



News Release

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Dealing with the Psychological Aspects of Terrorism

Tampa, Fla. (November 1, 2001) —Since September 11, there's a new battle being fought behind the scenes in America, and psychologists are springing into action to help people win it.

“Beyond the horrific attacks and the spread of biochemical warfare that affect our sense of physical safety, what we are finding is that there are strong psychological aspects to terrorism,” said Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D., a licensed mental health counselor with extensive training in critical incident stress management. “What’s happening now is a bigger and more insidious act of terrorism, because it has the potential for affecting tens of thousands of lives. The problem occurs when we allow these actions to get inside our minds and hearts so that we behave differently.”

“What makes this situation unique is there’s not an end in sight,” Alexander said. “Every time we turn on the news, there’s another piece of information and it’s prolonging the emotional impact. People start thinking, ‘What next?’ This makes it more difficult to cope.”

“It’s important for us to be alert, aware and informed about potential danger,” Alexander continued. “But people are becoming alarmed, and that is the psychological aspect of terrorism. When people become alarmed, they become fearful. Watching the news tends to contribute to the sense of fear. While the news media have done a good job of informing the public, there is still a tendency to sensationalize events. What happens psychologically is that people are watching hour upon hour of news, and they are re-traumatizing themselves.”

“I recommend a technique called ‘Going to the Balcony,’” Alexander said. “From a psychological standpoint, people need to remove themselves far enough from what’s happening to see the big picture. Limit news viewing to pre-September 11 levels. It’s important not to listen to rumors, opinions or speculation. Allow yourself to react and respond to information that is grounded and from a reliable source.”

In an October 11 news conference, FBI special agent in charge Hector Pesquera demonstrated a good example of the kind of calm, factual response that can keep people from becoming alarmed, said Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., clinical occupational psychologist and founder of Wood & Associates.

In his statement, Pesquera confirmed a Florida worker's exposure to anthrax, adding that authorities had no evidence it was caused or created by a terrorist group. "This is not a time for premature conclusions and inaccurate reporting. This is a time for sound scientific principles and methodical investigation. Our scientific experts tell us there is no investigative conclusion that can be drawn at this time." [<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.invest.html>]

Another good example, says Alexander, is New York Mayor [Rudolph] Giuliani. "He has the ability to deliver bad news while at the same time he has a reassuring tone. That's what we need to do, to display that kind of courage and take positive steps forward."

"What we tell our clients and those who attend our corporate training sessions is that there are normal emotional reactions to any trauma," said Alexander. "These may occur within days, or not until weeks later. Usually, those reactions will subside. But if they don't, they need to talk to someone who has experience in dealing with crisis situations." [See "Experts Offer Advice for Employees Coping with Tragedy" at <http://www.woodassociates.net/america.htm>]

Getting back to a normal routine is especially important, Alexander and Wood tell their clients. "Just as President Bush encouraged Americans to do in his September 20 speech, [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>] we are advising people to live their lives, and try to maintain as much routine in their daily activities as they can, because that gives them a sense of control," Alexander said.

Also important is developing a support system and being conscious of who is a part of that support system. "Avoid the 'Chicken Little' who panics and claims the sky is falling," said Alexander.

"The terrorist acts are a wake-up call, in terms of our need to review security and to address the lapses in security," Alexander observed. "But we personally have to strive for balance to overcome fear. If we continue to stay home and lock ourselves away, we become prisoners in our own homes. Instead of imprisoning themselves, we urge people to have courage."

One strong plus to the psychological battle, says Alexander, is that people tend to unify when there is an attempt to divide them. "The terrorists' goal is to divide and destroy. But what's happening is the opposite, because we're unifying. People tend to pull together when there is a common enemy. It puts the small daily divisions in perspective."

Understanding the mind of a terrorist also helps to put things in perspective, said Wood, a clinical psychologist with extensive training in human behavior. “It’s my professional point of view that knowing more about the psychology of terrorism, its nature, causes and how to deal with it, is critical to our personal, community, government and business success.”

“Essentially I believe that at the core of terrorism is the attempt to intimidate,” Wood continued. **“This can cause individuals to perceive themselves as vulnerable. Our success in dealing with intimidation depends specifically on the unique coping capacities and skills of individuals and groups.”**

“It’s important to recognize that intimidators are narcissistic,” said Wood. **“They are poorly developed emotionally and socially, and have as their primary goal self aggrandizement and power. They have a lack of regard for others, including their own families. Intimidators with this personality type tend to exhibit antisocial behavior and criminal acts—such as what occurred in the attack on the World Trade Centers and on the Pentagon.”**

“Normal human beings are vulnerable to intimidation because of a natural inclination to self awareness, self development, social awareness and social development. Mature individuals are naturally vulnerable. Intimidation is not a new strategy—it has been used throughout history. Machiavelli used it, so did Hitler. But in our society, we foster individualism, personal and social decision making and involvement. Intimidators hate this.”

Wood says that, unfortunately, normal individuals can be too trusting for their own good. “We have allowed ourselves, over the last 50 years, to be lulled, by our own nature, into a psychological sleep. Our lack of vigilance has made us vulnerable to intimidation.”

“Essentially, what U.S. citizens are engaged in now is psychological warfare,” said Wood. **“We learned from Darwin’s theory about survival of the fittest. He pointed out that adaptation to the environment is a determinant of survival. Since the events of September 11, it is our ability to adapt psychologically to intimidation which will determine our survival.”**

Tactics such as diplomacy, economics, and the military have to be viewed as tools for dealing with methods of intimidation, Wood said.

Wood has confidence, though, in individual Americans’ ability to survive the psychological effects of terrorism. “It’s very true that fear itself is the enemy. Intimidators use this to exploit people. But a strong emotional reaction to the attacks can be healthy.”

“We all are naturally courageous. We have a natural interest in survival. And included in that is our own inclination to be aggressive and destroy. But that can create fear and anxiety within ourselves. People become anxious about their own aggressiveness, and they have a lot of internal conflict between self-doubt and aggressiveness.”

“When we conquer self-doubt and accept our own aggressiveness, we can, as individuals and as a culture, create healthy adaptive responses for ourselves, our families, our society and our world. As Americans, we are going to get through this crisis and become even stronger as a result, because we are determined to defy intimidation, and because we have the emotional resources terrorists lack.”

[Sidebar]

Five Steps for Getting through Traumatic Times

- 1. Remain alert to real dangers**
- 2. Be smart and get information from reliable sources**
- 3. Stay calm – be reassured that things will get better**
- 4. Maintain resolve – be firm and committed**
- 5. Be prepared – function as a part of a “Nationhood Watch”**
- 6. Be hopeful – look beyond yourself, and seek comfort in faith and prayer**

About Wood & Associates

Wood & Associates is an Employee Assistance Program 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.