

A Story of Survival

New York City Firefighter and Iron Worker Experienced More Than His Share of Tragedy and Loss

This is his story of courage and living.

When you first meet Tommy Roche, his unassuming manner and warm, welcoming smile make you think, "This is a guy who has had a good life." No one would know about the hardships and tragedy this 35-year-old New York City firefighter and ironworker has encountered. In fact, he makes a conscious effort to minimize these struggles – including his involvement in the tragic aftermath of the 9-11 disaster – and divert attention elsewhere. He refused to give *Rolling Stone* magazine the gory details about his 9-11 experience.



Tommy Roche

buildings collapsed," said Roche.

He reached the firehouse and watched as the second building collapsed, and then boarded buses with other firefighters and went to the site.

"Thousands of people were crossing the bridge in a mass exodus," said Roche. "They were all covered in ash. At that point, I knew it would be very bad. I told fellow ironworkers who were willing to help that they should come. When we approached the site, the streets were deserted except for police and firefighters. Papers and photos were flying around. A lot of people I knew – both firefighters and other friends who worked in the buildings – were in there.

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"Thousands of people were crossing the bridge in a mass exodus. They were all covered in ash."

He only agreed to tell his story when we promised to focus on the healing and hope it could offer others.

9-11 Tragedy

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Roche was working with fellow ironworkers at King's County Hospital. He suddenly noticed that across the river one of the World Trade Center towers was on fire, and then witnessed the explosion. He immediately called the firehouse where he was also employed and learned of the two planes crashing into the towers. Minutes later he saw the mushroom flame and knew he needed to go.

Upon stopping at a gas station on the way, an attendant told him that the bridges were closed and he would not be able to cross, so he instead went directly to the firehouse. "In a way, that guy probably saved me from being in there when the

Latest Email Scam Can Drain Your Bank Account

A foreigner contacts you stating that he needs to transfer money from a Swiss bank account to the United States. If you simply let him use your bank account for the transfer, he'll give you \$400 in return. Sounds like easy money? Think again.

First, ask yourself:

1. Why did this stranger choose to contact *me*?
2. What do I know about this person?
3. I wouldn't give my bank account information to someone I know. Why

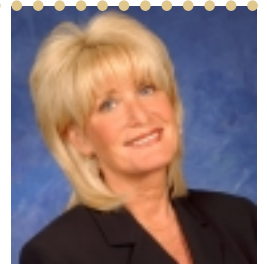
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Do You Suffer from Depression?

If so, please take a few minutes to answer our online poll regarding depression and exercise. Simply go to www.MySelfHelp.com and click on User Poll.

Results will be included in next month's newsletter. As always, you will remain anonymous.



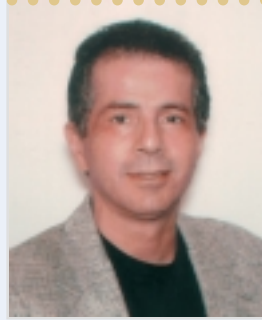
Susan Wornick
Consumerism Expert
WCVB Channel 5,
Boston

- would I give it to a complete stranger?
4. How can I be certain this person will not take my money? *Answer: He probably will!*

The golden rule of thumb is, if it sounds too good to be true—then it is too good to be true. 🍀

Ask Doctor B.

Questions and Answers with Dr. Richard Bedrosian



With 9-11, threats of terrorism, and the war in Iraq, I find myself worrying almost all the time. The more I try to put it out of my mind, the more anxious I get. What can I do?

Mary B.
Bowie, MD

Dear Mary,

You are not alone. The current world situation is causing many people to experience fear, anger and sadness. When this bothers you, it can help to talk about your reactions with trusted friends or family members. However, since so many of these tragic events are out of your control, you also should try to go on with your life as usual. Make sure to keep up all of your usual social and recreational activities. It can also help to limit your exposure to upsetting information. By all means stay informed about the world, but don't feel as if you need to read every article or watch every news report about this difficult world of ours.

If taking these steps doesn't seem to keep these worries from interfering with your life, consider getting some help in managing your emotions. If you currently have a therapist, talk to him or her about these feelings. If you do not have a therapist, call your doctor, a clergy member, or a trusted friend for a referral. In addition, if you are a subscriber to MySelfHelp.com, go to the section of the program on "**Difficult or painful emotions**" for help in dealing with your feelings. You also may want to choose one or more of the Self-Soothing Strategies in the program to help calm you when you are feeling anxious. Your recognition of a potential problem and desire to solve it are signs that you are on the right track. Be patient with yourself as you work toward feeling better.

Richard Bedrosian, Ph.D., is President of MySelfHelp.com. He has been a practicing clinical psychologist for over 25 years, is a faculty member at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and has written books and articles on depression and related topics. Send your questions to Dr. Bedrosian at info@MySelfHelp.com.

I feel like I can't do anything right or finish any job, so I'm constantly overwhelmed with my house, my work, my children, etc. Why can't I ever finish what I start?

Pat S.
Bloomfield Hills, MI

Dear Pat,

We live in an over-booked, over-stressed society where there never seems to be enough hours in a day to complete the tasks we lay out for ourselves. It sounds like you may be over-committed and overwhelmed with your responsibilities. The first step is to prioritize your tasks each day. Identify those things that **must** be done to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of you and your family. Once the tasks are prioritized, take the following steps:

1. Start with the top entries on your list.
2. Break each task into small steps. This will make each task easier to complete, and seem less overwhelming.
3. Use lists to monitor your progress and stay on track.
4. Whenever possible, try finishing one task before beginning another.
5. Give yourself a small reward for finishing a task.
6. Lower your expectations. You can't be perfect in everything. Consider eliminating some of your responsibilities. You are only human. Taking on too much sets you up for failure and can compromise your mental and physical health.
7. Be proud of your accomplishments—no matter how small they may seem!

A Story of Survival

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"About 40 of us walked in and started looking for people, but we found no one," added Roche.

As firefighters and other officials scrambled to organize and deal with this horrific tragedy, Roche was recommended to the fire battalion chief as someone to count on for advice and to serve as a liaison between the ironworkers and fire chief. "With 18 years of experience as an ironworker, and only two years with the fire department, I realized I could be more helpful as an ironworker at the site – by removing steel beams and moving debris – but that my skills as a firefighter could also be utilized." As a result, the battalion chief consulted closely with Roche in laying out a plan to begin digging out bodies and debris – and to ensure the safety of the workers and any potential survivors.

The two were faced with some extremely difficult decisions. "On the first day, we found bodies of fully recognizable people. But there was only so much digging we could do with our hands. We realized that it was time to bring in the crane to start ripping down beams and dig through the site, but if people were alive, we would be making the tragic decision of risking their lives. As it turned out, no one was left alive.

"We knew what was coming – that the crane would not only pull up the metal and debris, but would also pull up human remains. Two fellow ironworkers walked away with blank stares and tears in their eyes. It was so devastating."

Roche lost 14 firefighter friends from his training class – as well as numerous friends and acquaintances who worked in the World Trade Center. One of the firefighters who died was about to move into Roche's Long Beach house. Firefighter training never prepared him or anyone else for such a tragedy and loss. "It was incomprehensible and incredibly sad. No one could ever be ready for something like this," he said. "You just came to expect the worse with each passing day. The bad news just kept coming, and I began to feel numb as I learned of more and more deaths of people I knew."

Roche then led eight men to assess the damage of the adjacent American Express building, which had been heavily damaged and was riddled with pieces of

the World Trade Center that were blown into it. These pieces needed to be tied back or cut, so as not to pose a danger of falling and endangering people near the building.

They began by checking all floors of the building to ensure that no one was in the building. "We went up to the 30th floor and it was eerie and silent," he said. "Wallets and other personal belongings were strewn across desks. One desk was hanging off the side of the building. I saw a photo of a young girl on the desk along with what appeared to be the employee's address. I took the photo and mailed it to the address with a note – not knowing whether or not the person survived the tragedy." As it turned out, the grateful employee contacted Roche to thank him for returning one of the few pictures he had of his daughter. Roche was just glad to hear that the man made it out alive.

Roche, along with countless others, worked around the clock – with very little sleep and little to eat. "It was difficult to think about eating at a time like that," he said. He worked tirelessly – cutting and moving steel to make it safe for others and prevent any further loss.

Even when not working at the site, there was no escaping the tragedy of the World Trade Center, as the thick lingering smoke throughout the air was a constant reminder of the death and devastation.

Finding Solace in Man's Best Friend

"That night, I went home to my dog and fish – who were the only normal things in the world to me at the moment. I know this may sound strange, but my dog was not affected by the sudden tragic events of the world – he was just happy to see me. I really needed that."

How Did He Cope?

When asked how he coped, Roche said it came down to separating the tragedy from the good parts of life. "It's not easy, but you have to make an effort to jump back into your life," he said. "For me, the things that kept me going were my brother, friends, sports, and the people I met through all this. I really felt lucky to be alive." Roche received calls from over 50 concerned friends from all over the country, and his brother drove for three days from California to New York to be with him, since all flights were halted.

No Stranger to Pain and Loss

Roche had some previous practice with loss and grief, as eight close relatives had passed away within three years. He said the 9-11 tragedy was especially difficult in that it brought back the painful memories and feelings he had when he lost his parents. Both died of illnesses within two months of each other when he was only 22 years old.

Without thinking twice, Roche began the process of adopting his 14-year-old brother Mike – his only sibling – in order to assume legal responsibility and cover him under his medical benefits.

At a time when most 22-year-olds were experiencing their first real taste of freedom, Roche shelved his plans of traveling the world and assumed the daunting task of instant parenthood on his own. While he brushed it off as "no big deal," any parent of a teenager knows otherwise. He did admit that there were challenging times when he had to enforce "tough love" – such as dragging his brother out of bed and forcing him to go to school. "He was a typical teenager who thought he knew it all," said Roche. "I don't know if I would have won any parenting awards, but I did the best I could."

Mike went on to college at Virginia Tech and is currently in flight training with the Air Force in Texas. When asked if he worries about losing his only remaining family member – especially considering the current military actions overseas – Roche said he tries to stay positive. "Things are going to happen no matter what," he said. "You can't spend your life worrying. You've got to go on living."

When asked if he feels bitter or sad about the tragic events that shaped his life, and for losing most of his family at such a young age, Roche said he doesn't dwell on that. Quoting from the movie "Finding Forrester," he said, "sometimes you have to make your own family," when your real family no longer exists. Roche's wealth of friends demonstrates that he has done just that.

Lessons Learned and Words of Advice

What advice does Roche give to others?

"The most important thing is to set goals and try to live your dreams," he said. He highly recommends looking back to your childhood dreams – which are genuine and untainted. "If you wanted to be an astronaut, or travel the world, or fight fires, then go for it," he said. "Obviously you have to pay your bills and fulfill your responsibilities, but never lose sight of your dreams."

Roche had two childhood dreams: to travel across the country on a bicycle, and to become a member of the elite team of smokejumpers who parachute from planes to fight forest fires. It's no surprise that he accomplished both. "The two best days of my life were when I crossed the Golden Gate Bridge on my bicycle and when I was awarded my wings as a smokejumper."

When it comes to employment, Roche emphasized the importance of getting a job that you at least like. "If you like something, and think you can make a little bit of money at it and pay your bills or if it's just going to keep you sane, you should stick with it," he said. "If you can't start out doing what you like, then make it your goal for your future. Not living beyond your means is a huge part of making this a reality."

The other piece of advice Roche offered is to spend time with the people you love. "Go outside and throw the ball with your kid," he said. "That's what he or she will remember about you when you are no longer around – not how many hours you put in at the office." Roche remembers asking his grandmother where she would go if she could choose anywhere in the world, and she chose Hawaii. As a result, he surprised her with a 13-day vacation to the Hawaiian Islands. Two months later, his grandmother died suddenly of a heart attack. Though deeply saddened by her death, he was comforted with his memories of their time spent together.

"Instead of worrying about what can happen, I try to get up every morning and think of the possibilities," said Roche. "I think, 'Wow, I wonder what's going to happen today,' and I rarely have a bad day." 🍌

"Things are going to happen no matter what. You can't spend your life worrying. You've got to go on living."

Top Reader Picks for Relaxation Techniques

1. A long walk in the park or on the beach
2. Reading a book
3. A relaxing bubble bath
4. A short nap
5. Watching a movie
6. Yoga
7. Listening to music
8. Drawing or painting
9. A quiet, candle-lit dinner
10. Deep-breathing exercises
11. Playing the piano or other instrument
12. Calling an old friend

Next Issue

Send us your ideas for keeping your relationship with a spouse or significant other fresh and exciting.

Share an inspirational story about you or someone you know.

Send ideas to Caren Kenney at ckkenney@MySelfHelp.com.



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resources designed to speed recovery and promote well-being.

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Quote of the Month

“Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

— Confucius