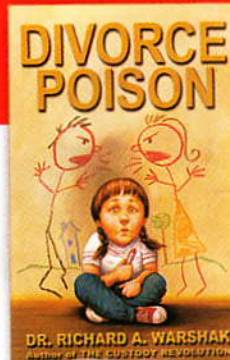


Tips for Dealing with Troubling Feelings

Related to War & Terrorism

by Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D.



With our country at war and in a state of high 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.

Recognize the Signs of Anxiety

Headaches, stomachaches, sleeplessness, and rapid heartbeat are a few of the more common signs.

Accept Your Fears

Often people try to deny that they are afraid. This makes them less able to conquer their fears. We do not master a fear by pretending it is not there. When we acknowledge our fears we begin to take charge of them. We bring the fear within our control, rather than let the fear control us.

Learn Relaxation Techniques

Certain behaviors help to clear the mind of worries. Deep breathing, meditation, yoga, massage, and exercise all can help to reduce anxiety and induce relaxation.

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.

When Relatives and Friends Take Opposing Positions on the War...

I know of at least one family in which differences in beliefs 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 front. One should never allow a disagreement about a particular government policy, even one with as grave and far-reaching effects as war, to overshadow the entire history and basis for a close personal relationship. To do so would be to drop the context of the relationship. Rejecting someone based on one political stance requires us to shrink our awareness of all the experiences and shared values that form the bedrock of the relationship and that bind a family together. This is reminiscent of the vindictive parents I write about in *Divorce Poison* who encourage their children to reject the other parent based on 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.

Naturally, strong relationships can 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 to agree to disagree. Such a policy reflects an awareness of the importance and value of maintaining the goodwill of those who love us and are loved by us.

Respect Individual Differences

If your spouse is tired of hearing about the war, respect this. Many conflicts in marriages occur because spouses don't recognize and respect each other's differences. Some people cope best with anxiety by seeking lots of information. Other people find that distraction from anxiety-provoking world events assists in maintaining a reasonable level of comfort. We should not confuse this with evasion of reality; rather, it is a reasonable tactic to cope with anxieties stimulated by the risk of events over which we have no direct control.

The Best Medicine: Take Positive Action

Action helps 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.

Comic Relief

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

Recognize Your Limitations and Get Help If Necessary

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 those around you on the altar of a misguided notion of individuality and independence.



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