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Assignment #3: *Through a Child's Eyes: September 11, 2001*

Personality Development Related to Stress and Coping

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"It's always going to be hard...it's like a mountain of sadness that gets smaller and smaller until it's just a little bump," explains seven-year old Katie who lost her father during the September 11th attacks (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). Even though the attacks shattered Katie's sense of safety and trust, Katie adopted coping strategies in line with the BASIC coping model in order to progress with her life in a healthy manner. However, the sad reality was that for many children in the movie *Through a Child's Eyes*, the persistent nightmares and emotional numbing associated with the attacks were too hard to shake-off. While the movie *Through a Child's Eyes* succeeds in its goal of helping children following the attacks, it also teaches us how children deal with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], the role self-esteem plays in the terror management theory, and the BASIC coping model.

As we discussed in class, PTSD is defined as one who "endures a psychological disturbance attributed to the experience of a major traumatic event" (Schreier, Nov. 11, 2010). Perhaps, one of the most commonly reported symptoms of PTSD in children is repeated nightmares. Garrett illustrated this symptom when he said, "I have bad dreams some time. Every day" (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). Another symptom of PTSD is a phobic avoidance of similar places (Schreier, Nov. 11, 2010). Drew illustrated this symptom when he said, "I watched the twin towers collapse on TV. But I don't really like to go near tall towers" (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). A third symptom of PTSD is increased nervousness. Moley illustrated this symptom when she said, "I don't feel safe. I don't" (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). That Moley did not feel safe caused her to become increasingly more nervous.

In the days following the 9/11 attacks, psychologists were presented with the unique opportunity to examine the effects of the terror management theory during a time when the entire nation's mortality salience was elevated. When people are reminded of their own mortality, as the

9/11 attacks did, the terror management theory holds that people will increasingly turn to their cultural views as a method for coping (Weiten, 2010, p. 518). One interesting finding is that after the 9/11 attacks, people expressed a greater admiration for those who upheld their cultural standards, such as firefighters. As Shayne peddled around in his fire truck donning his helmet and uniform, it was clear that he expressed admiration and respect for firefighters. That Shayne proudly explained in crystal clear detail how firefighters extinguish different types of fires illustrates that Shayne viewed firefighters as his heroes. (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). This is consistent with the idea that people strengthen their cultural views after an attack and display a great admiration towards those who uphold their cultural standards.

Similarly, recent research on the terror management theory has explained that people tend to exhibit increased expressions of religious faith when their mortality salience is manipulated (Weiten, 2010, p. 519). Tyler perfectly illustrates this concept when he said, "you can always pray to God. God, do you think you can use your magic while everybody's sleeping to make the Twin Towers build itself together again" (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002)? By praying to God, Tyler could help defend his cultural worldview about religion while probably alleviating some of his anxiety. Engaging in prayer probably also boosted Tyler's self-esteem in that it allowed him to feel as if he were doing his part to aid the victims of the 9/11 attacks. The fact that Tyler turned to his religious faith following the attacks helps prove the terror management theory.

Developed by Dr. Mooli Lahad, the BASIC coping model explains that people have six "potential characteristics or dimensions that are at the core of an individual's coping style" (*How Children Cope with Trauma*, Frank Zenere). The letter "B" in the BASIC coping model stands for the word beliefs. More specifically, it explains that children tend to find meaning in their core values and that they oftentimes look to a belief system or faith to help cope (Schreier, Nov. 11,

2010). And, just as Tyler's prayers to God reinforced the Terror Management theory, they also serve as an excellent example of the BASIC coping model's first component. In response to the World Trade Center falling down, Tyler prays to God asking Him to rebuild the towers. Tyler likely found great solace in prayer because it reinforced the cultural worldview that his parents instilled in him. Because Tyler turned to his belief system in order to cope, he illustrated the letter "B" in the BASIC coping model (Through A Child's Eyes, 2002).

The letter "A" stands for the word affect. A child who copes by using his affect "relies upon the ability to express or ventilate through emotion" (How Children Cope with Trauma, Frank Zenere). When Katie explained that she no longer felt safe after the 9/11 attacks, she ventilated by expressing her emotions (Through A Child's Eyes, 2002). Katie's statement describing her fears allowed her to express her emotions and start coping. If I were Katie's psychologist, I would provide her with the opportunity to talk openly and honestly about all of her feelings. Then, I would explain that her feelings of fear and confusion were completely normal and that many Americans were going through the same exact thing. By providing Katie with the platform to express her emotions and by validating them, Katie would start to cope.

The letter "S" stands for "social" and describes children who cope by seeking support through their relationships with other people (How Children Cope with Trauma, Frank Zenere). Perhaps, the best indicator of social coping was when the Oklahoma Air Force daughters had a play-date to talk about their "daddies' jobs." All of the Oklahoma Air Force daughters could understand each other because they all knew what it was like to go through long stretches of time without their fathers. Social coping provided the best support network because each girl could understand each other's loneliness and offer her friendship. In essence, when the girls interacted

with each other, they were forming a support group and helping each other to cope through social support (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002).

The letter "I" stands for imagination and describes children who cope by turning to their own sense of imagination in order to deal with trauma (Schreier, Nov. 11, 2010). As Josh explained, "it really all started on September 11th. I had no idea why but I just took out these dumb old blocks and started building." When Josh used building blocks to "re-build" the World Trade Center, he was using his imagination as a way of coping with the trauma. If I were Josh's teacher, I would provide Josh with art supplies and would encourage him to express his emotions through art. Josh's imagination provided him with the outlet to share his emotions and cope with the tragedies of 9/11 (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002).

The letter "C" stands for cognitive and explains a coping style that "utilizes problem solving, [and a] direct approach to dealing with issues of concern" (*How Children Cope with Trauma*, Frank Zenere). Children who use this coping strategy benefit from open and honest dialogue with adults. After Max's dad died on the airplane during the 9/11 attacks, Max questioned why the terrorists would kill Americans after it was Americans who taught them how to fly (*Through A Child's Eyes*, 2002). Max's sophistication and willingness to approach the topic head-on, demonstrated a willingness to directly approach his understanding and emotions related to the 9/11 attacks. If I were Josh's mother, I would answer his question by explaining that unfortunately hatred exists in the world and that a small minority of people were willing to act upon their hatred by killing others. By engaging Josh in open dialogue, Josh will be able to cope by dealing with his issues directly. In conclusion, I hope you walk away with the understanding that people have a multitude of different reactions to traumatic events. And, as a friend, the best thing that you can do is listen and offer your support as they cope.

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