Sudhesh Dahad: Survivor of the London Transport attacks on 7th July 2005

Sudhesh Dahad, like millions of other Londoners, set off for work early on the morning of the 7th July 2005 before cramming into a London Underground train at King's Cross tube station. That morning his life would change forever, as a small cell of terrorists attacked the London transport network, killing 52 innocent victims and injuring many more.

Below, SINCE 9/11 got the opportunity to speak with Sudhesh about his experiences that day and how events have impacted him since.

SINCE.❺~~7~~7¿What.was.your.experience.on.❸th.July.866❶?

Sudhesh Dahad: I was on my way to work on that day. I could say it was a typical Thursday morning but it wasn't – it was a hot summer's morning and there was a sense of excitement the day after London had won the 2012 Olympic bid. I was on my regular route to work, using the Piccadilly Line from Kings Cross to Piccadilly Circus. Normally, I used to board the train at the second set of doors from the front but it was so crowded that I couldn't reach that part of the platform. In fact, it was so crowded that about a minute after arriving on the platform, it was impossible to leave. So I stood at the end of the platform where the front of the train would stop whenever it arrived. I couldn't board the first or second train that arrived, as they were so crowded. When the third one arrived, I got carried along with the crowd onto the train but I couldn't move at all and my arms were trapped at my sides. There is no underestimating some people's desperation to get to work!

Less than a minute after the train left Kings Cross, there was a popping sound, a flash and the train came to an immediate halt. All of these seemed to happen at the same time. I was thrown onto the floor as everybody who was standing got thrown forwards with the sudden stop. I knew immediately what had happened as it was something I had anticipated for a long time but I really didn't expect that I would be there when it did happen. At the time, I didn't know where the bomb had gone off and only learned about two weeks later that it was detonated by the second set of doors from the front, where I usually get on the train.

Eventually, maybe after about twenty minutes and after walking down the tunnel, I emerged at Russell Square station along with others who were still able to walk. I felt a little relief then, although I still didn't feel entirely safe, and that's when the emotional numbness set in.

What.was.the.response.of.the.emergency.services.like?

I had no experience of the emergency services on that day. I didn't think I was injured so I walked away. On my way home, I did go into A&E in my local hospital in Hertfordshire where I was given a cursory examination. I was told that my eardrums were perforated and the nurse removed the little fragments of glass that were loosely lodged in my scalp.

How.did.your.experience.of.the.attack.impact.you.in.the.few.days.following?

I was mostly numb for days and weeks afterwards. My job at that time involved lots of conference calls with my head office in the US, because of the project I was working on. Since the incident happened on this side of the pond, my colleagues on the other side didn't really comprehend the impact of what had happened so the project went on but I couldn't take anything in. It was only about three weeks or so later that I felt I couldn't continue trying to work and I realised I was in no condition to do so. So I spoke to somebody in HR in the London office for the first time and they advised me to take some time off.

It might sound like such an obvious thing to do but I was incapable of making any choices or decisions because I felt like a zombie. I needed to be told what to do but nobody really does that for you as an adult. The only times I felt any emotion was whenever I watched the news. It had me in tears nearly every time. With hindsight, watching the news when you're in traumatic shock isn't a great idea.

Do.you.feel.that.you.were.adequately.supported.in.the.aftermath?

Very few people who survive terrorist attacks will tell you that they had adequate support in the aftermath and I'm no different. I think the problem is twofold: firstly the people who need support don't know what kind of support they want at the time and the people who try to provide the support generally haven't been through the experience themselves so their approach is based on what they've learnt on courses or from textbooks so it's mostly based on theory.

The best support I had was from a charity in Cheshire that was originally created to support people affected by the violence in Northern Ireland. The charity creates a safe space for survivors to share their stories and also opportunities to speak publicly about it. The other form of support that was most effective was meeting regularly with other survivors from 7/7. I only began to meet with my fellow survivors about six months later, after coming across a newspaper article about self-help group just before Christmas that year.

You've.spoken.previously.about.being.in.denial.about.the.impact.which.has.had.on.you.- .how.did.events.that.day.affect.you.long.term?

Yes, I'm not sure I would use the word "denial" again. That was just the first word that came to mind during a speech one year in Hyde Park. I would say that I tried to distract myself and convince myself that everything would be ok if I just got on with my life. Two years after it happened, I found myself promoted to a rather high-pressured role just because I'd been heavily immersing myself at work and managed to achieve quite a lot. But the high pressure was the tipping point – I absorbed it for about three years without realising the impact it was having on me. I was suffering from constant anxiety over everything – work, home life, health, finances. There was nothing that I didn't worry about and blow out of proportion in my head. It was affecting my sleep too and the whole thing became one vicious circle.

By 2010, I began to realise this and took a different role at work that would give me a little breathing space. The problem is that every time something new comes along, it is difficult to heal the old wounds when you have to start coping with new challenges. For many survivors, their home becomes the only place they feel safe so when my home was burgled in 2011, it compounded the trauma that I was still trying to recover from. Now nowhere felt safe.

In the following years, I also had to deal with the sudden death of my father and my marriage ending. It all gets thrown into the mix and then you don't know which emotions are due to what. It becomes quite complex for mental health professionals to disentangle what is really going on and how best to treat you.

How.often.do.you.think.about.the.events.of.❸❸?.and.has.it.got.any.easier.over.time?

Rarely a day goes by without me thinking about the events of 7/7. It's not that I think about the day itself but more about the consequences and also the consequences if something like that should happen again. Even then, I'm not thinking about the consequences for me but more like the consequences for people who depend on me such as my daughter and my elderly mother. Sometimes the fears fade away and the complacency sets in again. And then something might happen to trigger those fears again. The attacks in Manchester, Westminster and London Bridge are examples of such triggers. They remind me of our vulnerability and then push me back into the mode of being hyper vigilant when I'm in crowded places. I'm not sure it gets easier with time if you still feel like you have to be exposed to the same environment day in, day out. Some of my fellow survivors left London or even left the country altogether to start new lives because it just wasn't getting any easier for them.

Has.your.experience.affected.your.outlook.on.the.world~~-life~~?

An experience such as this is bound to affect your outlook on life. The biggest change is probably being sure to let your loved ones know that you love them every time you're

going to be apart from them, even if it's just going to work or going to school or anywhere that you think is just part of the daily routine. You don't know when something could happen to you or to them so treat every conversation as if it could be the last one you have with them. Another change is that it helps put life's problems in perspective. I don't think I sweat over the small stuff so much any more. Do I still worry about little things? Of course, but do they really matter in the scheme of things?

Perversely, while an experience like this makes you all to aware of your own mortality and shatters any illusion of invincibility, you also think that if you've survived a terrorist attack then you can survive all kinds of things. I remember walking through Soho one evening few years ago. If you know the area, you know how crowded it gets so lots of people spill off the pavements into the roads. Well there could well have been a headline that day: "Survivor of terrorist attack dies in mobility scooter accident".

How.important.are.public.memorials.like.the.❸❸memorial.in.Hyde.Park?

There are several aspects to the importance of public memorials like this.

Firstly, with incidents like 7/7 in which hundreds of people were affected directly and possibly thousands indirectly, there's always somebody who turns up to commemorate the day for the first time. Maybe they were bystanders who witnessed something on the day or lost a loved one or were perhaps profoundly impacted by the death of somebody they barely knew. No matter how many years have passed, still there are new people who turn up each year. It helps to know that there's a place they can go and connect with people who have a good chance of understanding what they might be going through.

Secondly, while I can't speak for the bereaved families, I know from the ones I've spoken to how much it means to them that we gather to remember those who were murdered on that day. That is the most important reason to me for the memorial. Well you might say that everybody wants his or her loved ones to be remembered so what's different about this case? The circumstances in which these people were taken away from their loved ones are different and more difficult to come to terms with, even after all these years.

You.are.involved.in.a.network.of.survivors.of.terrorist.attacks?does.it.help.to.talk.to.people.who.have.had.similar.experiences.to.your.own?

It is a sad fact that tragedy brings people closer. In the case of survivors of terrorist attacks, there is a range of emotions and day-to-day challenges that only a fellow survivor can relate to. It takes fewer words to explain it and we listen to each other without judgment. I could try explaining to my own family members what I feel every time I have to get on an underground train again and they will lend a sympathetic ear but

no matter how much they might love me, they can't really understand that feeling. Of course it isn't just about meeting to share how awful we all feel every time. It's now almost thirteen years since 7/7 and we have shared so much joy as well as sadness – birthdays, weddings and funerals for example - in those years that rather than a network, it is more like another family.

Why.do.you.think.it.is.important.that.younger.generations.who.may.not.have.any.memory.of.❸❸?.or.may.not.have.been.born.when.the.attack.took.place?.learn.about.the.events?

This begs the broader question about why bother with history at all? A stark example that's relevant right now is the recent shooting in Florida. If the students involved in the current protests and movements were unaware of previous shootings, would they feel so strongly as they do about gun control? That's perhaps easy to understand but with terrorist attacks it's a little less obvious. One answer is that younger generations should be given the full facts of what has happened in the past so that they can make up their minds about the risks they want to take. From a purely statistical perspective, they should have all the data so that they can make their own interpretation of any patterns or trends to gauge where is safe and where is less so.

Today, we struggle to counteract the radicalisation narrative that proliferates on the Internet. We don't see any obvious solutions to it. There may be a point in the future at which it becomes more obvious to future generations if they know the history of these incidents.

My first two points were both about making information available to younger generations so that they might be able to take better countermeasures to deal with threats like these in the future. But there's also another aspect. Many of the survivors' stories, and stories from bereaved families, reflect the pain caused by terrorism not just to those who are injured but also to the loved ones left behind. Every young person is likely to have a brother, sister, father, mother or child who loves them. My hope, perhaps a naïve one, is that the more these stories spread, the more likely it is that a would-be terrorist will stop and think about his or her own loved ones before going down a path of violence.