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In Times of Stress: Finding Links to the Past

Something happens. You hear a report on the radio, or you read about an accident. You're not directly affected, but as you think about it, you become upset. While attending the funeral of a friend's grandmother you are filled with grief, not for the woman you never knew but for reasons you can't explain. Someone mentions a name, a place, or a certain turn of events, and you tense up. You ask yourself, "Why am I so anxious? Why am I reacting this way?" You may be surprised by the answer.

Each of us has a history, an accumulation of events -- some good, some bad -- that have helped shape us into the person we are today. Some of this is in our conscious memory, some in our subconscious, but wherever it is, it is sitting there, at the ready, to trigger our emotions when we least expect them.

It may be little more than a startled reaction on hearing a loud noise, recalling the time you barely escaped an explosion. It may be something much deeper, stemming from the unexplained death of a playmate when you were a small child. Or it may be a visceral reaction to tragic events however distant from you personally, that shook your sense of well-being.

In September 2001, the whole world was shaken by the tragic events in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania. Seeing television pictures of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center or people leaping from the towers was a searing emotional experience that can never be erased, however far we may have been from those events. For many Americans, it brought chilling reminders of the war in Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, and the era of backyard bomb shelters. All of us who remember that day will live the rest of our lives with those horrendous images buried in our memory. We can take steps to protect society from future tragedies of this kind, but we can't remove our memories -- they are part of the visceral reaction many of us will feel in the future when a new danger appears.

But are we just helpless victims of terrorists who wish us ill? Or are there things we can do to get some control over our emotions and to escape the victimhood that our enemies would assign us? I recall my own intense reaction to last year's anthrax

scare. Everyone was concerned, of course, but I was particularly upset. Then I remembered! When I was a little girl, I lived on a farm that produced registered show cattle. When anthrax was discovered in our herd, all of the cattle, as well as our household pets, had to be shot, dragged into a pit, burned, limed, and buried. It was a horrible experience, and it's still in my memory. When I reflected on that, I realized why my reaction to the anthrax scare was so intense. Anthrax was a link to my past. Once I made the connection, much of the anxiety went away.

In our current period of high anxiety, it will help all of us to take an inventory of our own emotional history. Thinking back, as best you can, to that triggering experience can help you get control of the way you are responding to other circumstances today.

In an ideal world, we would each have a life free of disappointment, rejection, cruelty, or tragedy. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world, and when danger lurks or disaster strikes, we are likely to react much as we have been programmed to do through our respective histories. For example, one woman I know was sadly abandoned as a child. She now finds herself feeling especially vulnerable with all the concern about self-protection -- duct tape, plastic sheeting, etc. -- all of which bring back the sense of helplessness she felt as a child. Her reaction is not unlike that of a person grieving for the loss of a loved one. In her case, the loss was of a happy home and parents who loved her.

Reviewing your history will not make your life any more secure, but it can help to reveal where certain feelings are coming from. Is there something you don't want to think about, something you're avoiding? Is there something that you don't want others to know about? Was there something that happened when you were a child that might account for your current anxiety that seems out of proportion to the situation? Ignoring bad memories doesn't erase them; they're still there. But acknowledging what happened and accepting the reality, however sad or painful, can help you when new challenges come along.

With ever-new threats of war and frequent terror alerts, it is natural to be anxious. But if you are feeling unduly tense and worried, it might help to share your feelings with a friend. This might help your friend do the same kind of personal exploration, and both of you may be helped by your open exchange. If you are finding your anxiety intolerable, you could be suffering a much deeper anxiety known as Post Traumatic Stress Diagnosis (PTSD). That is not self-treatable, and you should not

hesitate to find a therapist who specializes in this area.

In sum, while there is no magic formula for surviving times of high anxiety, taking stock of your own history can help you deal more effectively with stressful reminders.

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