Terror doing its job of causing stress

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

It's been three years since the devastation and horror of Sept. 11, 2001. We've had three years to grieve and to recover. And, at least outwardly, we've done a pretty good job of it. But how has our jarring wake-up call to terrorism affected us emotionally?

As a clinical psychologist in private practice for 30 years, here's what I notice, not only in my consulting room, but in my community and culture at large.

I see many of us having become more hardened and desensitized to one another than we were three years ago. The world around us seems to be getting tougher, not kinder and gentler. Of course, love, caring and sensitivity still fight the good fight to make themselves felt. But the rage and hate engendered in terrorism have clearly affected us and are showing strong resistance, especially when fueled by righteousness in all of its flavors.

On the social level, I notice this in a growing number of acts of common incivility. From golfers attacking each other on the course to rage-filled drivers putting others in danger, to spouses who can't stand each other, to "reality" television that promotes lying, humiliation and manipulation, we see all kinds of examples in the news media and our entertainment &mdash'; examples of a lack of respect and concern for one another and a quickness to follow our impulses. Does this growing lack of decency have anything to do with terrorism? I think it does.

I view our incivility as a defensive mechanism to survive the ongoing terror of our lives. We feel, both consciously and unconsciously, the need to defend ourselves against the helplessness we feel in the face of terrorism. And, as they like to say in the military world, "The best defense is a good offense."

We have been forced to numb ourselves to the relentless acts of unconscionable cruelty and violence so that we will not become overwhelmed. We have learned to emotionally turn off, to harden our hearts, in order to maintain a semblance of control and sanity. And I would suggest that this numbing leads to incivility.

How many beheadings can we tolerate? How many times will we be able to tolerate the pain of hearing about hundreds of school children dying innocently at the hands of terrorists, as they did recently in Beslan, Russia? When the agony of war drags on, at what point do we just not care anymore about politics or elections and just want to stop feeling the pain?

And yet we are still on edge, still anxious, still wondering what will happen next that will test our ability to cope. We struggle against becoming too negative, too depressed, fearful or angry. We don't want to let in too much of the absurdity that we know is always lurking just around the bend. So we protect ourselves by tempering the power of the news, making sure only a tolerable measure touches our hearts.

Because of this numbing, it's clear to me that three years later, we are experiencing a stress from terrorism that is insidious and yet effective. Whether we want to admit it, terrorism works. It's working on all of us, and it doesn't make us "girlie men" to admit it.