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Conquering Our Fears By Kenneth A. Sprang

“[Extreme danger may help us remember] what we otherwise spend most of our lives forgetting: that our nature and purpose is . . . to love and to make love, to take joy from the beauty of the world, to live with an awareness that the future is not as real a place for any of us as are the present and the past.”

~~ Dean Koontz

The war with Iraq is upon us, and it appears that it may dominate our news for some time to come. War is stressful—not only to those risking their lives on the front lines, but also to those of us who watch and wait for the safe return of loved ones. It also creates stress and fear by impacting our economy, raising the level of alert for terrorism, and creating among us a subtle feeling of uneasiness.

That uneasiness is similar to what we may feel at a scary movie or when walking down the street at night in a rough or unknown neighborhood. Our primitive fight or flight syndrome is triggered--the adrenaline flows and our pulse rate increases. This is nature's way of protecting us.

The most toxic impact of fear is the feeling of powerlessness. The events of 9/11 or the current war cause us to feel impotent—victims of circumstances over which we have no control. We know that we are fearful, angry, or both, and our minds and bodies are responding. Our safety is threatened—one of the most basic of human needs.

The best remedy for our fears is to reclaim our power. We are powerless individually to end the war in Iraq, the threat of terrorism, or the other threats and dangers—perceived or real—in our lives. We do, however, have the power to determine how we will respond to our stressors and fears. Likewise, no one can deprive us of the power to celebrate, value, and comfort one another.

The following are some suggestions as to how to address your stress and fears and those your partner or spouse (or anyone else you care about):

- **Watch for warning signs.** Be alert to warning signs, including persistent fatigue, inability to concentrate, outbursts of anger, changes in eating or sleeping habits, or prolonged feelings of anxiety, depression, or helplessness. If necessary, seek medical help.

April 1, 2004

- **Do what you can to reduce real risk.** Plan for family communications in case of emergency. Put an overnight bag in the car. Make sure cell phones are charged and flashlights have fresh batteries. Store extra food and water at home. Make reasonable plans for an actual emergency.
- **Maintain your schedule.** Keep your life and schedule as normal and regular as possible. Go to work, go to the gym, attend classes, enjoy your free time. Don't let your fears disrupt routine.
- **Exercise and make time for recreation.** Exercise helps reduce stress. Include high-energy fun or recreation in your schedule.
- **Do not dismiss others' fears.** If your partner, spouse, child, parent, or anyone expresses fear or anxiety, do not ridicule. The worst thing we can do is to trivialize another person's fears. Emotions are not rational or irrational—they are sometimes raw and *always* real.
- **Listen—don't try to fix the problem.** We men in particular are conditioned to “fix” things, to make fears go away. Don't try to fix anything—you can't. Just listen—mirror what you have heard and validate it by affirming that it makes sense to you that your partner is stressed or afraid. The simple act of talking about our fears with someone who loves us and who will really listen and not judge or dismiss is extraordinarily valuable.
- **Help empower those who are fearful.** Don't simply assure anyone that he or she is safe—we have no way of knowing when and where danger will strike. However, we can help our partner to become better informed about the real risks and to take precautions to minimize actual risk. Focus on what you *can* do rather than what you cannot do.
- **Carpe diem.** As Dean Koontz writes, “the future is not as real a place for any of us as are the present or the past.” Stretch to tell those you love how much you love them. Take time to have fun and do the things that make you and those close to you feel alive, happy, and fulfilled. True, we have no power over the future. We do, however, have unlimited power to savor each moment of the present and to shape it as we will.

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