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Coping with Apprehension, Anxiety

in Tense and Uncertain Times:

Mental Health Professionals Offer Advice

Tampa, Fla. (February 26, 2003) — Yes, these are jittery times. But we can overcome our feelings of apprehension and anxiety by recognizing what's behind them and by renewing our efforts to live normally, experts advise.

"The emotions many people are experiencing now are different than what they felt after September 11," observes Tampa clinical occupational psychologist Gary L. Wood, Psy.D. "That event caused acute levels of anxiety, concern and shock. Mental health professionals could intervene with specific techniques and strategies because we had a specific situation to address."

"What we saw immediately after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. were rational fears," explains Jon Henshaw, M.A., founder and director of the Denver Family Resource Center. "But what we're seeing now is individuals with irrational fears, which are more difficult to address directly. One of the contributing factors is a constant media stream of news and commentators' reports which can be confusing and frightening, making our situation seem much more dire than it really is."

"Dealing with these pervasive feelings may seem like trying to put socks on an octopus," says Wood. "These are insidious, chronic, free-floating anxieties, with no specific boundaries and no specific beginning or end. It's not really surprising, because we're living in a unique time in history. Our lives are filled with uncertainty caused by economic, political, technological, demographic and informational shifts. All of this taken together has resulted in a sea change, which can cause people to feel very anxious about the future."

There is good news in all this, though, says Wood. "People can still find their way even when they're living in a constant state of uncertainty. It does require extra effort, and what can help most is maintaining physical and spiritual health, social support systems and a focus on positive activities."

Of greatest concern to health care professionals are individuals who experience a pattern of distress that lasts for a month or more. “If people find they are having difficulty concentrating on work because of an overwhelming sense of anxiety, they should seek outside help,” says Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D., a licensed mental health counselor with extensive training in critical incident stress management – a comprehensive set of interventions designed to help individuals deal with various types of trauma. “Talking with a professional who has experience in treating anxiety disorders can be a big step toward regaining a sense of control. That’s where the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be a very helpful benefit for these individuals and their families.”

Know the Plan

Many employers’ security departments have re-examined their policies and procedures recently, resulting in changes designed to protect employees, facilities and business operations. It’s important to pay attention to any communications from your employer regarding workplace security, and to be aware of your company’s procedures for dealing with security threats and emergency situations. Being prepared at work will give you some extra peace of mind.

At home, families can prepare by creating a Family Disaster Plan and practicing it in case of an emergency. The American Red Cross Web site, www.redcross.org offers a wealth of information on disaster plans and what children should know about preparing for and responding to emergency situations.

Anxiety: Symptoms and Coping Tips

(Source: Jon Henshaw, M.A., founder and director of the Denver Family Resource Center, www.familyresource.com Used with permission.)

Most people experience anxiety as a fear of the unknown and an uncertainty about the future. It often affects our behavior, thoughts, feelings and physical well being. Some symptoms of anxiety include:

- Insomnia
- Feeling keyed up, restless or easily fatigued
- Being highly irritable and short on patience
- Difficulty concentrating, losing your train of thought
- Feelings of impending doom

- Headaches, muscle tension, or shortness of breath
- Accelerated heart rate, chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea, diarrhea, other abdominal distress

It's important that we take steps to help overcome our anxiety so it doesn't begin to impair our daily living. Here are a few tips for coping with and overcoming anxiety:

- Exercise – Medically appropriate exercise can relieve nervous energy and help you sleep better. (always consult your doctor before starting an exercise routine)
- Relax – Relaxation techniques can help you reduce stress and focus on the “here and now.” Try listening to some soft music in a comfortable chair, or concentrating on controlling your breathing in a quiet place.
- Talk – Spend time with friends and family voicing opinions and expressing your feelings. Ask others how they are coping with their fears.
- Pray – If you believe in a higher power, pray for strength and well-being.
- Keep Moving – Take part in activities that will help keep your mind off your fears. Instead of watching and reading excessive amounts of news about terrorism, try reading a good book, seeing a movie, or spending time with friends.

Sometimes no matter what we do, we cannot seem to get rid of our anxious feelings. When that happens, anxiety begins to affect our work and home life, and can sometimes lead to panic attacks. Severe anxiety problems can be treated, though. Treatments may include a combination of the following: individual counseling, family counseling, and medical treatment.

(This information is not intended to serve as medical advice. If you have physical symptoms that trouble you, seek a physician's advice.)

Dialogue Important, But Consider Information Sources

Discussions at work, home or elsewhere can help people cope with apprehension, says Wood. “Talking things out can help us develop stronger coping skills. In times of uncertainty it's healthy for us to turn to the natural caregivers in our lives — friends, family members, clergy, counselors or doctors, for example. Dialogue helps us gain accurate information, ventilate our thoughts and feelings, and to develop an awareness of why we feel and behave the way we do.”

“But,” Wood cautions, “it’s important not to become upset or frightened unnecessarily by unsubstantiated information. We encourage people to limit their exposure to ‘infotainment’ and unfounded rumors, whether they’re spread by word of mouth, the Internet or other forms of media. People need to seek out trusted sources for information, and to verify facts before springing into action.”

These organizations and Web sites are useful as information sources for information on safety and disaster preparedness.

American Red Cross

Toll-free national preparedness information hotline 866-GET INFO (438-4636)

Information and publications

www.redcross.org

American Red Cross, Tampa Bay Chapter
813-348-4820

www.redcrosstbc.org

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

Toll-free 800-621-FEMA (800-621-3362).

For people with a speech or hearing impairment, TTY toll-free 800-462-7585

Features news and updates for hazards, natural disasters, national preparedness, and more.

www.fema.gov/

Florida Division of Emergency Management

Information for Florida residents

<http://www.floridadisaster.org/>

Department of Health and Human Services Disasters and Emergencies

www.hhs.gov/disasters/index.shtml

Environmental Protection Agency Emergency Preparedness

www.epa.gov

Federal Citizen Information Center

Consumer information and publications

www.pueblo.gsa.gov

Ready.gov

Provided by the Department of Homeland Security

www.ready.gov

Your Employer-Provided EAP is Ready to Help

Your employer cares, and for your benefit provides you and your family the resources of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help you work through any problems that might otherwise carry over into the work environment. For more information about the specifics of your company's program call 813-870-0392 (Hillsborough County, Florida), 727-576-5164 (Pinellas County, Florida) or 800-343-4670 (toll free) or visit <http://www.woodassociates.net/eap.htm>

About Wood & Associates

Wood & Associates is an employee assistance and behavioral health consulting firm that helps employers maintain productivity, safety and behavioral health in the workplace. Wood & Associates is a pioneer in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) industry and has served employers and employees in the greater Tampa Bay area and elsewhere since 1982. The firm's diverse group of clients includes a number of major employers who also contract for its mental health and substance abuse services.

Patricia N. Alexander earned a Ph.D. in mental health counseling at the University of Florida. Trained in critical incident stress management through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, she is a Florida licensed mental health counselor and nationally certified counselor. Through her work experience she has addressed all types of critical incident situations, including explosions, multiple homicides, suicides, line-of-duty deaths, serious accidents and robberies. Alexander conducts training on stress management for law enforcement and businesses, and has developed peer support programs for law enforcement and industry.

Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., founder of the Wood & Associates consulting practice, is a pioneer in the field of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Since 1979, his practice has centered on providing solutions to employee and organizational problems. Wood is a licensed clinical psychologist, a member of The National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and a graduate of Rutgers University, West Georgia College and Mercer University.