"Coping with Unexpected National Trauma"

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from experiences at The Wellspring Center
Tacoma, WA

Because of their degree of violence and complete unexpectedness, the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon may have left you with a number of unsettling reactions. These reactions are shared by people undergoing sudden trauma (from natural disaster, crime, accidents, acts of war, etc.) and are normal ways of trying to deal with abnormal situations.During the next few days and weeks, you may experience some of these reactions. They will vary in intensity and duration with each individual. Though your thoughts, feelings, and responses may be unsettling, it is important to recognize them as natural and human. You may not be able to prevent these reactions but there are ways to help yourself and others.

Common Thoughts:

· Preoccupation with the event/difficulty thinking about other things. This is our way of trying to absorb the enormity of the event, little by little, at a pace we can handle.
· Thinking of the event over and over, being riveted to television, radio, and web reports. This is our way of trying to re-establish some sense of understanding and control.
· Trouble remembering or concentrating. Our intellectual and emotional energies are focused on dealing with the shock.
· Guilt. We all cope in different ways. If you use humor to cope, don't feel guilty for not being "appropriately sober" in all your responses. If you use activity to cope, don't feel guilty for not wanting to spend every moment trying to listen the news. If you use keeping up with the news to cope, don't feel guilty for being "inappropriately morbid." Each response is understandable and helps us in different ways.

Common Feelings:

· Anxiety and fear
· Numbness, withdrawal
· Sadness
· Distrust
· Anger
· Desire for revenge
· Feelings of helplessness

Common Behaviors:

· Wanting to spend time talking and being with other
· Feeling protective of loved ones
· Sleep disturbances

Ways to Help Yourself and Others Cope

· Talk with people. This helps us feel less isolated and anxious. This also helps us "reality check" our reactions, making us realize our feelings are normal. It also helps to bring back to reasonable parameters feelings of vengeance or fear we may be experiencing.
· Give yourself permission to be distracted.
· Be kind toward others and tolerant of ways in which their coping needs may differ from yours.
· Avoid real and symbolic violence. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the television images of the Trade Center collapsing, listen to the radio. Or avoid news sources altogether for a while. Periodically, you can ask others if there is any significant new information you should know. Avoid entertainment with violent themes or images.
· Structure your time. Keep your life as normal as possible.
· Help your children understand in ways that are not overwhelming. For example, young children might need breaks from the television imagery. You might reassure children that it is okay for them to not know what to do. Instead, there are responsible and competent adults who are handling this by each doing their specialized jobs. Emergency crews are helping the victims and their families, investigators are working to identify who is responsible, safety personnel are working to prevent other incidents.
· Take care of yourself physically. Eat nourishing food, try to get enough sleep, do mild exercise. Don't demand that your body perform at high levels. Now may not be the time to adhere to a rigorous new workout, an austere diet, or a taxing workday.
· Spend time with people you enjoy, doing things you enjoy.
· Engage in activities that reaffirm your sense of yourself and others as members of a caring community.

May these thoughts assist you as you develop "ways and means" of assisting those who look to our Unitarian Universalist congregations for assistance and solace.