

State of Mind: October 2008

For the past several months, it seems that we have been hit with an endless series of natural and manmade disasters. Added to the ongoing war in the Mideast, there is a general sense that everything is spinning out of control with rising gas prices, destruction by storms, failed mortgages and the associated financial debacles on Wall Street. What makes this confluence of tragedies somewhat unique is the immensity of the potential harm that could be caused combined with feelings of powerlessness, unreality and detachment. Unless personally impacted, all the turmoil can come across as an abstraction...distant from us. Accordingly, one might be inclined to think: It's just today's burning news story, and it will vanish from the headlines when something new comes along.

Sadly, all of this is very real. For the average person it could become quite overwhelming and nearly impossible to process. The messages of gloom and doom are based on actual negative events that are not given proper perspective. As things unfold, our human reactions tend to mirror those cited in literature on death and dying. This seems to be an appropriate framework for coping with changes to our way of life...loss of the familiar and predictable.

Many people do remain in a state of DENIAL, acting as if nothing bad has occurred or that this is all a nasty dream conjured up by politicians or the crisis-generating news media. It is easy to ignore the unpleasantness when there is no appreciable direct impact on one's day-to-day living. We sympathize with those who have lost their homes and jobs, but find ways to maintain our lives as we go on pretty much as usual...shopping for groceries; watching or going to sporting events; playing with our children; mowing lawns and making every day as good as we can. This actually can be considered a form of RESILIENCE, a reasonable effort at adapting by trying to keep things as normal as possible.

Sometimes the news gets to the point that the weightiness of the total situation breaks through. This is likely to trigger feelings of ANGER, BETRAYAL and BEWILDERMENT. We seek to find someone or something to blame. Often the targets of our antipathy are deserving of condemnation. There are causes that defy any sense of control, such as "Mother Nature," international economics, dishonesty or greedy executives. Today it seems that we are fed so much information that it is hard to decipher what is true and what is not. Such conditions exceed our threshold of BELIEVABILITY, and in turn lead to CONFUSION, which could form the basis of chaos and rage. In these situations, even the most well-meaning actors are viewed with skepticism—if not hostility. We have placed our trust in leaders who seem to have let us down or who are as helpless as we are to do anything meaningful. They talk big, but produce little.

In modern times we have not had so many things go wrong so fast and at the same time. We are challenged to find ways to deal with the turbulence and do not have much experience with ways to address the actual situations we face now. Feelings of ANXIETY, DEPRESSION and DESPERATION are common. The sheer volume, magnitude and velocity of troubling news can easily lead us to feel that we are unable to affect positive change. We may even fear losing our way of life. While losing our beloved way of life is possible, it is not likely. Simplistically, coping with today's monumental stressors demands level heads.

First, we must realize that there will be no quick fixes. This is one of the most destructive traits of *We the People of the United States*. We want immediate and simple solutions to complex problems. On top of it, we do not want to suffer in the least. It is essential that we embrace a long-range view and realize that there will be changes, believing all the while that as long as we do not ignore the pressures we will find ways to adapt. Living one day at a time and purposefully looking at the good that has happened will strengthen you. Also, priorities must be adjusted...WHAT IS REALLY IMPORTANT?

Collecting FACTS from several sources is mandatory. This should be followed by dispassionate analysis that prompts a filtering process that is applicable to personal situations. What works for a friend may not be right for you. However, this quest for information should include limiting exposure to the 24-hour news media, which tends to inflame issues and offer opinions cloaked as universal truths.

Third, we must attempt to normalize our daily lives by maintaining our routines. Staying busy with things in our control is essential. It is also important to establish and maintain healthy habits. Such basic, yet effective, measures include regular exercise, ample sleep, entertaining hobbies and proper nutrition, all of which help to inoculate us to the adverse impact of stressors.

The most critical thing we can do is to cultivate and preserve our personal relationships. These can be a major source of comfort and support, as we share spiritual beliefs, humor and the healing powers of social contact. We need each other. We will do well when we develop healthy interdependent relationships, devoid of panic and hopelessness, and full of the best we have to offer...human kindness and wisdom.