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PSYCHOLOGISTS

Coping in Unsettling Times

Tips for Students

The United States and the world are going through pretty turbulent times. We are witnessing important, though unsettling, events in our history. Many people are concerned or uncertain about the issues of war and terrorism. That's okay. The best way to deal with your concerns and sort out your questions is to talk with your friends, family, and teachers. The following suggestions can help.

Be aware of your feelings. Many people feel anxious about the war or the uncertainty of a possible terrorist attack. Some people may feel confused, angry, or anxious. It may be hard to concentrate in school or sleep at night. It is better to deal with these feelings than pretend they don't exist. Talk to your friends, parents or another trusted adult if you find your reactions getting in the way of your typical daily activities (like eating, going to school or socializing). It helps when you realize you are not alone. **Tell an adult immediately if you or a friend feels distressed or overwhelmed.**

Don't dwell on a "worst case scenario." There are no guarantees in life, but the strong likelihood is that you and your family will not be personally harmed by the war or terrorism. This is true even if you have loved ones in the military or reserves. Although combat is dangerous, the safety of our troops is a top priority. The United States is a strong country, our military is the best in the world and, here at home, our public safety professionals are extremely competent. Remember: There is a difference between the *possibility* of danger and the *probability* of it affecting you personally.

Maintain your normal routine. Keep up with your schoolwork and extracurricular activities to the extent possible. Sometimes simply helping out around the house, going to a practice, seeing a movie, listening to music, or reading a favorite book can help make you feel more in control.

Take care of yourself. Stress or anxiety can affect your health and being rundown can affect your outlook. Get plenty of healthy food, exercise, and sleep. Limit your caffeine and junk food. Spend time with friends instead of online. Above all, don't use drugs or alcohol. They may **temporarily** mask unpleasant feelings but ultimately **always** make problems worse.

Focus on your strengths. Identify what you have done in the past that helped you cope when you were frightened or upset. Know what your family and school plans are in case of a problem. Know who to call or where to go if you can't reach your parents. Focus on the things you do well in daily life but also don't be embarrassed to ask for help, particularly if you have extra family responsibilities because one of your parents is deployed. Most people are happy to lend a hand.

Do something positive to help others. Contributing to the community or country helps us feel more in control and builds a stronger sense of connection. Consider helping classmates or other families in the community who have a parent deployed and may need babysitting, errands run, yard work, etc.; writing letters or sending care packages to our troops; volunteering for a peace or international humanitarian organization.

Limit your television time. It is important to stay informed, but watching endless war coverage is likely to heighten your anxiety. Also be sure to get your news from multiple sources, print, radio, T.V. and Internet, in order to gain as broad and accurate an understanding of the facts and range of viewpoints as possible.

Keep current events in perspective. People frequently say that “9-11 changed everything.” But it is important to remember that change, both gradual and turbulent, is part of human history. The United States as well as others in the world have weathered many crises, including terrorism, disease, natural disasters and war and, for the most part, have emerged stronger and more resilient each time.

Do not ridicule people or ideas just because they are different. The issues of war and terrorism are complicated and many viewpoints have valid arguments. For instance, people can support the war and also care about protecting innocent lives, just as people can oppose the war and care deeply about the United States and the safety of our troops. Discussing different views is one of the best ways to broaden and clarify our own beliefs and understanding of the world.

Differentiate between fact and opinion. They are not the same. Fact is what actually happens. Opinions are how we feel about what happens. Our opinions should be based on fact, not rumor or supposition. Everyone has a right to their own opinion and the ability to express it reflects our most important right: freedom of thought and speech.

Explore and express opinions respectfully. You can discuss ideas without attacking others. Avoid stigmatizing statements like, “War protesters are wimps,” or “People who believe in war are jerks.” Try stating your thoughts with opening phrases like, “I believe” or “Have you thought about” instead of “Anybody who” or “No one should.”

Do not bully or harass anyone. Anger is a natural reaction when we feel threatened. Often we want to blame and lash out at someone. While there are individuals responsible for the current conflict, we are not at war with a race of people or a culture. Hate and anger only make things worse. Hurting or threatening someone because of their religion, dress, or ethnicity is wrong and will not make you safer or America stronger. Indeed, our diversity and respect for differences is one of America's greatest strengths.

Don't worry if grownups seem concerned or uncertain. Many adults have strong feelings about current events. Like you, they may be upset at the human and economic costs of war or convinced that military action is our only option to protect Americans and promote world peace. The heated nature of debate at home and demonstrations around the world is not wrong; it simply indicates how important and difficult it is to balance these two views. Remember: your parents' and teachers' first priority is to help you understand what is happening and ensure your welfare.

Think positively. Whatever your views on war, everyone can hope for a quick and peaceful resolution to conflict. We can feel grateful to the men and women who are risking their lives to protect us, and wish for their safety and that of Iraqi citizens.

For further information, talk to your parents, teachers, school psychologist or counselor. Or visit our website at www.nasponline.org.

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