Therapy after Terror

Therapy after Terror examines the impact of the 2001 World Trade Center attack on mental health professionals in New York City, and on the field of mental health. The events of 9/11 quickly were identified as an unprecedented public mental health crisis, and urgent demands for psychological treatment ensued. In response, thousands of mental health professionals volunteered their services on the scene, while uncounted others provided treatment in their regular clinical settings. Yet few mental health professionals were experienced in assisting survivors of trauma, let alone of a violent catastrophe of this magnitude. Moreover, like other New Yorkers, many therapists were 9/11 victims themselves, if only indirectly.

Based on interviews with New York City mental health professionals, Therapy after Terror depicts therapists’ strikingly varied activities after the attack. This detailed study of the post-9/11, mental health crisis recounts the rapid organization and delivery of psychological services in schools and corporations, in restricted locations such as the Lexington Avenue Armory, Family Assistance Center, and Ground Zero Respite Centers, and in therapists’ private offices. It also closely examines the attack’s psychological effects on therapy patients, its unanticipated personal and professional consequences for therapists, and its extraordinary challenges to conventional clinical theories and methods.

In addition, Therapy after Terror investigates the social and political dimensions of mental health concepts and practices. Critically analyzing shifting notions of trauma, the subjective aspects of psychiatric diagnosis, the increasing medicalization of behavior, and the state’s management of the national mood, this book raises questions concerning the politics of psychotherapy after 9/11.

Karen M. Seeley, MSW, PhD, is trained in clinical social work and in cultural psychology. She is a lecturer in the Anthropology Department at Columbia University and teaches in the Psychology Department at Barnard College. Dr. Seeley is also a psychotherapist with a private practice in New York City. She has published numerous articles on culture and mental health and is the author of Cultural Psychotherapy: Working with Culture in the Clinical Encounter.
Therapy after Terror

9/11, Psychotherapists, and Mental Health

Karen M. Seeley

Columbia University
For Hayley, Brigitte, and Tyler
Contents

Acknowledgments  page ix

Introduction  1

1 Trauma Histories  10

2 Volunteers for America  39

3 “Get Me Counselors!”  61

4 The Psychological Treatment of Trauma  80

5 The Trauma of Psychological Treatment  101

6 Diagnosing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder  125

7 Trauma as Metaphor  147

8 Mental Health in Traumatic Times  168

Notes  197

Works Cited  213

Index  233
My biggest debt is to the therapists who participated in this research and who, with great eloquence, candor, and insight, discussed the personal and professional impacts of their post-9/11 clinical work. I cannot thank them enough for inviting me into their consulting rooms and revisiting the profoundly taxing weeks and months after the World Trade Center attack.

I owe special thanks to David Stark for pulling me into the original research project on which this book is based (cf. Foner 2005); to Sema Gurun for indispensable support; to Monique Girard, comrade in all matters related to 9/11; and to journalist Akiko Morikawa, who clarified the culturally specific features of Americans’ responses to the attack. Monica Bernheim, Melissa Brown, June Feder, Melinda Fine, Georgina Gatch, Carmen Grau, Diane Mirabito, Alan Roland, Matthew Silvan, Marjie Silverman, and others provided me with introductions to New York City therapists who offered psychological care in the aftermath of the attack. Ghislaine Boulanger, Mary Marshall Clark, Margaret Klenck, Madelyn Miller, Alan Roland, Sally Satel, Ann Stoler, and Nina Thomas helped me think through notions of trauma and their political implications. Susan Agrest, Gerard D’Alessio, Jean Maria Arrigo, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Peg Hoey, Setha Low, Karen Meiselas, Sherry Ortner, Adela Pinch, Aileen Seeley, and Robert Seeley read and responded to earlier versions of this work. So did therapists at the Furman Counseling Center at Barnard College, where I was on staff, and students in my Columbia University class on “Trauma.” I thank the Russell Sage Foundation for funding my initial research, Nancy Foner for providing editorial support, and Eric Schwartz of Cambridge University Press, whose guidance and calm helped bring this book to completion. Portions of this book previously appeared as
x  •  A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s


I am especially grateful to my family – to my children, Hayley, Brigitte, and Tyler, and to my husband, Brinkley Messick – for lovingly standing by me and giving me the space to complete this project.