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Major city vigilance urged, with vehicle attacks the ‘new normal’

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Those living in major cities need to learn to normalise the possibility of hostile vehicle attacks by increasing vigilance as pedestrians, according to the clinical psychologist who helped shape the Bourke Street recovery effort.

One year after a car attack killed six in Melbourne’s CBD and just weeks after another car rampage on Flinders Street left one man dead, Rob Gordon said recovery was easier for those who accepted this new “indiscriminate violence”.

“We probably don’t realise how dangerous things are with cars racing around; we take for granted those risks and we’ve got to live around the new risks. We can normalise that once we accept it as this is our world and we have to deal with it,” Dr Gordon said. “The point we need to get to is just to be more cautious, just the way most people don’t go on to zebra crossings without looking at cars ... we should do that, and other places too.”

Dr Gordon has been a consultant to the state recovery service through the Victorian government, Red Cross and Emergency Management Victoria, following disasters in the state such as the Black Saturday bushfires and Hoddle Street massacre.

The car attacks have similarities to mass shootings, he said, given the level of damage the offender wants to cause.

“What’s important here is the new method of causing such damage using a car, violating people’s assumptions about what’s safe, which has a tremendous social impact on how people see their environment,” he said.

“But it belongs to a group of events I think of as indiscriminate violence — in other words, the person just wanted to wreak havoc and this would be the same mentality behind people who commit mass shootings ... in the sense they don't care who they kill or hurt, they just want to vent their rage against society.

“So it has a particular quality when it doesn't matter who you are, you happen to be in the wrong place at wrong time. It's very different to a criminal event where someone is targeted for whatever reasons. So I think it's the shock, the violation of what we think of as safe, secure, environments and the change in community norms. Now this can happen. Someone has done it again and it means we have a new hazard we have to get used to.”

He said the Flinders Street attack had prompted another government recovery operation, with many people re-traumatised after the events of last January.

A state memorial service will be held in Melbourne's Carlton Gardens today to remember those who were killed and injured in the Bourke Street tragedy.

Statistics from the Department of Justice show the Victims of Crime Helpline has taken 3058 calls and referrals related to the Bourke Street tragedy, and referred 1254 people to victims assistance programs.

The Transport Accident Commission has received 120 claims in the year since Bourke Street, and has paid \$1.498 million in claims.

TAC chief executive Bruce Crossett said the normal 12-month cut-off for making a claim would be extended past the first anniversary. “We strongly encourage anyone who was affected but has not lodged a claim, to do so as soon as possible,” he said.

“We will continue to consider claims for people affected by the Bourke Street incident beyond the 12-month mark. This was an unprecedented tragedy and we understand it has affected different people in different ways.”