

Dear Specialists in Victim Support and Security

I shouldn't be here.

I shouldn't be here talking to you about our experiences as victims of the terrorist attack in Belgium this year.

The world is upside down I shouldn't come to you, you should be coming to us.

You should come, you should listen and take care of what we can't in our distraught condition.

You should be asking and providing what we need, because people with broken hearts and bodies are not ready to concentrate on mundane things. We are lucky if, emotionally, we can stay sane enough to go on with a kind of normal life.

You should come *to learn* for yourselves how to give more adequate support and care to all victims so they don't feel neglected. Because neglected is how we feel: Inconsequential actors in an unfortunate news event, which happened quickly and was quickly forgotten.

It's true that Belgium wasn't prepared to deal with such a tragedy; it was the first terrorist attack on this scale in our country. But it is not an excuse, it was not all that unexpected. And even more important, are we better prepared now eight months after the event? And if we are not, what have we learned and what can be done ?

I don't know, and it is not up to me to know. But what I can do – and why I am here - is speak of my experience as a victim. I can tell you what was badly needed and missing on the 22nd of March, in the first week of chaos and despair and in the months that followed. What would have been of great help for me, my family and many other victims and unfortunately is still missing. Here are 3 things that could have made a difference for us.

### **First, Psychological support from professionals to help victims deal with trauma and its emotional effect**

A human tragedy of this scale and severity requires psychological expertise on a similar scale. And beyond the actual skills we definitely need a new consciousness of the importance of emotions and human contact in, during and after traumatising events.

Here are some examples of my own experiences:

When officials came to me in the first week they did not know how to behave. They were correct, but mostly cool and uneasy. I took the initiative of asking them their first names and gave them mine, in order to be able to relate to them. And... what a relief, there was an immediate warmer and more reassuring relationship which made what we had to do together a lot easier. I should not have had to facilitate this; I have some psychological knowledge but most victims do not.

Another example is the **terribly long time it takes to identify disaster victims.**

It seems that identity cards and other official documents on the body are not enough, they need other evidence such as DNA, dental records and details of victims supplied by their families and taken down by hand by volunteers. This identification process takes so much time, that I only knew on Friday morning, 4 days after the attack, that my partner Johan was dead. All his documents, some with my name and telephone number were found intact on his body but it seems that official documents are not enough, they need other evidence such as DNA, dental records and details of victims supplied by their families and taken down by hand by volunteers.

Other severely wounded victims were also identified very late. I can understand that the protocol is there to avoid terrible mistakes. But imagine what it is like for a victim - in pain or even dying - to be on his own so long without the emotional support of his family. People are more than flesh and blood. I am grateful to the doctors and nurses who did a heroic job. But the presence of your beloved is healing too.

A last example:

Some weeks ago, the victims who claimed for civil injury were invited by Federal Justice to an information session about the on-going investigation. We didn't know what to expect.

They showed us a slideshow with a detailed reconstruction of the event with several pictures of the perpetrators (walking from their apartment to the tube station), pictures of the destroyed metro wagons, an X-ray picture of the bomb with the nails and other devices meant to hurt inside.

Not surprisingly several people were overwhelmed and had to leave. Others stayed and were re-traumatized.

After the slideshow, we could ask questions and the whole session lasted from 3 till 5.30 pm. People kept on asking questions about every little detail, which seemed vital to complete the inner emotional film of their trauma.

The emotional outbursts in front of the judges – who were neither prepared nor trained to deal with them - showed how the victims have lacked active psychological support in the weeks and months after the attack. Emotional questioning and processing should have been facilitated in the weeks and months after the attack by counsellors and therapists trained in trauma and crisis intervention. This is not work for untrained volunteers.

I mentioned 3 things that could have made a difference. Here is the second. - **Enabling Victims to connect and support each other**

There is a strong dynamic of fragmentation and individualization in our society. This is a fertile breeding ground for extremism, which makes it also easier for terrorists to harm us.

Social reconnection is essential, not only to prevent but also to heal those who are afflicted, shaken or afraid. People should be motivated to leave their isolation and find each other in groups - small and large. After a collective tragedy as this terrorist attack, when fear keeps people in their home, this is more needed than ever.

This is why, together with some friends and professionals, I initiated a voluntary civil movement called "Circles -We have the choice," in which we gather as human beings to share our silence and our stories in times of blind violence. Circles are open to everybody who feels touched and worried about what is happening, and who wants to share his or her experience with others. The Circles stimulate a dynamic of connection, healing, solidarity and prevention.

Once again though, we the victims have taken it upon ourselves to organise what you should be organising. And we received little support. After the attack we begged everywhere for the addresses of victims, the few we finally obtained were mainly through the press and our own research.

And here is the third thing that was missing and would have helped - **Central coordination & communication about what was happening, who was doing what, and where to find which information**

It would have been helpful immediately after the event if there had been a **central point of information** for Victim Rescue with trained people and updated information about victims & survivors.

Indeed, there were some telephone numbers, and people to answer the calls. They did what they could, but there was no substantial information available whatsoever. And this lasted for 5 days. After hanging for hours on the telephone, it really felt useless to call them anymore. That's why our family and many others started to call and visit all the hospitals in the country in search of our beloved.

There seems to be **nobody responsible for** thinking about us victims, individually and as a group.

In other countries, such as France victims received spontaneous emotional, financial and legal support in a quite transparent way.

In Belgium we had to find out most things for ourselves, like what to do for psychological or medical support, financial aid, indemnities, insurances and other administration, how to defend our civil rights, how succession and personal taxes would or wouldn't be charged. In Belgium, nothing is clear and the victims are still waiting for clarity.

What became concrete after some months is that for financial aid and the coordination of compensation there is the "Commission of financial aid for victims of acts of terrorism", and the person in charge is very engaged and helpful.

For everything else, I met a series of people and organizations: someone from the police who presented himself first as victim support, someone from justice, someone from a CAW and someone from an unknown association. Sometimes they presented themselves as "slachtofferhulp", sometimes as "slachtofferonthaal", sometimes as "slachtofferbejegening", sometimes as "service laïque d'aide aux victimes. I still don't have a clue how they are different and how they relate. And when I asked, they didn't either.

When there was a clear urgency, for example for arranging to receive the remains, some people came to me. But for most other things I had to find out myself. And I can tell you - it requires a lot of energy to hunt for support, to get bits and pieces here and there and then to try putting everything together.

Also, how can it be that I didn't know about the actual existence of Victim Support Europe before I was asked to come here and speak? How can you reach the victims if the victims don't know you?

**There was never a complete list of victims** with contact information, and apparently there still isn't one now.

Last week a movie production company called me because they wanted to engage some victims as actors in the promotion movie of an important federation of social assistance. They had received my name from an official at Justice who had told them that I could give them the names of victims!

I was flabbergasted. I had asked several public departments myself, including Justice, for this list so that they could be invited to our Circles "We have the choice." Sometimes I was lucky enough to get a name but never a list. And now they nominate me as the point of contact?!

There still isn't a **central Victim Support website** with information and links with other sources in Europe and the world, about Victim Support in the aftermath of terrorism. A website is a easy to make, inexpensive and effective communication tool. There are good examples of similar websites in other countries. Why there isn't one in Belgium is beyond me.

Ideally this website would be only the façade of a real Expertise centre of Victim Support. This Expertise centre could then also organise a positive campaign to sensitize and prevent. Now the tragedy is quickly forgotten.

Last week I heard from a friend who saw on TV that 32 birch trees would be planted in the wood for those who died in the 22<sup>nd</sup> March attack. Such a pity that they didn't inform, or even better consult the victims themselves. And yes, instead of the announced memorial monument at Zaventem Airport, there is a tiny bronze plate on a wall that you'll only notice when there is a bunch of faded flowers under it. Do I sound bitter? Well, they say that indifference is the first step towards violence.

I would like to end by saying something about the word "Victims", a term I can hardly relate to.

*What do we mean by "victims", who are they ? Only the dead and wounded ? Or does the word also include their families ? And are the families of wounded as much victims as the family of the dead ?*

And what about those who were on or near the place of the attacks (care givers, security people, people working at attack locations - passengers, citizens - many of them are also traumatised: are they victims too ? And what about all those who were not present but still have emotional damage (doctors, nurses, people of the Muslim community, family of perpetrators, regular commuters, ...) ? And if they all are victims is there a psychological difference between them that we should tune into or should they be treated in the same way ?

This may seem to be a detail, but to give you an example: I was invited with other families of missing people to a information session about the rescue and identification process in the military hospital a few days after the attacks. To our dismay, they only spoke about the procedure how they identify dead people. It didn't occur to them that most people present were there because they still had hope that their family member was alive! You can imagine the emotional outcry of the families that followed.

Of course we are hurt, wounded, traumatised, but the word 'Victims' just reduces us to passive sufferers without any agency, and pushes the others in the opposite polarity of the perpetrators. And as we know language forms our perception, and perception dictates our actions.)

Dear people,

Johan - my man-, Fabienne - wive of Eddy Van Calster and sister of Philippe Van Steenkiste who are her with me - and the 30 other people who were killed on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March shouldn't be dead. But they are, and the Belgian state failed to prevent this.

And again, I shouldn't be here. But I am.

And whoever works for Victim Rescue and Support was not prepared to take care of the so-called victims.

When terrorists hit at the Belgian and European Institutions by killing innocent people to, our institutions should own their responsibility to give whatever emotional, administrative and financial support is needed to those who were sacrificed.

It is time now that Europe, and Belgium as part of Europe, show what solidarity means in times of terrorism. It is time that Europe and Belgium apply the necessary changes so that human suffering caused by blind violence will be taken care of in a good, emotional intelligent and respectful way.

Thank you for your attention.