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Editions

When Situations Heat Up, Most of Us Keep Our Cool

■ A review of social behavior concludes that during crises, such as terrorist attacks or earthquakes, societal rules and order prevail.

By BENEDICT CAREY, TIMES STAFF WRITER

While the rescue workers who rushed into the World Trade Center buildings a year ago will always be revered as heroes, the more than 10,000 people who fled down stairwells and out of the New York City towers embodied another selfless and deeply rooted instinct--to preserve social order.

"They filed down those stairs, helping the disabled, passing water bottles, calling loved ones on cell phones," said Lee Clarke, a sociologist at Rutgers University and author of a recent review of social behavior during disasters. "Something in their gut was telling them to get out, but they didn't lose control. It could have been much worse."

The review compared victims' response to the terrorist attacks with a variety of disasters that had the potential to provoke widespread panic among large groups of people, from nightclub fires to rock concert hysteria to wartime bombings. In five decades of disaster research, social scientists have found one common thread--civil decency almost always carries the hour. Although some individuals are overwhelmed by fear and "lose it," most of us remain calm amid the chaos and help care for one another and restore order, according to Kathleen Tierney, director of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. After the floods in Europe this summer; the Northridge earthquake in 1994; the Loma Prieta quake of 1989; and even in the midst of extended bombing campaigns such as those of London and Berlin during World War II, citizens as a rule shared food, clothing and shelter, researchers say.

Contrary to predictions of selfish panic and mass hysteria, moreover, a disaster can bring out decency that might not otherwise have been evident.

"When the crunch comes, and the world begins to fall apart, the true, raw self comes out--and we find it's essentially humane," said Clarke. "The point is that altruism is not all that exceptional; it's the rule."

The review, which appears in the fall issue of the sociology journal Contexts, used testimony of eye witnesses, as well as reported behavior of the group during and just after the calamities, all of which included deaths.

Psychologists find that certain well-defined predicaments are more likely than others to send people into flights of wide-eyed screaming and trampling over their fellow

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citizens. A confined space, filling with smoke or flames, whose exits are quickly closing is more liable to spread panic than the first rumblings of an earthquake, for example. The sense that some will survive at the expense of others, the time pressure and the apparent need for decisive action make for a powerful combination, say those who study panic response.

But even tragic firetraps evoke a wide range of behavior from those caught inside. On Memorial Day weekend in 1977, 165 people died trying to escape a fire at the Beverly Hills Supper Club in Southgate, Ky. When they first heard of the fire, 1,200 or so visitors moved calmly toward the main room's three exits, according to eyewitnesses. After smoke and fire cut off one of the exits and poured into the room, some people began jumping over chairs and tables and pushing. But they did not overpower those weaker than themselves, or violently shove others away, according to an investigation of the fire, said Clarke.

In short, the rules of behavior during crises are very much the same as in ordinary life, researchers say. "Social relationships are very durable," Tierney said. "During disasters gender roles are very strong: Men do what men are expected to do, the heavier work; women do what they're expected to, helping care for others. Even leadership roles persist, with people looking to their superiors for direction."

One reason many of us remain levelheaded, especially in the first moments after disaster has struck, is kind of denial, social psychologists surmise. We're attached to our routines; we'd rather make one more phone call than deal with a fire drill; we don't want to panic. "We call this the bias toward normalcy," Tierney said.

This longing for social order not only helped thousands of attack victims in New York and the Pentagon save themselves and others; it has brought some semblance of "normal" back to those cities in just one year. "It's a very hopeful thing to think about," said Clarke, "that the people who are most likely to save me during a crisis are those right next to me."

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