

Fear and Hope in Uncertain Times

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Not surprisingly, in the past few weeks I have received many questions from parents and other caregivers about how best to help children deal with the fears occasioned by war. I was asked similar questions after the terrorist attacks of September 11. There is a natural wish to protect our children from situations that arouse their anxiety and distress. One parent with two young children poignantly remarked, "I know it's not possible, but I just feel like escaping with my two children and husband to a place where there is no mention or even threat of terrorism or war. I want my kids to be happy and not worried about war and terrorists." This sentiment would be echoed by parents and other adults in all corners of our world.

We cannot insulate our children from the reality of war, even one being waged thousands of miles from our shores. Continuous news coverage on television is dominated with scenes of bombings, machine gun and tank firings, POWs, and children and adults bloodied and bandaged. The cover of national magazines and the front page of newspapers display indelible images of a war that touches the psyches of adults and children alike. For children and families who have relatives or friends in the Armed Forces or living in the war zone the anxiety is more intense.

Children are also witness to an increased presence of security personnel in many parts of our country as well as regular alerts indicating the level of a possible terrorist attack. While these conditions have been initiated as safety measures, they are reminders of the uncertain times in which we live. Recently I spoke in New York City during a heightened terrorist alert and several parents reported an increase of anxiety in their children as well as in themselves. One mother observed, "Who ever thought that you would see armed guards with machine guns protecting your place of worship?"

Some have wondered if children and adults living in cities that seem more likely targets of terrorist activities, such as New York or Washington, D.C., experience more worries than those living in seemingly safer areas. This may be the case. However, even in small towns far removed from large

cities, there are many men and women serving in the military. Thus, for residents of these areas there are personal connections to the war. We are all impacted by the events of the day.

We are painfully aware that this is not an easy time. The presence of terrorism, war, and a slumping economy has pervaded our everyday lives. Many adults feel less secure about the future for themselves and their children than they did just three or four years ago, a time that seems in the distant past when the economy was still booming, when the World Trade Center in New York served as a vibrant location for business and commerce, when a plane had not yet flown into the Pentagon, when discussion of anthrax and chemical warfare was rarely heard, and when allies were not bitterly divided about how best to deal with the regime of Saddam Hussein.

My initial intent was to use this article to describe the steps we can take to help children deal with war and terrorism. However, based on the number of individuals who have shared their own feelings of anxiety and stress as well as the many responses I received to my January and February, 2003 articles about assuming “personal control,” I decided to focus on what we as adults can do to become more resilient in the face of ongoing challenges. If we are able to take care of ourselves, we will be better equipped to ease the anxiety of our children. For those interested in helping children cope, I would recommend two informative articles, one by Dr. Robin Goodman titled “Talking to Kids about Terrorism or Acts of War” (<http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war.html>) and the other by Gary Gately titled “Helping Kids Cope with Worries of War” (<http://healthatoz.com/healthatoz/Atoz/news/hs512355.html>). You might also wish to read my November, 2001 article “Terrorism: Helping Our Children Cope.”

To a greater or lesser extent, all of us feel troubled and stressed by current events. However, as I emphasized in my January and February articles, we must focus on those areas that provide us a sense of purpose and security. Many readers were moved by the quote I included by Dr. Victor Frankl, a renowned psychiatrist who survived the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl vividly captured the significance of personal control and compassion when he wrote:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.”

Last week, while traveling to a speaking engagement, I read a story in USA Today titled “Americans Muster Strength to Fight Fear” by Karen Peterson. Similar to the words of Dr. Frankl, I was touched by the perspective of Leah Rosenbluth, 89, of Phoenix. She said, “We have no control over the situation we are in now, but we still have to be active, do what we love to do, and do it well. In addition to my hobbies, I try to do something nice for someone every day. I find that it helps.” What wise words! In essence, rather than give in to fear and be preoccupied with areas over which she felt she had little, if any, control, she chose to engage in activities that were within her province and offered her solace.

The perspective conveyed by Frankl and Rosenbluth represent a basic foundation for dealing with stress and becoming resilient, namely, to focus on the areas in our lives over which we have control and that are likely to nourish our sense of hope and well-being. Several areas have proven to be such sources of strength. I should like to highlight two. They involve our sense of connectedness and our feeling of commitment and purpose.

My close friend Dr. Ned Hallowell has written extensively about the healing powers of connections. He eloquently expands the definition of connections beyond interpersonal relationships, reminding us of its multifaceted expression. While connections with others has received the greatest attention among mental health clinicians and researchers, it is important to remember that other forms of connections exist.

Ned observes, “What is connection or what I sometimes call connectedness? It is a feeling of being a part of something larger than yourself. This something may be a friendship, a marriage, a team, a school, a company, an activity you like, a country, even a set of ideals, like the Bill of Rights, or a belief system, like a religion.”

There is ample research to indicate that when we feel connected to others and when we are involved in activities such as helping others, not only do we find comfort and security, but we also add meaning and purpose to our lives. To do so is not to deny the reality of war and terrorism, but rather to allow a more positive force to permeate our lives, a force over which most of us have more control than we may realize.

As one example of the power of connections and giving, the American Psychological Association Monitor reported a study undertaken by Dr. Stephanie Brown at the University of Michigan. She and her colleagues followed 423 older couples over a five-year period. They found that people who reported providing no support to others were more than twice as likely to die during the five years compared with people who assisted spouses, relatives, and friends.

The article further noted, "Support provided to friends, family, and neighbors included transportation, errands, shopping, housework, child care or other tasks; support given to spouses included being available to talk or to make their spouses feel loved. Despite concerns that the longevity effects might be due to healthier individuals' greater ability to help out, the results stood even after the researchers controlled for such factors as functional health, health satisfaction, health behaviors, mental health, age, income, and educational level."

I believe that providing for others, as Frankl and Rosenbluth emphasized, adds meaning to our lives and helps to temper feelings of anxiety and stress. In my clinical work I have increasingly advocated that we establish as a high priority involvement in activities that provide connectedness and purpose. While we may have limited control over terrorism and war, we can as Frankl advocates, "choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way." We can choose to involve ourselves in helping others, in giving time for certain causes or ideals, in nurturing our spiritual life. I am not suggesting this is an easy task, but when compared with the alternative of being overwhelmed with anxiety and stress, undertaking this task is worth the effort.

In ending this article, I should like to describe the experiences and perspective of Dr. Paul Safran, an educational psychologist and marriage and family therapist in California. Paul and I have been corresponding for many months, sharing our experiences. I recently saw Paul when he

attended a presentation I gave in Los Angeles. A few weeks later, Paul wrote me the following story, which he gave me permission to share:

“I know of a contemporary who, as a ten-year-old boy, suffered a serious accident. He was helping his father in the garage one sunny afternoon. The power saw needed some adjusting so, to turn a screw, he put his hand under the blade. At that very instant, his seven-year-old brother flipped on the power switch. With a zing, his middle and ring fingers on this right hand were completely severed and never found. The boy was rushed to the hospital where he was placed with his bandaged hand into a bed. His mother was not allowed to stay with him, and he was scared and lonely. He had scars from this accident that followed him into his adulthood.

“As a caring man, he used to worry that children would find his hand offensive, until one day he met a little girl on the playground of a school. The girl noticed his hand and asked what had happened, and he told her the story. She was so caring and compassionate towards him and said, ‘I love you just the way you are.’ Then she gently and kindly held his hand in hers and softly kissed it. At that very moment, his hand was no longer as ugly as he had thought, but it was, as the little girl had said, something special. The little boy who suffered the accident was me. I needed to tell you this story because my past has played a large part in my resiliency work.”

Paul has described a number of examples of his work and it is obvious that he is a gifted therapist. Obviously, one need not have suffered what Paul did in order to help others who are in pain. The reason I share his story is that it exemplifies an individual who chose not to permit his accident to become a source of ongoing distress and pessimism. Instead, he has used it as a motivation to connect with and help others, assisted by the comment of a young girl. In the process of helping others, he found purpose to his life’s journey. Paul said that if anyone would like to write to him about his experience, his e-mail address is resilientguru@aol.com.

I believe that even in a time of anxiety and uncertainty, nurturing an optimistic attitude is possible. However, we cannot wait for such an attitude to come to us as if by osmosis through the air. Instead, we must actively search for it in our relationships, in our acts of compassion, and in

behaviors that instill value and meaning to our existence. We can become glued to the television set, absorbing every detail of the war or we can recognize that there are other behaviors in our repertoire. We must not ignore what is transpiring in the world, but we must not be held captive by our fears. We must find those roads that lead to a sense of purpose, compassion, and hope. It is a journey worth taking both for ourselves and the significant people in our lives.

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