

Dealing with an Anxious Time

by Richard Warshak

With American forces still in Iraq and the country frequently in a high state of terrorist alert, we go about our daily lives with a backdrop of tension and anxiety. A rational approach to this state of affairs must balance the conscious awareness of the state of the world with the need to function effectively on a daily basis and to continue the pursuit of important goals and values. Here are some tips for accomplishing this balance and for helping our children do the same.

1. *Recognize the signs of anxiety.* Headaches, stomachaches, sleeplessness, and a rapid heartbeat are a few of the more common signs.
2. *Accept your fears.* Often, people deny that they are afraid. That makes them less able to conquer their fears. We cannot master a fear by pretending it is not there. Only when we acknowledge our fears can we begin to take charge of them. By acknowledging fear, we bring it within our control rather than letting the fear control us.
3. *Learn relaxation techniques.* Certain behaviors help to clear the mind of worries. Deep breathing, meditation, yoga, massage, and exercise can help to reduce anxiety and induce relaxation.
4. *Talk, talk, talk.* Talk about your thoughts and feelings and encourage your children to do the same. Anxiety does the most damage when we ignore it or try to bottle it up. Talking about distress helps to relieve it.
5. *Agree to disagree.* I know of at least one family in which differences about the appropriateness of our action in Iraq ruptured long-standing relationships. In other cases, conflicting opinions about the war tainted what were otherwise benevolent relationships. To protect against this, recognize that people who agree on fundamental principles of conduct and political goals can disagree on how to implement such principles on the world stage.

One should never allow a disagreement about a particular government policy, even one with effects as grave and far-reaching as war, to overshadow the entire history and basis for a close personal relationship. To do so is to drop the context of the relationship. Rejecting someone on the basis of one political stance requires us to shrink our awareness of all the experiences and shared values that form the bedrock of the relationship. This is reminiscent of the vindictive parents I write about in *Divorce Poison*, who encourage their children to reject the other parent on the basis of one alleged misdeed or grievance, as though an emotionally based response to one aspect of reality should stand in for a balanced consideration of all relevant facts.

Strong relationships can usually tolerate a good deal of conflict and disagreement. But when heated political discussions threaten to overwhelm the basic love and respect between relatives and friends, the most reasonable approach is "agreeing to disagree." Such a policy reflects an awareness of the importance and value of maintaining the good will of those who love us and are loved by us.

6. *Respect individual needs.* Many conflicts in marriages occur because spouses do not recognize and respect each other's different needs. For example, some people cope best with anxiety by seeking lots of information; other people find that distractions from anxiety-provoking world events help them maintain a reasonable level of comfort. So, if your spouse is tired of hearing about the war, respect this. Do not confuse it with evasion of reality—it can be a reasonable tactic for coping with anxieties that are stimulated by the risk of events over which we have no direct control.
7. *Take positive action.* Action helps to offset a sense of helplessness. Join in relief efforts; write to soldiers and families who lost relatives in the war; study history and geography related to the war. Working alongside others who are engaged in benevolent, constructive pursuits reminds us and our children that there is far more good than evil in the world.

8. *Laugh.* In the days immediately following 9/11, late-night comedy talk shows stayed off the air. When they returned, the hosts avoided their usual comedy format out of respect for the grief-stricken state of the nation. This was understandable, appropriate, and healing. When the humor re-emerged, though, it was more than welcome.

Humor is one of our most potent weapons against stress and depression. It rapidly defuses anxiety and provides a socially acceptable outlet for hostility. It is also a great outlet for the additional hostility that we all feel when we hear

about the cruelties of war. So try to balance watching the news with your favorite sitcom. A joke a day keeps anxiety at bay.

9. *Recognize your limitations.* If anxiety is dominating your life and you are unable to shake it, accept the reality that you need some assistance and get it. Don't sacrifice your well-being and that of those around you on the altar of a misguided notion of individuality and independence. Even Howard Roark sought help from Henry Cameron.

Helping Your Children with Their Anxiety

1. *Be open.* Children can sense when we are upset, and certainly it would be difficult to conceal our own reactions to acts of terrorism and tragedies of war. So, like it or not, your children will watch how you handle your feelings and look to you for direction on how to handle their feelings. If you choose to deal with your distress by ignoring it, they are apt to think that you want them to suppress their feelings. If they sense that you do not want to hear anything negative, their bad feelings will not go away. They will merely go underground, where they do more damage and are less accessible to parents' reassurances. It is far better to let children know that you recognize your feelings and their feelings and that you regard them as normal and understandable.

We want children to know that when horrible things happen it is normal and healthy to react with strong negative feelings and to freely express these feelings. The best way to teach a healthy approach to difficult feelings is to demonstrate it through our own behavior.

2. *Be composed.* Parents often wonder how much of their own uncertainty and anxiety they should reveal to children. It is best to strike a balance between two extremes. As noted, parents who take a business-as-usual approach and act as though nothing is out of the ordinary encourage children to distrust their own perceptions. But the principle of openness is not a license to burden children with your own sense of hopelessness and despair. Parents who fall to pieces while discussing the war compound their children's insecurity at a time when they need reassurance. The goal is to show your children how to express strong feelings openly. If you frighten them by appearing out of control, the lesson they retain will not be that it is healthy to express emotions but that it is frightening.

So, when talking to children about stressful events, be aware of how your own reactions color your responses. By maintaining composure while acknowledging the reality of the frightening events, you reassure your children that the events have not shattered the security of their home and family. You show them that they do not have to deny horrible realities, but that even when life is *not* business as usual they can rely on their parents to retain their roles as sources of comfort and security. This approach simultaneously demonstrates for them a very important virtue: courage in the face of adversity. It is a lesson that will reap benefits for a lifetime.

3. *Deal with unearned shame.* School-age children who fear enemy soldiers and terrorists often feel ashamed of what they perceive as babyish behavior. Explain that it is not a sign of weakness to feel fear but a natural and protective response to danger.

4. *Promise normality.* Children also worry that their newfound fears will never go away. They need to hear that their fears will not last forever. One of the most effective ways to get this point across is to talk about a temporary fear that you suffered and surmounted when you were a child.

5. *Hold off if necessary.* If relatives and friends are directly in harm's way or, worse, have suffered casualties, parents who are so overwhelmed with their own distress should postpone talking with their children about those events until they are able to do so without breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing fits. Even here, though, it is essential to acknowledge and validate your children's feelings while providing reassurance. Let them know that you understand it is difficult and worrisome when you are preoccupied with your own distress, but you will recover and will soon be able to give them the attention they need. In fact, helping children cope with traumas will help us recover as well.

6. *Answer repeated questions.* Children sometimes ask the same questions repeatedly. Naturally, this gets tedious for parents, but you should understand that the questions are not intended to "bug" you. Rather, such questions show that the children have still not fully understood or accepted the answers. Asking the same questions over and over is one way that children try to come to grips with difficult concepts and emotionally intense experiences. Try to be patient. Children's questions are precious gifts. They bestow upon you the awesome responsibility of shaping, or at least framing, your children's attitudes for years to come. Repeated questions deserve repeated answers. When your children no longer need to ask questions, they will stop on their own. If you tell them to stop asking questions, they will not stop thinking about the issues; they will merely exclude you from their inner thoughts.

7. *Remember context.* Very young children who do not know anyone in the armed forces can be shielded from the entire issue of war. But if they have loved ones in the service, they will need reassurance and help to cope.

8. *Don't prejudge TV.* Although younger children should not be watching too much war coverage, most of them are more interested in *SpongeBob SquarePants* anyway. But older children may find war coverage just as fascinating as do their parents. Unless the images become unduly gory, find out how the coverage is affecting your children before banning them from watching the news.

9. *Focus on the positive.* Despite its tragedy, war also teaches us about the importance of courage, valor, and loyalty to values—traits that we should all aspire to and help our children develop.

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