

Fighting Fear *By Archibald D. Hart*

Like many of you, I have been preoccupied these last few months with thoughts about terrorism and our battle against it. For some it has been more than just an academic exercise. They have literally been bowled over by fear and anxiety. Who knows how many were unable to visit families at a distance because they couldn't even consider getting on a plane. The fear of flying has shown a dramatic increase since September 11. Others are afraid to leave loved ones alone and quite a few hesitate to open mail for fear of anthrax spores.

Children in particular are running high on fear and anxiety. I have heard reports of children as old as 11 who believed that the repeated images of an airplane plowing into the towers of the World Trade Center were repeated occurrences. They are still having nightmares about what they saw. Vivid TV images like these may help to keep us informed of the news, but they can also create a lot of unwarranted fear. The children of our service men and women who are serving their country overseas are also experiencing an increase in fear. I can imagine as these children are put to bed at night family prayers in many homes must be filled with supplications to God for the safety of their loved ones.

So, what can those suffering from such a dramatic increase in their fear level do to keep it manageable? Here are some suggestions:

Understand That Fear Is Normal

It is quite unreasonable for you to expect that either yourself or your children should be totally free of fear or anxiety at this time. Fear is a basic reaction to threat. It serves us well in the normal course of events because it keeps us from doing anything that would harm us. But like so many healthy functions, fear can become distorted. It is then that fear can itself become the source of harm. Our task, then, for our children and ourselves is to keep our fears contained and reality based. What I mean by this is that while we must allow ourselves to feel fear when a threat is real, we need to challenge our thinking about it when it is not. It is here that our imaginations can work against us because it is very

easy to exaggerate minor threats.

For instance, never criticize your child just for being fearful. Rather, try to understand what it is he or she believes about the threat and then help your child correct any exaggerations and understand what the real threat is. If your child fears that a terrorist airplane will attack your home, then explain how very, very impossible that can be. Why you, when there are more important targets? If you fear getting on a plane, try hard to convince yourself that the risk of flying is no higher now than before. If anything, with all the security in place this is possibly the safest time to fly that we have ever known. I have personally flown a number of times since Sept. 11, including three overseas trips. I've never felt safer!

Talk Your Fears Out With Someone Else

I must confess that I don't have much confidence in my ability to solve problems, personal or professional, merely by keeping them to myself and trying to "think through" a solution on my own. I have this sneaking suspicion that when we just think about something, it stays locked in some small location in the brain. It certainly doesn't recruit the rest of my brain to deal with the problem. Seldom have I solved significant problems merely by thinking about them. But when I start to talk to someone else about them-Eureka! I come up with a solution even before I have finished my explanation. Just hearing what I am saying opens up my whole mind. This is why counseling can be so helpful not because counselors are necessarily smart, but because you get to listen to yourself talking. It's quite an ear opener!

The best way to resolve your unreasonable fears is to talk them over with someone else and develop a truthful perspective on them. It can be a spouse, neighbor, or counselor but talk about it!

Share Your Fears With God

There are many Scripture verses that can comfort us when we are fearful, but none is more precious than Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

God offers us his peace for dealing with real threats. Since it is very easy to pray in such a way that makes you more fearful (I call it "worry praying" because all you are doing is incubating your fearful thoughts so they only make you more fearful), pray and ask God for three things: (1) For a greater understanding of what is really making you afraid; (2) For a deeper understanding of the reality of his love and protection; (3) For the courage to step out of your unreasonable fears into the presence of his peace. Our God always answers prayers like these!

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