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## A misunderstood stress symptom

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
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In the aftermath of a traumatic event, such as a fire or an air-crash, the mysterious onset of survivor guilt used to baffle friends, families and colleagues so much that it was classified as a mental disorder.

That was certainly how it looked - a condition that appeared to run counter to any notions of reason or logic. Instead of celebrating their lucky escape, the survivors would start to identify with the dead rather than the living, feeling guilty about their own good fortune, and often blaming themselves, quite irrationally, over nothing.

Then about fifty years ago, therapists who had treated many groups of Holocaust survivors began to question this. With research based on such a large sample, they concluded that survivor guilt was not an aberration but a complex moral response, although the sufferer's psychological profile could also determine his susceptibility. And it was officially re-classified as one of the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Today it is easily recognised among survivors of military combat, terrorist outrages or industrial accidents.

In a more muted form, it can affect people who have been spared a 'slow motion' trauma like redundancy. But the effects are similar. Always the over-heated conscience is at work. "Why wasn't it me?" or "Could I have done more?" The guilt is nearly always completely unfounded.

But if survivor guilt is easy to recognise, it is certainly not easy to treat. Specialists have described the syndrome as a defence barrier that needs to be lowered, and the emotional damage slowly repaired. It is not a case for urging the patient to 'snap out of it'. Judgmental input has no place in this treatment. Instead the counsellor aims to move the sufferer towards self-help through a practised routine of listening, prompting and guiding in confidence, subtly steering the dialogue through minimal speech or gestures. This is the best way to stimulate the revelations that may yield a new perspective on the problem.

With survivor guilt, therapy centres on escorting the sufferer back down the strange route by which they arrived - revisiting the trauma, focusing on it as part of the emotional landscape and acknowledging the guilt feeling. This can help them to come to terms with their true role in the incident, make more

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sense of it, and start to assume a more normal role in the here-and-now. In other words, it ushers them gently towards the rational.

This can usefully be combined with co-counselling or mutual evaluation between peers. It is easy to see how introducing a fellow-sufferer of the same syndrome can help to induce a more balanced outlook on such an emotive problem.





HR departments everywhere are becoming better trained in this sensitive and constructive form of support-intervention.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

### Survivor guilt

- Survivors of traumatic incidents often blame themselves over nothing.
- This irrational behaviour is officially classified as a symptom of PTSD.
- Specialist therapy and co-counselling can largely defuse the problem.

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