



## News Release

For more information contact:

Dr. Gary L. Wood or Dr. Patricia N. Alexander 813-870-0392

### **The Columbia Tragedy:**

How to Deal with the Sense of Loss,

How to Help Kids Cope

Tampa, Fla. (February 6, 2003) — As yet another tragedy of international significance rivets us in front of our TVs, mental health professionals offer advice to help people keep from becoming overwhelmed by persistent feelings of sadness. "We grieve because they represented the best in us, because part of us has died," The Rev. Luis Leon said in a sermon about the Columbia astronauts, quoted in the NY Times Feb. 3.

The symbolic nature of the shuttle disaster hits us hard," says Tampa clinical occupational psychologist Gary L. Wood, Psy.D. "It's our nature to feel a strong sense of pride for the courageous men and women who venture into space, or for anyone who faces danger to achieve worthy goals. So when we lose those heroes suddenly, we feel like we've lost a part of ourselves. The event also emphasizes our own insecurities about the state of the world in general, and that can give us a sense of helplessness."

"It's normal to experience these emotional reactions to any trauma, and when an event comes into our homes through live media coverage it's not only difficult to tune out, it can intensify

our emotional responses,” adds Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D., a licensed mental health counselor with extensive training in critical incident stress management. “For people who are already undergoing their own personal crises or are overly stressed in their daily lives—because of work responsibilities, financial pressures, family problems or illness, for example—it can be too much. That’s when we tell them it’s OK to turn off the TV. Go for a walk, meditate, spend time with friends, and do something life-affirming, so that the healing process can begin.”

“Feelings of sadness, a sense of emptiness, and asking questions like ‘how could this happen?’ are certainly acceptable and normal,” explains Jeffrey T. Mitchell, Ph.D., a certified trauma specialist and co-founder of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) in Ellicott City, Maryland. “But when people become so overwrought that they can’t function on the job after several weeks have gone by, we become concerned, because that may indicate something else is going on in their lives—pre-existing ‘baggage,’ for example, that may have been stirred up by the new incident.”

“If people find they are having difficulty returning their attention to work after the shuttle tragedy, we encourage them to reach out and talk with someone who has experience treating grief and loss, particularly traumatic loss,” says Alexander. “That’s where the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be a very helpful benefit for these individuals and their families.” [See “Experts Offer Advice for Employees Coping with Tragedy” at <http://www.woodassociates.net/america.htm>

## Tips for Getting Through Trauma

Alexander offers these tips for individuals who are struggling to deal with the emotional aftershocks of the Columbia disaster or other traumatic events.

- Recognize that having a roller coaster of emotions is normal following a traumatic event.
- Avoid the use of alcohol or drugs to self-medicate or numb your feelings.
- Participate in support activities (prayer services, counseling, stress management programs).
- Try to keep your routine as normal as possible and include recreational activities.
- Focus on nutrition and for a period of time, eat healthier. Reduce your intake of high-carbohydrate foods and sugar.
- Exercise as medically appropriate. This can reduce acute stress reactions.
- Try to reduce constant exposure to news media so you don't re-live the crisis repeatedly.
- Do not isolate yourself.

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

### **Kids Need Honesty, Reassurance**

"Loving parents do not like to see their children needlessly worry or suffer," says Richard Bromfield, Ph.D. in his book "Living with the Bogeyman: Helping Your Child Cope with Fear, Terrorism, and Living in a World of Uncertainty."

But when bad things happen, children need honest acknowledgments. "For example, both psychologists and clergy

believe that children need to be spoken to directly about death. It is remarkable what children can hear when we talk to them reasonably and directly," Bromfield says. "Parents need to let kids know it's OK to talk about painful and uncomfortable things, and when their children bring up these topics, they need to listen carefully and keep lines of communication open," Mitchell advises.

"Adults should also understand that children (as well as adults) express their emotions differently," advise educators Glenda Moss and Joe D. Nichols of Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne. "It is vital that adults understand that there is no right or wrong way to express grief or anxiety. Children should understand that emotions are a natural way to deal with these issues and that it is all right to feel upset. However, as these feelings and emotions evolve, children may need assistance from adults in adequately and appropriately expressing these feelings."

At times of crisis like this it's important to give children extra reassurance, with words, hugs and personal attention, so they know they are loved and safe. "Remember too," says Alexander, "that young children do not have the capacity to handle long periods of intense emotion, or make sense of frightening news, so try to keep their schedules as normal as possible, and control their exposure to coverage of disasters on television."

"Older children will have questions about safety," says Mitchell. "We should help them understand that when there is an accident like this, people work harder to make sure it doesn't happen again. And for those who may have dreams of space exploration, we can reassure them, as the president told us, that the space programs will go on. Teenagers especially tend to do a lot of 'catastrophizing,' dwelling on the idea that something terrible will happen again, so we need to remind them of how many space missions have been accomplished safely and successfully, and that this one incident was an exception, a way-off-the-scale circumstance."

## Important Tips for Parents

**Los Angeles psychologist and media commentator, Robert R. Butterworth, Ph.D. offers these tips related to the Columbia tragedy.**

- Find out how much a child knows about the explosion and their feelings about it.
- Explain the "who, what, where" of the disaster -- children who do not know the real facts will fantasize their own version of reality, which can create more stress than would occur by a clear and understandable explanation of the actual events.
- Be alert for anxiety in children who become frightened when exposed to television coverage -- fear and anxiety can be manifested by attention-getting behavior, physical complaints, regressive symptoms and declining school performance. A child's emotional reaction often reflects an adult's response to the crisis.
- Talk about the definition of what makes up a true hero.
- Parents need to be honest about their emotions and encourage their children to discuss feelings.
- Create a supportive environment in which children can discuss their feelings and even debate with parents their opinions concerning the possible conflict -- honesty regarding parental emotions while talking about feelings in a supportive environment is crucial.

**Your Employer-Provided EAP is  
Ready to Help [for clients only]**

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.**

#### Sources:

Bromfield, Richard, "Living with the Bogeyman: Helping Your Child Cope with Fear, Terrorism, and Living in a World of Uncertainty." Prima Publishing, 2002.

Moss, G., & Nichols, J. D. (2002, May 22). Reflective practitioner preparation: In the wake of 21st century terrorism. *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 5 (3).

<http://cie.ed.asu.edu/volume5/number3/>

Butterworth, Robert R. Ph.D., (Feb. 1, 2003)  
"Shuttle Disaster: Psychological Expert Available to Discuss Grief." International Trauma Associates, News Release, *Business Wire*

<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/story.https/prn/texas/1760732>