

MY STORY

‘I survived the Boxing Day tsunami’

Carole Edrich, a journalist, was on holiday in the Maldives when the wave struck. Ten years on, she talks about coming to terms with her traumatic memories

As I walked back to my hotel room after breakfast on the morning of 26 December 2004 – the day I was meant to be flying home – I looked to my right, saw a wave and at first thought it was the perfect shape for surfing. When I looked again I realised that it was miles away, that it was an enormous tsunami and that we were in trouble. I had eaten breakfast with a friend I’d met at the hotel after my travel companion had gone off on a tiger safari, and I told my friend to take her sons back to the reception (the only building that looked like it might hold) and raced to my room to save my mobile phone and laptop. The first wave hit as I was hurrying back to reception. Everyone thinks a tsunami is one big ‘event’, but they are caused by earthquakes far out at sea and the aftershocks produce smaller waves that follow the big one. The initial wave covered the island – the cottages within the hotel grounds were all flooded – but the Maldives wasn’t as badly affected as places like Indonesia, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka.’

The road to recovery

‘Before becoming a journalist, I’d worked as a risk management consultant, so I stayed on for a few weeks, using my skills to help work out a disaster recovery plan. I’d walk to breakfast along the beach each morning and see toothbrushes, teddy bears, single sandals and children’s shoes washed up on the sand. It made me feel as if



Thanks to cognitive behavioural therapy, Carole is able to manage her memories of the tsunami

someone had reached into my heart and twisted it so terribly that even now, 10 years later, I still cry. A handful of people in the Maldives lost their lives, but it has since been estimated that 230,000 people died throughout the worst-hit regions.

‘When I first got home, I felt fine. I didn’t mind people asking me about my experience; in fact, I had it down pat and it just tripped off the tongue. But slowly, those images of teddy bears in the sand became all I could see. They brought back feelings of helplessness, and the belief that I should have stayed to help rebuild shattered communities boiled in my head, making my day job – writing features for magazines –

impossible. It was all I could do to get myself out of bed and when I did, I would sit at my computer and stare at a blank screen.

‘After three weeks I went to see my doctor, who diagnosed me with depression and referred me to a counsellor. I was encouraged to talk about the experience again and again, but given no help to actually process the events that had happened. I felt stuck in a spiral of anxiety and negativity, with no way to move on.’

Moving on

‘One day, I heard a Radio 4 programme about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It explained how soldiers from the Gulf War got trapped in a circle of negative thoughts and feelings, and how something called cognitive behavioural therapy could help. It was a light-bulb moment. Realising that I had PTSD felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. However, at that time, cognitive behavioural therapists weren’t available on the NHS as it was still considered an emerging therapy, so I saved up for weeks to pay for my own.

‘I visited six different therapists before finally finding one whose techniques were so useful that after just three weeks I started to feel better and could start working again. For the next four years, I would wake up on Boxing Day and start crying. But that’s a healthy reaction. It’s taken a long time, but now when I wake up on the 26 December, I no longer cry.’ 