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How to Cope with the War & Threats of Terrorism: Tips for Older Adults

Traumatic events can trigger unwanted memories and mental distress in people who have previously lived through times of crisis. This is particularly true for veterans and older adults. As the war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism here at home continue, your stress levels may increase as well as your feelings of anxiety and apprehension.

Older adults have proven time and again their ability to survive crises -- from the Great Depression and World War II, to the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War, to social unrest here at home, and the Cold War and the threat of nuclear holocaust. However, when bad things happen over which you have no control, and these bad things continue over an extended period of time, you may find that you suddenly feel terrified...alone...and vulnerable. These feelings of helplessness may frighten you even more.

For older adults, especially those who are homebound, exposure to around-the-clock TV news coverage of the war can be unnerving. Many people are feeling anxious, vulnerable and upset. These are all normal reactions. Here are a few things that can help you cope with this situation:

- 1. Maintain control over those things that you can control.** For example: If you walk for exercise, continue to walk. You might consider changing your walk to an inside location like the YMCA or the mall but, by all means, continue your daily routine.
- 2. Limit your television news viewing.** Bad things generate news coverage but you don't have to subject yourself to repeated doses of it. Tune in for occasional updates, but don't sit in front of the television waiting for them. Instead, turn to a movie channel, read a book or listen to soothing music.

3. Stay connected with family and friends. Don't isolate yourself. Keep in touch with family members and friends through phone calls and visits, if they're close by. Make an emergency communications plan with family and friends. Re-introduce yourself to neighbors and exchange phone/cell phone numbers. Get involved in community activities, such as a candlelight vigil, benefit, discussion group or special lecture.

4. Do something for someone else. Taking attention off our own worries and doing something nice for someone else can improve our own frame of mind. Give blood, collect donations for Iraqi children, send care packages or write letters to service men and women.

5. Volunteer. Contact area schools, hospitals or volunteer groups to ask how you can help. Taking personal action to be part of the solution is a very constructive way to reduce your anxiety.

6. Talk to someone. If you start to feel overwhelmed by your feelings, talk with a friend, family member, doctor, religious advisor or mental health professional. Often, talking about your fears and realizing that someone else shares your feelings is enough to reduce your anxiety.

7. Seek professional help. If you feel your problem is more serious and you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, hopelessness or extreme anger, seek help from a mental health professional. This is especially important for those who live with depression, substance abuse problems, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. Your local mental health association can help you find a social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist or other mental health professional in your community.

8. Be optimistic about the challenges ahead. Try to maintain a positive outlook. Remember that our nation has survived other difficult times. Stay in touch with your spirituality, if you find it comforting.

The National Mental Health Association has several resources available to help you and others cope with our ongoing national crisis, including fact sheets on post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, coping with loss, helping children handle war, and other topics. Visit our Web site at www.nmha.org or call, toll-free, 800-969-NMHA (6642).