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Promoting Tolerance in Times of War

Ignorance and a lack of understanding often lead to a fear of persons or groups who are unfamiliar or different from ourselves. In times of war this fear can be exacerbated by the very human need to blame someone or something for situations that are out of our control. But it is at these very times, when people seem to adopt an "us against them" mentality, when we all must work especially hard to remain in control of our emotions and actions. When people try to make sense out of conflict and issues that are hard to understand, they may make assumptions, discriminate against others because they do not look the same or feel the same, and buy in to biases and stereotypes.

Use the following tips to help you promote tolerance and respect in these uncertain times:

- **See each person as an individual.** Do not attribute the actions or opinions of a few people to an entire race, religion or group of people – that is stereotyping. Think about all of the people who share your race, ethnicity, religion or political affiliation, and how much diversity there is in their feelings, opinions and actions.

stereotype – An oversimplified generalization regarding what a group of people are like.

- **Learn more about people of other cultures, religions and ideologies.** Make a point to talk with people you know who are different from you. Read articles or books about different cultures and viewpoints. Keep an open mind.
- **Identify and challenge your own biases.** Never spread rumors or participate in conversations that perpetuate stereotypes. Challenge acts of discrimination.
- **Teach tolerance and acceptance of differences to children.** Children learn attitudes, values and behaviors at home, in their neighborhood, in school, and through the media. Be aware of what you say and do in front of children. Call attention to prejudice in things they, or others, may say or do. Talk openly about diversity, how to respect all people, and why it is important.
- **Respect opinions that are different than your own.** We all approach issues with our own set of values and experiences guiding our views. Americans are proud of this diversity and share a number of important beliefs -- in democracy, in freedom of speech, and in the right to worship as they choose. Never use hostile comments or aggression to try to get your point across, and challenge such behavior from others.

bias – A highly personal and unreasoned inclination to support or oppose someone or something.

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Dealing with Different Opinions About the War

An added stressor in many homes and communities is conflict over differing opinions about the war. Individual values, cultural norms, political opinions and past experiences with war drive people's viewpoints about our government's actions and motives. A situation of this magnitude creates extremely strong emotions in people, and some are finding themselves in conflict with their neighbors and even members of their families.

The following tips may help you cope with conflict and anger during these emotional and divisive times:

- **Talk about your feelings** with a friend or family member. If you don't happen to agree, respect their right to their opinion, and remain calm and accepting. Feeling angry is a normal response, but acting on that anger with violence or hostility is never appropriate.
- **Channel strong feelings into helping others.** There are many people and organizations that could use help in times of crisis. Contact a local school, military base, children's relief organization, blood donation center or community center, and see how you can help.
- **Continue with your normal activities.** Retaining a sense of control over your life, especially when so much feels out of your control, can help fight feelings of stress and helplessness. Limit your exposure to television coverage or debate about the war.
- **Stay away from drugs and alcohol.** Instead of helping to drown troubles, drugs and alcohol often create more. Drugs and alcohol have a way of accentuating strong emotions while diminishing the ability to make good decisions. This is a dangerous combination, particularly when strong, varied opinions are already causing conflict in many homes and communities.
- **If you have trouble coping with your anger,** or if any powerful emotions affect your day-to-day life, seek help. Contact a mental health professional, doctor, clergy member, or employee assistance program; they are there to help.
- **If you experience discrimination** or are the victim of a hate crime, document the incident and immediately report it to local authorities or your employer's human resources department. Seek support from neighbors, friends, victim's assistance organizations, support groups or your faith community. Ask children how they are being treated at school and notify school administrators of any concerns.

discrimination ô The act of singling out an individual or group for unfair treatment.
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For more information, contact your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association at 800-969-6642 or www.nmha.org. 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.