

How 9/11 Memorials Break Isolation, Offer Comfort

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As he has every Sept. 11 for the past decade, Jay Winuk will make his way this Sunday to ground zero in Lower Manhattan, stand at the hallowed ground where his brother Glenn and thousands of others died in 2001, and remember.

Time-honored rituals will take place: Names will be read. Flags will fly. Photos will be held high. And this year, for the first time, family members of those killed at the World Trade Center site will stand beside new reflecting pools built in honor of the victims, and run their fingers along the 3,000 names carved into nearby dark granite walls.

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"I choose to go down to that ceremony every year, and I feel good about being down there," said Winuk, whose 40-year-old brother, a volunteer firefighter, was helping evacuate the south tower when it collapsed. "There are many I know in the 9/11 community who choose not to go, but for me, it works. It's a way for me to feel I'm paying tribute to Glenn," said the Putnam County, N.Y., resident, who is in his early fifties. [\[For 9/11 Responders, Cancer Cause Remains Unclear\]](#)

Countless other memorial ceremonies will take place across the country this week to mark the 10-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. But despite the simplicity of the events, mental health experts say such rituals offer a level of comfort and healing that solitary acts of remembrance can't match.

Why we memorialize

What's so powerful about coming together – often with strangers – to mourn and remember? The act of memorializing not only offers an opportunity to acknowledge the collective trauma wreaked by tragedy, but helps us take control of an experience that made everyone feel helpless, said Elizabeth Goren, a psychologist in New York City and author of the book, "Beyond the Reach of Ladders: My Story as a Therapist Forging Bonds with Firefighters After 9/11" (Open Gate Press, 2011).

Memorials let people remember the experience of 9/11 in a safe way, said Goren, also a faculty member at New York and Pace universities. "It's a very different experience than mourning in private. It [takes it out of our inner life](#) . . . and gives it a context, a reality, that's a shared reality."

Groups of public mourners, in fact, create shared memories that eclipse the ability of any one person to understand the magnitude of the losses of 9/11 – not just of people and buildings, but of a way of life, said Billie A. Pivnick, a consulting psychologist to Thinc Design, which partnered with the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.

"Memorializing is a form of collective grieving . . . one may remember being stuck in the stairwell, waiting to be rescued. One may remember waiting for a phone call about their loved one," she said. "Each of those memories creates a larger memory of the event that no one individual can remember." [\[Do You Really Remember Where You Were on 9/11?\]](#)

For those who still grieve

Perhaps more than anything, communal events offer us a script of sorts to guide our response to a disaster as unprecedented as 9/11, said Karla Vermeulen, deputy director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at State University of New York, New Paltz.

Even so, not everyone's emotions will follow the same timeline on that script, she said.

"It's one thing to [adjust to the loss of a loved one](#) . . . but with something as massive as this kind of attack, we just don't know what to do," Vermeulen said. "Some are still feeling deeply affected, and there are others who feel that it's been a decade and we should move on. It can get very politicized."

What can those who still feel psychologically "stuck" on the losses of 9/11 – perhaps having nightmares, flashbacks or other signs of acute trauma – do to move forward? Experts recommend seeking therapy and/or spiritual counseling, and Pivnick said that seeking solace among other mourners can offer an extra layer of help.

"I think there are still people who are traumatized, but society expects them to just move on and they haven't," said Pivnick, also an adjunct associate professor of clinical psychology in the doctoral program at Columbia University. "They're looking for answers, blaming themselves or may have physical symptoms.

She said, "The kind of solace people are looking for requires . . . not being isolated. Visiting a memorial can help in the process."

Pass it on: On Sept. 11, sharing grief with fellow mourners brings people together and may offer more comfort and help in the healing process than privately grieving.

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