9/11: Mental Health in the Wake of Terrorist Attacks

“This is a great and exciting book; a volume filled with stories of endeavour, achievement, appraisal and learning; stories of heroism, challenge and hope. It will become a handbook for all who would research the impact of disaster and terrorism on mental health and well-being.”

Beverley Raphael

Does terrorism have a unique and significant emotional and behavioral impact among adults and children?

In what way does the impact of terrorism exceed the individual level and affect communities and specific professional groups, and test different leadership styles?

How were professional communities of mental health clinicians, policy makers, and researchers mobilized to respond to the emerging needs post-disaster?

What are the lessons learned from the work conducted after 9/11, and the implications for future disaster mental health work and preparedness efforts?

Yuval Neria and his team are uniquely placed to answer these questions having been involved in modifying ongoing trials and setting up new ones in New York to address these issues straight after the attacks. No psychiatrist, mental health professional or policy-maker should be without this book.

Yuval Neria is Associate Clinical Professor of Medical Psychology at the Department of Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University; and the Department of Epidemiology, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health; and Associate Director of Trauma Studies and Services at The New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Raz Gross is Assistant Professor of Epidemiology and Psychiatry, Department of Epidemiology, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health; and Department of Psychiatry, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University.

Randall D. Marshall is Director of Trauma Studies and Services, New York State Psychiatric Institute; Associate Director, Anxiety Disorders Clinic, New York State Psychiatric Institute, and Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Ezra Susser is Professor of Epidemiology and Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University; Chair of the Department of Epidemiology at the Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University; and Head of the Department of Epidemiology of Brain Disorders at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.
This book is dedicated to those killed in the attacks of September 11, 2001; and is written for those who survived them, and mourned, and to all who have suffered because of what they saw and feared and felt, and lost.

Yuval Neria: For Mariana, Michal, Oren and Maya, who shared this journey and created the safe space which enabled its fulfillment; and for my dear parents and sister with love.

Raz Gross: For Natalie, Roy, Elie, and Daria; for my dear parents; and for my brother Aeyal and my sister Vardit, with great love.

Randall Marshall: For Tessa, Rory and Thalia, and my parents and brother Rodney, who are my teachers on the nature of love; and for Reece Marshal (1971–2001), who would have understood.
9/11: Mental Health in the Wake of Terrorist Attacks

Edited by
Yuval Neria
Raz Gross
Randall D. Marshall

Guest Editor
Ezra S. Susser

With a foreword by
Beverley Raphael
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Acknowledgments

The editors thank the dedicated staff of Trauma Studies and Services at The New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University, College of Physicians and Surgeons who have devoted themselves to our 9/11 work from the very beginning: Eun Jung Suh, Larry Amsel, Donna Vermes, Steve Rudin, Gretchen Seirmarco, Helena Rosenfeld-Alvarez, Kimesha Thompson, Arturo Sánchez-Lacay, Smit Sinha, and Jaime Cárcamo, together with Franklin Schneier, Blair Simpson and Michael Liebowitz and the late Sharon Davies of the Anxiety Disorders Clinic.

The editors thank Helena Rosenfeld-Alvarez, the editorial coordinator in New York City; and also thank Alana Balaban for her editorial assistance.

Support for this book and for our work described herein has been provided in part from the National Institute of Mental Health (Neria, Marshall); The New York Times Neediest Fund (Marshall, Neria); Spunk Fund, Inc. (Neria); the New York Community Trust (Marshall); Project Liberty (Marshall); The Atlantic Philanthropies (Marshall); The September 11th Fund (Neria, Marshall); and The Robin Hood Foundation (Marshall).
Editors brief bio

Yuval Neria, PhD
Dr. Neria is Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Departments of Psychiatry and Epidemiology at Columbia University and Associate Director of Trauma Studies and Services at The New York State Psychiatric Institute. He received his doctorate in Psychology from Haifa University, Israel, in 1994, and subsequently served on the faculty of Tel Aviv University until his recruitment to Columbia University in New York City after the attacks of 9/11. He has been working in the area of trauma, loss and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) both in research and in treatment over the last 15 years. His trauma research is inspired by his extensive combat experience. He was injured in the Yom Kippur 1973 War where he was awarded Itur Hagevura, the highest medal for bravery that is awarded in Israel. He has authored numerous publications in the area of PTSD and resilience and his projects have been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression (NARSAD) and multiple charity organizations. He is currently leading a number of research projects related to the aftermath of 9/11 including a nationwide survey on traumatic grief and a longitudinal study among low income minority, primary care patients affected by the 9/11 attacks. Together with Dr. Randall D. Marshall, he has founded The Center for the Study of Trauma and Resilience, aiming to conduct research, training, and educational projects; enhance preparedness for terrorism and mass violence-related trauma; to promote resilient coping with adversities; and to improve the medical and psychological treatment of individuals affected by trauma of all kinds, including terrorist attacks and major disasters.

Raz Gross, MD, MPH
Dr. Gross received his MD degree from Tel Aviv University. After serving as a physician in the Israeli Defense Forces he trained in medicine and then in psychiatry. He moved to New York where he completed a 3-year Post-Doctoral Fellowship in
Editors brief bio

Psychiatric Epidemiology at Columbia University. He received his Masters degree in Public Health at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University. Dr. Gross is currently Assistant Professor of Epidemiology and Psychiatry at Columbia University. He is involved in studies of workers who participated in the clean up and recovery effort at Ground Zero after September 11, and of the mental health consequences of 9/11 on primary care patients in Northern Manhattan. Dr. Gross is also a member of the core research team conducting a web-based survey on the psychological effects of losing a loved one on 9/11. His other areas of research include studies examining the relationship between psychiatric and medical conditions, prenatal and early life risk factors for major psychiatric disorders, and clinical trials.

Randall D. Marshall, MD

Dr. Marshall is Director of Trauma Studies and Services at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Columbia University. He received his degree in Medicine from Johns Hopkins University in 1989, and subsequently trained as a resident and research fellow at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, Columbia University. He has published over 100 articles, case reports, chapters, and editorials, and received numerous research grants funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), private industry, and multiple philanthropic sources. He is currently conducting a NIMH-funded treatment study of persons with PTSD related to the 9/11 attacks. His research related to psychological trauma has encompassed the role of trauma and dissociation in the anxiety disorders, nosology of trauma-related diagnoses, pharmacotherapy, cognitive–behavioral therapy, dissemination of evidence-based treatments, the biology of treatment response in PTSD, and most recently, the study of serious mental health complications in bereaved persons. Most recently, he and Dr. Yuval Neria have founded The Center for the Study of Trauma and Resilience, which aims to conduct state-of-the-art research, training, and educational projects to enhance preparedness for terrorism, and mass violence-related trauma; promote resilient coping with adversity; and improve the medical and psychological treatment of individuals affected by trauma of all kinds, including terrorist attacks and major disasters.

Ezra Susser, MD, DrPH

Ezra Susser is the Anna Cheskis Gelman and Murray Charles Gelman Professor and Chair of the Department of Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, and Head of the Department of Epidemiology of Brain Disorders at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Much of his research focuses on the developmental origins of health and disease throughout the life course. He heads the Center for Developmental Origins of Health, a collaborative
birth cohort research program in which epidemiologists seek to uncover the causes of a broad range of disease and health outcomes, including psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders, obesity, cardiovascular disease, reproductive performance, and breast and ovarian cancers. Elsewhere in his research, he has taken an active role in using epidemiology to better understand social inequalities of health by focusing in the health of inner city populations. He has studied the interrelationships between homelessness, HIV, and psychotic disorders and was formerly director of the Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies at the New York Academy of Medicine. Following September 11, 2001, he worked in close partnership with the New York State Office of Mental Health and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to coordinate the research and services response of the public and academic sectors. He lead the preparation of a broad needs assessment submitted by New York State to the federal government estimating the scope and costs of mental health needs arising from the terror attacks. He also received funding for and implemented a free and confidential mental health services program, A Common Ground, for the union workers who participated in the World Trade Center (WTC) rescue and recovery effort. This program provided psycho-education, outreach, and group, family and individual counseling and psychiatric services to thousands of union members and their families.
List of contributors

Jennifer Ahern, MPH
Senior Research Analyst
Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies
New York Academy of Medicine
1216 Fifth Avenue, Room 553
New York, NY 10029, USA
Tel: +212-822-7297
Fax: +212-876-6220
E-mail: jahern@nyam.org

Lawrence V. Amsel, MD, MPH
Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry
Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons
Director of Dissemination Research for Trauma Studies and Services
New York State Psychiatric Institute
Associate for Medical Education
Hasting Center for Bioethics
245 West 107th Street, Suite 14-F
New York, NY 10025-3064, USA
Tel: +212-592-3804
Fax: +212-678-6752
E-mail: lva@columbia.edu

Diana Bilimoria, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Organizational Behavior
Weatherhead School of Management
Case Western Reserve University
10900 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106-7235, USA
Tel: +216-368-2115
Fax: +216-368-6228
E-mail: dxb12@po.cwru.edu

Richard E. Boyatzis, PhD
Professor and Chair
Department of Organizational Behavior
Case Western Reserve University
10900 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106-7235, USA
Tel: +216-368-2055
Fax: +216-368-4785
E-mail: reb2@weatherhead.cwru.edu

Naomi Breslau, PhD
Professor
Department of Epidemiology
Michigan State University
B645 West Fee Hall
List of contributors

East Lansing, MI 48824, USA  
Tel: +517-353-8623, ex. 170  
Fax: +517-432-1130  
E-mail: breslau@epi.msu.edu

Evelyn J. Bromet, PhD  
Professor of Psychiatry and Preventive Medicine  
School of Medicine  
SUNY at Stony Brook  
Putnam Hall-South Campus  
Stony Brook, NY 11794-8790, USA  
Tel: +631-632-8853  
Fax: +631-632-9433  
E-mail: ebromet@notes.cc.sunysb.edu

Shawn P. Cahill, PhD  
University of Pennsylvania  
3535 Market Street, Suite 600 N.  
Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA  
Tel: +215-746-3327  
Fax: +215-746-3311  
E-mail: scahill@mail.med.upenn.edu

Marylene Cloitre, PhD  
Cathy and Stephen Graham Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
Director, Institute for Trauma and Stress Child Study Center  
New York University School of Medicine  
215 Lexington Avenue 16th Floor  
New York, NY 10016, USA  
Tel: +212-263-2471  
Fax: +212-263-2476  
E-mail: marylene.cloitre@med.nyu.edu

Susan W. Coates, PhD  
Clinical Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry  
College of Physicians & Surgeons  
Columbia University  
Teaching Faculty  
Columbia Center for Psychoanalytic Training & Research  
205 West 89th Street  
New York, New York, 10024, USA  
Tel: +212-580-1423  
Fax: +212-580-1423  
E-mail: swcl@columbia.edu

Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD  
Professor, Department of Psychology and Social Behavior  
Professor, Department of Medicine  
3340 Social Ecology II  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, CA 92697-7085  
Tel: +949-824-2192  
Fax: +949-824-3002  
E-mail: rsilver@uci.edu

Amar Das, MD, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Stanford Medical Informatics  
Departments of Medicine and of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Stanford University School of Medicine  
MSOB X-233  
251 Campus Drive Stanford, CA 94305, USA  
Tel: +650-736-1632  
Fax: +650-725-7944  
E-mail: akd@SMI.stanford.edu

Joanne L. Davis, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Psychology  
University of Tulsa  
600 South College  
308C Lorton Hall  
Tulsa, OK 74104, USA  
Tel: +918-631-2875  
Fax: +918-631-2833  
E-mail: Joanne-Davis@utulsa.edu
List of contributors

Lori Davis, Psy. D
107 West 82nd Street, Suite P106
New York, NY, USA 10024
Tel: +212-580-0271
Fax: +212-292-8945
E-mail: loridavis@nyc.rr.com

JoAnn Difede, PhD
Associate Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry
Director, Program for Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Studies
Payne Whitney Clinic, Department of Psychiatry
Weill/Cornell Medical College
New York Presbyterian Hospital
New York, NY, USA
Tel: +212-746-3079
Fax: +212-746-5418
E-mail: jdifede@med.cornell.edu

Sheila Donahue, MA
Director, Bureau of Data Analysis and Performance Measurement
Center for Information Technology and Evaluation Research
New York State Office of Mental Health
44 Holland Avenue
Albany, New York, USA 12229
E-mail: coevsad@omh.state.ny.us

John Draper, PhD
Director of Public Education and the LifeNet Hotline Network
Mental Health Association of New York City, Inc.
666 Broadway, Suite 405
New York, NY 10012, USA
Tel: +212-614-6309 (direct/voice mail)
+212-614-6357
+1-800-543-3638 (LifeNet hotline)
E-mail: jdraper@mhaofnyc.org

Cristiane S. Duarte, PhD
Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology in Psychiatry
Division of Child Psychiatry
Columbia University
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 43
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5688, 212-543-5725
Fax: +212-781-6050
E-mail: duartec@child.cpmc.columbia.edu

Spencer Eth, MD
Professor and Vice Chairman Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
New York Medical College
Medical Director and Senior Vice President Behavioral Health Services
Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers
144 West 12th Street
New York, NY 10011, USA
Tel: +212-604-8195
Fax: +212-604-8197
E-mail: seth@svcmcny.org

Adriana Feder, MD
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychiatry
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
One Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1218
New York, NY, USA 10029
Tel: +212-241-1563
Fax: +212-824-2302
E-mail: Adriana.feder@mssm.edu

Chip J. Felton, MSW
Senior Deputy Commissioner and Chief Information Officer Center for
List of contributors

Information Technology and Evaluation Research
New York State Office of Mental Health
44 Holland Avenue
Albany, NY 12229, USA
Tel: +518-474-7359
E-mail: cfelton@omh.state.ny.us

Edna B. Foa, PhD
Professor of Clinical Psychology in Psychiatry
University of Pennsylvania
3535 Market Street, Suite 600 N.
Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA
Tel: +215-746-3327
Fax: +215-746-3311
E-mail: foa@mail.med.upenn.edu

Mindy Thompson Fullilove, MD
Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Public Health
New York State Psychiatric Institute, Unit 29
1051 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-740-7292
Fax: +212-795-4222
E-mail: mf29@columbia.edu

Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH
Associate Professor
Department of Epidemiology, University of Michigan School of Public Health
1214 South University, Room 243
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2548
Tel: +734-647-9741 (direct) +917-930-6923 (cell)
Fax: 734 998 0006
E-mail: sgalea@umich.edu

Marc J. Gameroff, PhD
Research Scientist
Department of Clinical and Genetic Epidemiology,
New York State Psychiatric Institute Unit 24
1051 Riverside Drive / Unit 24
New York, NY, USA 10032
Tel: +212-543-5849
Fax: +212-568-3534
E-mail: gameroff@childpsych.columbia.edu

Virginia Gil-Rivas, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychology
University of North Carolina, Charlotte
9201 University Boulevard Charlotte, NC 28223 0001, USA

Vincent Giordano, PhD
New York Academy of Medicine, Office School Health Programs,
Senior Consultant National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement,
Advisory Board Member Denizen Consulting, Partner
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
37 Mount Tom Road
New Rochelle, New York, NY 10805 USA
Tel: +914-654-8897
Fax: +914-654-8897
Cell: +914-393-4541
E-mail: vgiordano@verizon.net

Lindsey Godwin, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Organizational Behavior
Weatherhead School of Management Case Western Reserve University
324 E. 310 Street
List of contributors

Willowick OH, USA 44095
Tel: +440-537-0971
E-mail: lng2@case.edu

Raz Gross, MD, MPH
Assistant Professor
Department of Epidemiology,
Mailman School of Public Health,
Columbia University
Department of Psychiatry,
College of Physicians & Surgeons,
Columbia University
722 West 168th Street
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-304-6591
Fax: +212-544-4221
E-mail: rg547@columbia.edu

Sandra Hanish
Psychiatric Clinical Nurse Specialist
Walter Reed Army Medical Center
Pentagon/Operation Solace

Johan M. Havenaar, PhD
Managing Director of Adult Psychiatry
Buitenamstel Institute of Mental Health Care; Department of Psychiatry
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Tel: +31-30-2308686
Fax: +31-30-2308885
E-mail: j.havenaar@altrecht.nl

Elizabeth A. Hembree, PhD
Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology in Psychiatry
University of Pennsylvania
3535 Market Street, Suite 600 N.
Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA
Tel: +215-746-3327
Fax: +215-746-3311
E-mail: hembree@mail.med.upenn.edu

Robin Herbert, MD
Associate Professor
Department of Community and Preventive Medicine
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
New York, NY 10029, USA
E-mail: robin.herbert@mssm.edu

Kimberly Hoagwood, PhD
Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry
Center Director for Child and Adolescent Services, Research Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
Columbia University
1051 Riverside Drive, Box 78
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-6131
Fax: +212-543-5966
E-mail: Hoagwood@childpsych.columbia.edu

Stevan E. Hobfoll, PhD
Distinguished Professor and Director
Applied Psychology Center
Kent State University
Director
Center for the Treatment and Study of Traumatic Stress
Summa Health System and Kent State University
Kent, OH 44242, USA
E-mail: shobfoll@kent.edu

E. Alison Holman, FNP, PhD
Health Policy and Research
University of California, Irvine
100 Theory, Suite 110
Irvine, CA 92697-5800, USA
Tel: +949-824-6849
List of contributors

Fax: +949-824-3002
E-mail: aholman@uci.edu

Barry A. Hong, PhD, FAACP
Professor of Psychiatry
Washington University School of Medicine
600 S. Euclid Ave., Campus Box 8134
St. Louis, MO 63110
Tel: +314-362-4270
Fax: +314-362-4857
E-mail: hongb@psychiatry.wustl.edu

Margaret M. Hopkins, PhD
Case Western Reserve University
Weatherhead School of Management
Department of Organizational Behavior
Cleveland, OH 44106, USA
Tel: +216-651-2414
Fax: +216-651-3796
E-mail: mxh9@po.cwru.edu

Lourdes Hernández-Cordero, DrPH
Assistant Professor of Clinical Sociomedical Sciences
Community Liaison
Columbia University Center for Youth Violence Prevention
Community Research Group
Mailman School of Public Health
513 West 166th Street, 3rd floor
New York, NY, USA 10032
Tel: +212-740-7292
Fax: +212-795-4222
E-mail: ljh19@columbia.edu

Christina W. Hoven, DrPH
Child Psychiatric Epidemiologist
Department of Epidemiology
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

Research Scientist
Division of Child Psychiatry
New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 43
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5688
Fax: +212-781-6050
E-mail: HOVEN@childpsych.columbia.edu

Nimali Jayasinghe, PhD
Instructor of Psychology in Psychiatry
Department of Psychiatry
Weill/Cornell Medical College
New York Presbyterian Hospital
525 East 68th Street, Box 200
New York, NY 10021, USA
Tel: +212-821-0728
Fax: +212-821-0994
E-mail: nij2001@med.cornell.edu

Peter S. Jensen, MD
Ruane Professor of Child Psychiatry and Director
Center for the Advancement of Children’s Mental Health
Department of Child Psychiatry
Columbia University/New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit No. 78
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5334
Fax: +212-543-5260
E-mail: pj131@columbia.edu

Krzysztof Kaniasty, PhD
Professor
Department of Psychology
Uhler Hall, 1020 Oakland Avenue
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, PA 15705-1068, USA
List of contributors

Department of Psychology
Opole University, Poland
Tel: +724-357-5559/2426 (office)
Fax: +724-357-2214
E-mail: kaniasty@iup.edu

John Kastan, PhD
Vice President, Behavioral Health Services
Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences,
New York Medical College
203 West 12th Street, Rm. 603
New York, NY, USA 10011
Tel: +212-604-1571
Fax: +212-604-8794
E-mail: jkastan@svcmcny.org

Craig L. Katz, MD
Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry,
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
President, Disaster Psychiatry Outreach
1100 Park Ave., Suite 1B
New York, NY 10128, USA
Tel: +212-860-8665
E-mail: craig.katz@mssm.edu

Shawn M. Kennedy, PhD
The University of Tulsa
Department of Psychology
600 S. College Avenue 74104
Tulsa, OK, USA
Tel: +918-631-2031
E-mail: shawn-kennedy@utulsa.edu

Rafael Lantigua, MD
Professor of Clinical Medicine
Director, General Medicine Outpatient Services

Director, Columbia Center for the Active Life of Minority Elders (CALME)
Columbia University Medical Center
622 West 168th Street, VC2-205
New York, NY, USA 10032
Tel: +212-305-6262
Fax: +212-305-6279
E-mail: ral4@columbia.edu

Carol Barth Lanzara, MS, JD
Research Scientist
Center for Information and Evaluation Research
Evaluation Research Branch
NYS Office of Mental Health
44 Holland Avenue
Albany, New York, USA 12229
Tel: +518-408-2042
Fax: +518-474-7361
E-mail: clanzara@omh.state.ny.us

Willis Todd Leavitt, MD
LTC, MC, USA
Psychiatry Consultant, Great Plains Regional Medical Command
Combat/Operational Stress Control Program Manager
Tel: +210-221-8235
Fax: +210-221-7235
E-mail: Willis.Leavitt@cen.amedd.army.mil

Pam Leck, PhD
Instructor of Psychology in Psychiatry
Department of Psychiatry
Weill/Cornell Medical College
New York Presbyterian Hospital
New York, NY, USA
Tel: +212-746-0554
Fax: +212-746-8552
E-mail: pal2002@med.cornell.edu
List of contributors

Stephen M. Levin, MD
Associate Professor
Department of Community and Preventive Medicine
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
New York, NY 10029, USA
E-mail: stephen.levin@mssm.edu

Tony Lingham, PhD
Case Western Reserve University
Weatherhead School of Management
Department of Organizational Behavior
2040 Stearns Road, Apartment No. 1
Cleveland, OH 44106, USA
Tel: +216-496-8816
E-mail: TXL28@po.cwru.edu

Brett T. Litz, PhD
Professor, Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry,
Boston University
Associate Director, National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder / Behavioral Science Division (116-B5)
Boston Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center
150 South Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02130, USA
Tel: +617-232-9500 ext: 4131, 6198, 6191
Fax: +617-264-6523 or 617-278-4501
E-mail: brett.litz@va.gov

Shira Maguen, PhD
San Francisco Veterans’ Administration Medical Center
University of California San Francisco PTSD Program (116P)
4150 Clement St., Building 8, Room 206
San Francisco, CA 94121, USA
Tel: +415-221-4810 ext. 2511
E-mail: shira.maguen@va.gov

Donald J. Mandell, PhD
Professor, State University of New York Research Scientist, New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 43
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5688 (main)
E-mail: mandell@child.cpmc.columbia.edu

Randall D. Marshall, MD
Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons
Director of Trauma Studies & Services, New York State Psychiatric Institute, New York Office of Mental Health Co-Director, Center for the Study of Trauma & Resilience, New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University Associate Director, Anxiety Disorders Clinic, New York State Psychiatric Institute 1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 69
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5454
Fax: +212-543-6515
E-mail: Randall@nyspi.cpmc.columbia.edu

Gerald McCleery PhD
Associate Executive Director Mental Health Association of New York City
666 Broadway, 2nd floor
New York, NY 10012, USA
xxi

List of contributors

Tel: +212-614-6305
Fax: +646-654-0593
E-mail: GMcCleery@mhaofnyc.org

Daniel N. McIntosh, PhD
Associate Professor of Psychology
Department of Psychology
University of Denver
2155 S. Race Street
Denver, CO 80208, USA
Tel: +303-871-3712
Fax: +303-871-4747
E-mail: dmcintos@du.edu

Richard J. McNally, PhD
Professor
Department of Psychology
Harvard University
33 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
Tel: +617-495-3853
Fax: +617-495-3728
E-mail: rjm@wjh.harvard.edu

Stephen S. Morse, PhD
Associate Professor
Columbia University
Mailman School of Public Health
Center for Public Health Preparedness
722 West 168th Street, Suite 522C
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-8793
Fax: +212-543-5966
E-mail: ssm20@columbia.edu

Laura Murray, PhD
Center for the Advancement of Children
Columbia University/New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 78
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5428
Fax: +212-543-5966
E-mail: MurrayL@childpsych.columbia.edu

Yuval Neria, PhD
Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology
Department of Psychiatry,
College of Physicians & Surgeons
Department of Epidemiology
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University
Associate Director, Trauma Studies and Services
New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive / Unit 69
New York, NY USA 10032
Tel: +212-543-6061
Fax: +212-543-6515
E-mail: ny126@columbia.edu

Elana Newman, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology, Lorton Hall
University of Tulsa
600 South College Avenue
Tulsa, OK 74104 3189, USA
Tel: +918-631-2836
Fax: +918-631-2822
E-mail: elana-newman@utulsa.edu

Fran H. Norris, PhD
Research Professor
Department of Psychiatry,
Dartmouth Medical School and
National Center for PTSD
Veterans' Administration Medical Center 116D
215 North Main Street
White River Junction, VT 05009, USA
Tel: +802-296-5132
Fax: +802-296-5135
E-mail: fran.norris@dartmouth.edu
xxii List of contributors

Carol S. North, MD, MPE
Professor of Psychiatry
Nancy and Ray L. Hunt Chair in Crisis Psychiatry
UT Southwestern Medical Center
Department of Psychiatry
6363 Forest Park Rd.
Dallas, TX, USA 75390-8828
Tel: +214-648-5381
Fax: +214-648-5376
E-mail: carol.north@southwestern.edu

Judith Pizarro, MA
University of California, Irvine
E-mail: jppizarro@uci.edu

Mark Olfson, MD, MPH
Professor of Clinical Psychiatry
Columbia University and New York State Psychiatric Institute
New York, NY, USA
Tel: +212-543-5293
E-mail: mo49@columbia.edu

Michael Poulin, PhD
Department of Psychology and Social Behavior
University of California, Irvine
3400 Social Ecology II
Irvine, CA 92697, USA
Tel: +949-824-6849
Fax: +949-824-3002

Elizabeth A. Pease, RN, MS
New York State Office of Mental Health (NYSOMH)
44 Holland Avenue
Albany, New York, USA 12229
Tel: +518-402-2411
Fax: +518-474-7361
E-mail: Coeveap@omh.state.ny.us

Beverley Raphael, AM, MBBS, MD, FRANZCP, FRCPsych., FASSA, Hon. MD (Newcastle, NSW)
Professor Population Mental Health and Disasters
University of Western Sydney
Parramatta Campus
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith South, NSW DC 1797
AUSTRALIA
Tel: +61-2-9685-9575
Fax: +61-2-9685-9554
E-mail: b.Raphael@usw.edu.au
and
Professor of Psychological Medicine
Australian National University

Betty Pfefferbaum, MD, JD
Chairman, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Director, Terrorism and Disaster Center of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center
Tel: +405-271-5121
Fax: +405-271-8775
E-mail: betty-pfefferbaum@ouhsc.edu

Irwin Redlener, MD
National Center for Disaster Preparedness
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University
722 West 168th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-342-5161

Heidi Resnick, PhD
Professor
National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center
xxiii List of contributors

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Medical University of South Carolina
165 Cannon Street, PO Box 250852
Charleston, SC 29425, USA
Tel: +843-792-2947
E-mail: resnickh@musc.edu

Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, MD, MPH
COL, USA
Psychiatry Consultant to the US Army
Surgeon General
Skyline 6, Suite 684
5109 Leesburg Pike
Falls Church, VA, USA 22041-3258
Tel: +703-681-2974
Fax: +703-681-3163
E-mail: Elspeth.Ritchie@amedd.army.mil

Jennifer Roberts, PhD
Assistant Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry
Department of Psychiatry
Weill/Cornell Medical College
New York Presbyterian Hospital
Tel: +212-746-6167
Fax: +212-746-5418
E-mail: jroberts@med.cornell.edu

Jim Rodriguez, MSW, PhD
Research Scientist, Department of Child Psychiatry, Columbia University and New York State Office of Mental Health
Columbia University
Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
1755 Broadway, Suite 715
New York, NY 10019, USA
Tel: +646-328-4417
Fax: +646-443-8191
E-mail: rodriguija@childpsych.columbia.edu

Jack Rosenthal
President
The New York Times Company Foundation
229 West 43rd Street
New York, NY, USA 10036
Tel: +212-556-1091
Fax: +212-556-4450
E-mail: rosebud@nytimes.com

Jack Saul, PhD
Assistant Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health
Director, International Trauma Studies Program
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University
155 Avenue of the Americas, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10013, USA
Tel: +212-691-6499
Fax: +212-807-1809
E-mail: js2920@columbia.edu

Richard Schaede, DSW
The Mental Health Association of New York City
666 Broadway, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10012, USA
Director of the Crisis Resource Center at LifeNet
Work: 212-614-6345
Home: 718-834-6061
E-mail: rschaede@mhaofnyc.org

Daniel S. Schechter, MD
Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry in Pediatrics, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University
New York, NY, USA
Tel: +1-212-543-6920
Fax: +1-212-463-0702
E-mail: dss11@columbia.edu
List of contributors

Gila Schwarzbaum, MBA
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
Bronx Veterans Affairs
130 West Kingsbridge Road
526 Office of Mental Health PTSD 116/A
Bronx, NY 10468, USA

Arieh Y. Shalev, MD
Professor of Psychiatry,
Head, Department of Psychiatry
Hadassah University Hospital,
PO Box 12000
Kiriat Hadassah, 91120
Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: +972-2-6777184
Fax: +972-2-6413642
E-mail: ashalev@cc.huji.ac.il

Steven Shea, MD
Hamilton Southworth Professor of Medicine and Professor of Epidemiology
Chief, Division of General Medicine
Vice Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs
Columbia University
622 West 168th Street
PH 9 East, Rm. 105
New York, NY, 10032
Tel: +212-305-9379
Fax: +212-305-9349
E-mail: ss35@columbia.edu

Rebecca P. Smith, MD
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry
Mount Sinai Hospital and Medical School
Staff Psychiatrist, Disaster Psychiatry Outreach
World Trade Center Volunteer, Rescue and Salvage Worker Screening Program
1200 Fifth Avenue, First Floor
New York, NY 10128, USA
Tel: +212-241-9057
E-mail: Rebecca.smith@mssm.edu

Eun Jung Suh, PhD
Instructor in Clinical Psychology
Department of Psychiatry
Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons
New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 69
New York, NY, 10032, USA
E-mail: ejs161@columbia.edu

Ezra S. Susser, MD, DrPH
Anna Cheskis Gelman and Murray Charles Gelman Professor and Chair
Department of Epidemiology
Mailman School of Public Health,
Columbia University
Professor of Psychiatry and Department Head,
Epidemiology of Brain Disorders
New York State Psychiatric Institute
722 West 168th Street, Room 1508
New York, NY, USA 10032
Tel: +212-342-2133
Fax: +212-342-2286
E-mail: ess8@columbia.edu

David Vlahov, PhD
Director
Center for Urban Epidemiologic studies
Professor Department of Epidemiology
Mailman School of Public Health,
Columbia University
Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies
xxv     List of contributors

New York Academy of Medicine
1216 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029, USA
Tel: +212-822-7382
E-mail: dvlahov@nyam.org

Myrna M. Weissman, PhD
Professor of Epidemiology in Psychiatry
Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons
1051 Riverside Drive Unit 24
New York, NY, 10032
Tel: +212-543-5880
E-mail: weissman@childpsych.columbia.edu

Simon Wessely, PhD
Director, King’s Centre for Military Health Research
King’s College London
Weston Education Centre
Cutcombe Road
London
SE5 9 RJ, UK
Tel: +0044-207-848-0448
Fax: +0044-207-848-5408
E-mail: s.wessely@iop.kcl.ac.uk

Ping Wu, PhD
Assistant Professor of Clinical Public Health in Psychiatry
Departments of Psychiatry and Epidemiology
Columbia University
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 43
New York, NY 10032, USA
Tel: +212-543-5688 (main),
212-543-5190
Fax: +212-781-6050
E-mail: wup@child.cpmc.columbia.edu

Rachel Yehuda, PhD
Professor of Psychiatry
Mount Sinai School of Medicine/Bronx Veterans Affairs
130 West Kingsbridge Road
526 Office of Mental Health PTSD
116/A
Bronx, NY 10468, USA
Tel: +718-584-9000; ext: 6964 or 6677
Fax: +718-741-4775
E-mail: Rachel.yehuda@med.va.gov
Foreword

This is a great and exciting book; a volume filled with stories of endeavor, achievement, appraisal and learning; stories of heroism, challenge and hope. It will become a handbook for all who would research the impact of disaster and terrorism on mental health and well-being. It is a courageous contribution to the science of this field in giving testimony to the research that was done to assess need, to study reactions over time, and to provide and evaluate the best possible care. It is also courageous in that the research is presented openly, with its challenges, its successes, its imperfections, and with critical appraisal provided by “outside” experts. It is all the more powerful for this. It is the most comprehensive drawing together of the wide range of initiatives that followed a specific incident, initiatives that were implemented in the times of chaos and uncertainty. It was instigated by researchers and clinicians who were, at the time, themselves also experiencing the multiple, acute and subsequent stressors of the attack and its aftermath. It is a further contribution in terms of the universal wish to make meaning of what has happened. As mental health professionals and scientists, this surely, is one of our ways of making meaning.

A number of themes thread their way through this book: The enormity, unexpectedness and uniqueness of what happened; not only was America assaulted, but the world saw, and felt what happened. Courage, the “democracy” of distress, resolve, resilience – the coming together of peoples: ranging from the comforts of strangers, to the convergence of those who would provide help, all attested to the wish to repair, to undo the damage, to make the world right and safe again, to heal. There is the acknowledgment and measurement of the research reported: the psychological injuries experienced by many, and, as well, the stressors that arose subsequently and made further burdens for those fighting to recover. There is a suffering revealed vividly when we listen to the words of those most directly affected. Recognition of the extent of the catastrophe, and its possible effects, the “global distress”, as well as the individual pathology, has led most contributors to talk of the public health issues. There is documentation of need for the “population injury” to be dealt with, as well as the clinical psychological injury; and many of the diverse concepts,
initiatives and research mobilized to address these, including those of powerful community driven responses. This recognition also demonstrated the need for a coherent population health framework for such an approach for mental health, including the importance of core baseline data and surveillance programs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). There is also the pluralism which is so essentially American; the multiplicity of approaches which has been creative and productive – yet the need for consistency and coordination of response – all most obvious is the convergence of agencies, ideas and methodologies, which demonstrate the need for the reassurance of governance, coordination and structure in the face of chaos and uncertainty.

Researchers and commentators highlight the vital importance of evaluation, not only of individual treatments, but also of organizational response of the public health as well as the clinical initiatives. The aims to provide the “highest quality evidence-based practice” and “rigorous outcome evaluations” are important but extremely difficult to achieve at most times, let alone in the face of catastrophe. Further research questions are also seen as relevant; for instance, what are the exposures of “terrorism” and its aftermath; what is resilience; how are interventions to be really targeted to those with greatest need related to their experience of this incident; what is the nature of “psychological trauma” and “collective trauma” and how can we better deconstruct these scientifically to research their etiological significance; and how can excessive “trauma expectations” be avoided? There is also the need for better scientific appraisal of ethno-cultural “trauma” impacts.

Sophisticated science for “ecological assessment” to inform learning from these responses; for instance, how positive dynamics can be supported and negative changes mitigated is also important. Changes such as those associated with social network damage, splitting, fear and rejection of those who are different, perhaps in terms of ethno-cultural distinctions, need to be better understood. This should include an understanding and tracking of what happens to the anger and rage in such settings and the complex social consequences, the coming to terms with the “darker side of human nature” – both in our attackers and ourselves.

What are the effects of no clear end points to an event, and more specifically of ongoing terrorism “threat” – what changes occur socially, personally, and individually and politically as a consequence? How do individual and collective perceptions and realities interact? How can beliefs that have attached to models of response, for instance, debriefing and screening, be changed by evidence and how can evidence inform the realities of care in such circumstances? How do individuals and communities live with, prepare for a threat, with individual and community plans, that will be of wider value, that will promote well-being, even if the event does not occur, while preparing for effective response if it does?

All these are important questions for future research. But such research should learn from the rich contributions of this volume and the further work to come,
from what Yuval Neria, Raz Gross, Randall D. Marshall have so powerfully drawn together, and from all the excellent contributions that comprise this work. The reviews of previous research, the science and actualities of response so comprehensively documented and the unflinching critiques provide a valuable resource. We will all learn from it in terms of research, but also in policy and planning ahead: much of what has been learned can also enrich planning and research agendas world wide, including those such as WHO–AIMS–E, (WHO, 2005) and other guidelines. The need for core minimum data sets is critical for future research so that the knowledge base can be built (Consensus Conference December 2005 Sydney, Australia), so that we can compare what we do; and share and learn from others, including other cultures and worlds. This book is a foundation stone for such future endeavors.

With this volume, and with the story of 9/11, there are other powerful themes that shadow response. One is the theme of grief, grief for the multiple losses, the terrible deaths, but also the consequent losses of the sense of invulnerability, trust in safe, controllable worlds. Grief is touched upon for instance in describing Guliano’s leadership, symbolized by how he “turned the grief and shock into action and compassion” (this volume, p. 193). It is noted in the risk associated with the loss of a loved one, the loss of social network, place of work, the loss of community, “of a place to collectively mourn” (this volume, p. 343). As suggested in the contribution about the Pentagon, those in the services, and Americans generally, had to prepare for war, and indeed there is the documentation of the many subsequent challenges of the anthrax attacks, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, terrorist attacks elsewhere, and of course more recently by international and national natural disasters of catastrophic proportions, the Tsunami, Katrina, Pakistan earthquake to name a few. The shadows of grief, the sadness of lost pasts, and future fears reflect changed worlds. That such challenges will be courageously met is attested to by this volume, but is not easy, it is sad, sadness, that is a human grief requiring recognition, comfort, memorialization and commitment to value our loved ones and to make strong compassionate futures for our worlds.

As is so well evidenced by this magnificent work: “to come to terms with catastrophe must reinforce human values of family and society, of love and hope, and of passionate commitment to life, its value, and its preservation” (Raphael, 1986, p. 311).

Beverley Raphael

REFERENCES