



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

critical issues

As I thought about this edition of *Health and Healing*, devoted to “Critical Issues,” I found my chest tightening, my stomach clenching, and my brain turning to cement. A week after the deadline for my column I finally began to get clear on what was going on. At some deep level the phrase “critical issues” brought up memories of being at the sides of friends who were coping with suicide attempts, devastating car injuries, operations, and life threatening illnesses. I thought of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, and our continued concerns about terrorism.

I have never thought of myself as a fearful person and I don't think my friends would describe me as such, but a few months ago I realized how much fear I lived with on a daily basis. I think this is true for all of us, that we live with a great deal of fear that is just underneath the surface. We may not be conscious of it, but I think fear is the primary underlying source of stress.

We can get fearful or anxious about everything from meeting a deadline to natural disasters or escalating global conflicts. With the Internet and 24/7 news channels, we have access to an overwhelming amount of information — both the good news and the bad news. We can track the color of the terrorism level alert, follow the latest bombings in Iraq, keep abreast of political unrest in all parts of the world. Pictures of the latest natural disaster or horrendous crime are instantly available. Every week a new study comes out about a supplement we should take or a food we should avoid, and sometimes the studies seem contradictory. We hear about the latest diseases, with or without cures. Things we once thought were safe are now known to be highly toxic (mercury, asbestos, and lead). Ozone levels are broadcast with warnings to those who should remain inside when the levels are high. I could go on and on and work us all into a frenzy.

While this explosion of knowledge brings with it many more things to worry about, it also brings advances in technology, medical care, safety standards, and nutrition that previous

generations never dreamed about. So the question becomes: How do we make use of all the information we have in a way that improves our lives rather than making them more stressful? How can we take in what is valuable without having our fears raised at every turn? I believe that the task is to take in relevant information, do what we can to be safe, healthy, and free, but to let go of the illusion that we can control every aspect of our lives.

Letting go involves facing reality, making conscious decisions, and then working to let go of the fear and anxiety about what we *cannot* control. Letting go involves setting reasonable expectations for work, nutrition, exercise, sleep, safety, and political activity and acknowledging our limitations. Letting go may involve talking to a family member or friend for the reassurance that we are not alone with our fears. Letting go may involve seeking therapy to deal with intense or long-standing fears and anxieties. Letting go may involve being part of a spiritual community both for the fellowship as well as for the comfort of the belief in the presence of a something that is greater than ourselves.

Something I have found helpful is to sit quietly and focus on my fears and concerns. Where do I feel the feelings in my body? How would I describe those feelings? What are my thoughts? Sometimes if I sit and give all of my attention to whatever anxiety, fear or stress I am experiencing I find that it eventually subsides and a kind of peace comes over me. Attempting to control everything in order to feel safe is a task that is doomed to failure because it is impossible. If instead I am able to bask in the love of family, friends and a divine presence, I can find peace. Even though I know bad things happen, I know I can be okay, I can be whole and free from fear. There is a verse in the bible that says perfect love casts out fear. I think even imperfect love can certainly help us feel a lot better. *h&h*