but both are equally likely to think that a new terrorist attack is likely in the near future.
- Younger Americans ages 18 -to-34 (63%) are less concerned about terrorism than Americans ages 35 -to-54 (74%) and seniors (71%) and are less likely to think that a new terrorist attack is likely in the near future (78% versus 91% and 83%).
- Compared to lower- and higher-income Americans, middle income Americans earning between \$35,000 and \$60,000 per year are more concerned about terrorism, are more likely to believe a new terrorist attack is likely and are more likely to believe that it is more important to have access to informational programs.

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Level of Concern About Terrorism (%)</b>	<b>Likelihood of Another Terrorist Attack Soon (%)</b>	<b>Important to Have Access to Programs (%)</b>
All	69	85	87
Men	62	84	83
Women	77	84	92
Parents	68	91	89
Ages 18-34	63	78	89
Ages 35-54	74	91	88
Ages 55+	71	83	85
Income less than \$35,000	69	80	82
Income \$35,000-\$59,999	73	95	93
Income more than \$60,000	67	87	90
No college degree	70	83	88
College degree	67	87	87



Attitudes about the threat of terrorism also differ by geography.

- Americans living in Western states are less concerned about terrorism than Americans living in other parts of the country and are less likely to think that a new terrorist attack is likely in the near future.

<b>Geography</b>	<b>Level of Concern About Terrorism (%)</b>	<b>Likelihood of Another Terrorist Attack Soon (%)</b>	<b>Important to Have Access to Programs (%)</b>
Northeast	79	90	93
South	74	87	93
Midwest	72	86	90
West	59	79	81
Urban areas*	67	95	95
Suburban areas*	73	84	85
Rural areas*	68	85	84
*As defined by U.S. Census.			



**8. Americans display resiliency in the face of the threat of terrorism and many say that even terrible events like terrorism can have positive outcomes. Knowing where to go for help and counseling is a major factor in helping Americans become more resilient.**

Although Americans express a high level of concern about the mental health impacts of the threat of terrorism, poll results also demonstrate that a large percentage of the public believes that even an event as terrible as terrorism can have positive outcomes. As the table below illustrates:

- Seven in ten Americans (70%) say that the threat of terrorism had caused them to realize what is truly important in life.
- Half of Americans (50%) say that the threat of terrorism has made them become more resilient or stronger.

<b>Have any of the following positive things happened to you as a result of terrorism?</b>	<b>(%)</b>
I realize what is truly important in life	70
I have become more resilient or stronger	50
I have grown stronger in my religious faith	42
I have reestablished ties with friends and family	28
I have become more involved in my community	22

Americans identify strong, supportive families, access to counseling and reassurance that the government is working hard to prevent another attack as resiliency factors in the face of the threat of terrorism.

<b>Things that make people more resilient. % VERY important</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Having a strong and supportive family	90
Knowing where to go for help or counseling.	72
Reassurance the government is working hard to prevent a terrorist attack	72
Support from peers and colleagues	60
Religious faith	60
Having access to guidelines/principles that have worked for others	46
Leaders stating publicly that mental health effects of terrorism are natural	43

