

Winning the Battle Vs. War Worries

War - with Iraq and against terrorism in general -- weighs heavily on Americans' minds. But you don't have to let the worry take over your life. Experts are offering tips on how you can understand and conquer your fears in these troubling times.

Don't worry, be happy" -- it just doesn't fit in today's war-worried, job-challenged climate. In fact, the idea of war worries 70% of American adults -- even though 79% expect the U.S. will be successful, according to a new Gallup poll.

"We have good reasons to worry," says Emanuel Maidenberg, PhD, professor of psychiatry in the Anxiety Disorders program at UCLA. "Unpredictability scares us. So does the feeling that we have no control over events that affect our lives."

Fear can easily take root amid "ill-defined, vague apprehensions," says Daniel Creson, MD, PhD, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at The University of Texas Medical School at Houston. "Remember everyone running around scared about white powder, about anthrax? The odds were slim you would be exposed -- you were much more likely to get hit by a car."

Creson has worked with relief agencies in war-torn areas around the world -- in Sarajevo, Kosovo, and East Timor -- helping refugees normalize their lives. Maidenberg grew up amid the tumult of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both offer their advice on stopping the worry cycle -- that "tape" that plays endlessly in your head -- as we face a war on terrorism.

Put some perspective on your fears. Getting the facts will help, he says. "Unless you can put your fears in some context, they become overwhelming," Creson tells WebMD. "Step back from them, put them in some kind of perspective."

Find trustworthy sources for information. "Don't get caught up in online discussions or newspapers that speculate but don't have much to do with what might happen," Maidenberg says. "It's easy to get overwhelmed by data that may not be reliable. Accurate information is the first tool to deal with uncertainty."

Think critically. Learn what you can about the issues, so you can separate the facts from the non-facts, Creson says. "We are being bombarded by scare messages from all sides. If you put risk in some proportion in your life, you are in a much better position to think realistically. You're going to be much more comfortable."

Take a stand. "Once you get clear in your head your own beliefs -- where you stand and what you're willing to do -- you will feel less 'adrift in anxiety,'" says Creson. "The whole unsettledness of the situation creates a sense of extreme vulnerability. You have to decide what it means to you."

Determine how realistic the risks are. "For someone with a loved one in the military, there's the risk of losing someone you care about," Creson tells WebMD. "But for the rest of us, the risk of terrorist attack in this country may be high, but the odds of that affecting any given individual are so minute that allowing yourself to get crazy about it is self-defeating. Don't allow yourself to get caught up in the political rubric -- that there are all these crazy people out there ready to kill us."

Don't "catastrophize" everything. "When we're worried, there is a tendency to fill in the gaps in our minds with scenarios that may be worse than what could actually happen," Maidenberg explains. "There is a tendency to over-prepare. The threat of terrorism, as imminent as it may feel, is very, very unlikely to hurt us. You're much more likely to be in a car accident. If you don't make an effort to decatastrophize, the effects snowball, leading to more anxiety and fear."

Talk with friends, coworkers, family members. It's cathartic, and helps dilute the sense of doom, says Creson. "If you don't share your feelings with others, you're likely to perceive yourself at greater personal threat than you really are."

However, "if you feel the other person does not help you, for whatever reason, or makes you feel worse, more scared, then that is not good for you," adds Maidenberg. "Look for someone else."

Express your fears in writing. "I counsel many people who have difficulty expressing their fears," says Maidenberg. "It makes them feel more vulnerable. I tell them just write them down. That may be more helpful than anything else. It makes the fear a little more tangible. Free-floating ideas have a tendency to take on a life of their own. Writing about vague fears makes us pin them down. The process of it makes the fears easier to deal with."

Find some way to make a contribution, to volunteer. "People who work together for some common good, who feel a sense of cohesion in their community, feel better," says Creson.

Keep your routine as normal as possible. Make sure the kids get to school, the bills get paid, and dinner is on the table at the usual time.

"We all have some coping skills that we have adopted during our lifetimes to deal with uncertainty and stress," says Maidenberg. "We have to be mindful of bringing those back into our lives -- whether it's through a religious affiliation, friends, family, reading a book. Pay attention, be mindful, bring back coping strategies."

Also, take heart -- because humans naturally adapt to new circumstances, even ongoing fears.

"Human beings have a tendency to adapt," Maidenberg says. "I lived in Israel for many years, and clearly saw a process of desensitization. As scary as something may be, your own response will change. We've seen the reality [of terrorism], and as truly unpleasant and threatening as it was, as time goes by it becomes more a part of daily life and we adjust to it. It's likely to get easier as time goes by."

Indeed, "people are resilient," Creson adds. "We humans are not fragile beings. We make do. We survive. It's when we can't define our fears that we get into trouble. People survived World War II, Vietnam, Kosovo. Sarajevo is a very elegant and cultivated city, a wealthy city. Working there, my wife said she used to worry about the children. But then we realized, the children simply adapted. They made do."

War may be scary, conjuring up a host of vulnerabilities. But once Americans face their fears and attack worry head on, they will cope.

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SOURCES: Gallup News Service. Emanuel Maidenberg, PhD, professor of psychiatry in the anxiety disorders program at UCLA. Daniel Creson, MD, PhD, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at The University of Texas Medical School at Houston