September 11th's effects on intimate relationships [1]

Dear Alice,

I'm sure you've gotten tons of questions regarding the Sept. 11 attacks, and here's one more. It's about how the attacks have supposedly brought couples closer together, and how some have even decided to marry because of it. My question is, how "real" an effect can these attacks have on a relationship, all else being equal? That is, if a relationship wasn't all that great before Sept. 11, could the tragedies really produce a genuine, lasting, positive change, so two people who may not have been "right" for each other long-term suddenly BECOME "right" for each other? Or is this just a temporary, delusional effect? If two people aren't right for each other, wouldn't that fact emerge eventually, after the pain and trauma started to subside?

My reason for asking is a bit selfish. A guy who was really interested in me for a long time eventually started seeing someone else (who he didn't like as much as me, but she responded to him positively) a few months before the attacks. I regretted not having responded to him, and was considering maybe telling him how I felt. But then the attacks happened, and we haven't contacted each other since. I'm worried that whatever chance existed for us was ruined by the attacks, because it brought him and his new girlfriend much closer than maybe they would have been. And right now, I'm feeling depressed and a lot lonelier than I did before the attacks, and am regretting a lot more not having given him a chance (I didn't feel ready for a relationship back then, but I do now, and I miss him).

Please help.

? Feeling Alone After September 11

Answer

Dear Feeling Alone After September 11,

Your question doesn't seem selfish. What you have expressed quite eloquently are feelings that many other people are having, too. There does seem to be a phenomenon during times of great uncertainty (e.g., wars, natural disasters, terrorist attacks) wherein people feel compelled to connect with others, particularly in a romantic or sexual way.

Sometimes the desire runs deep, and people want to have heart-to-heart conversations, cry together, or spend lots and lots of time together. Sometimes there's a great sense of urgency, such as when those in the military rush to get married before leaving on a mission.
Sometimes it's to be with people we know well and know we can depend on, and other times it's comforting to be with strangers—at candlelight vigils and benefit concerts, or even in bed. In fact, psychologists and pop culture aficionados alike have reported an increase in what they call "disaster sex"—situations when people experience things that are scary and, feeling more aware of their mortality, run right out to have sex with whomever they can, and seem to prefer doing so with men and/or women with whom they are not really connected.

Not meaning to insinuate that you have racy, libidinous desires only for the guy you speak of, though. After a tragic event or natural disaster, it is normal to fear the unknown, and want to be surrounded by people who care for us. In our mind's eye, we may hope that a romantic partner will:

- Take care of us if something were to happen
- Be sad if we are harmed, thus making us feel important
- Distract us and help us to focus on something other than terrorism and war
- Comfort us when we're feeling vulnerable and afraid

Some theorists even believe that the desire for romantic connection in times of crisis stems from an evolutionary, biological urge to procreate, as if our whole species were at risk of disappearing. Of course, this doesn't quite explain everything, since so many people use birth control, not to mention that many same-sex couples hope to connect as well!

All of this is meant to say, of course, that your desires seem totally normal. Life situations, whether difficult or enjoyable, have a way of changing our perspectives sometimes. What's important at this point is that you focus on what you need. If you were planning to speak with this guy before September 11, 2001, and still have a desire to do so, what've you got to lose? If you tell him honestly what had held you back before, and that you now feel ready and would like the opportunity to get to know him, then it's up to him to consider that and make a decision about his own behavior. Whatever is his response, you will then be able to think about what would feel good to you, and maybe you'd also feel freer to move forward.

Also, take some time to really think about what you are hoping to get from this guy. Could the urgency you feel be a reaction to the uncertainties that have followed the terrorist attacks? Do you truly feel ready for a relationship now? Are there other ways to relieve your feelings of loneliness, or perhaps other people with whom you could spend romantic time? This particular person is probably not the only guy with whom you'd connect and feel good hanging out with. If romantic companionship is what you're looking for and it's not going to work out right now with him, you can look elsewhere.

You also ask if a couple that connects around a tragedy can make it through the long haul, even if they have other pre-existing problems. That's hard to say. In some cases, those other problems will prove to be too large or too basic and will resurface, causing insufferable discomfort. In others, the experience of coming together to support one another through a very difficult period can allow a couple to examine their relationship and work on the issues that have been troublesome in the past. All relationships involve an element of trial and error, and this is probably particularly true during times of great uncertainty.

Feeling lonely during these very anxious times is not uncommon. The likelihood is that many people you know feel similarly, even if they're surrounded by friends, family, and even a romantic partner. Remember to call upon your resources when you need to: call up your comrades, have dinner with colleagues from work, e-mail an old friend, call Grandma, visit
with children you know, play with your pets. And of course, don't forget the pleasure of spending time with lil' ol' you.

Alice!

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