



War in Iraq: Coping with war, political unrest and global tension

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The war in Iraq, political unrest, and global tensions have made these difficult and uncertain times for everyone. Fears regarding the war may be increased after September 11th due to concerns regarding potential terrorism and bioterrorism. People who have had past war related experiences may be feeling particularly vulnerable at this time. People who have experienced other traumas, such as car accidents, death of loved ones, violence and/or assault can also feel an increased sensitivity to worldwide events and apprehension. For some people, concerns regarding the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) have compounded the anxiety they are experiencing about the global tension.

While recognizing that at this time people may be feeling increased anxiety, it is also important to recognize that there are things we can do to take care of our families, our communities and ourselves. The following provides some basic information and tips on how to cope with the stresses that these challenging times present.

What is a normal response to this type of situation?

You may be feeling more apprehension than normal. For example, you may have some dreams related to the war in Iraq or other stressful events. You may feel like staying home more or cancelling travel plans. You may be watching the news more frequently or alternatively avoiding listening to the news or reading the newspaper. All of these feelings and activities are normal considering the difficult situation facing the world right now.

What can people do to help themselves feel calmer?

- Limit your exposure to the news. Sometimes reading the news in the newspaper can be less frightening than seeing the visual images on television or listening to it on radio.
- Talk to friends and family about how you are feeling.
- Continue with your normal activities. Go to the movies, theatre and spend time with friends and family.
- Keep yourself healthy. Be physically active, eat well and try to ensure that you are getting proper sleep and rest and relaxation.
- Contact the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's toll free line, 1-800-463-6273 or in Toronto (416) 595-6111 for information about anxiety and other mental health related concerns.

- Obtain valuable self-help tips, useful resources and links for further information on such websites as the following:
 - Health Canada's Office of Emergency Services: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/emergency-urgence/index_e.html
 - The American Psychological Association: <http://helping.apa.org/resilience/war.html>.
 - The National Mental Health Association: <http://www.nmha.org>.

What symptoms would indicate that someone is experiencing more anxiety than should be expected?

Remember, war and global conflict are stressful events, so feeling some anxiety is normal and to be expected. If, however, you have any of the following symptoms, you may be experiencing the effects of trauma.

- Panic attacks
- Chronic difficulties with sleeping
- Extreme fear of people or thoughts that people are out to harm you
- Substance abuse
- Other forms of self-harm behaviour

If you are experiencing these symptoms, please see your family doctor or mental health professional. Also, if your ability to work and relate to other people is affected; you are constantly thinking about the world situation; you are watching excessive amounts of television; and/or you no longer enjoy the activities you used to enjoy, you may want to speak with a health care provider.

What can people do who are having difficulty?

If you are in need of additional support and would like someone to talk with besides friends and family, many cities have distress centers. The telephone numbers for these help lines are frequently listed in the front of your telephone book. If you are experiencing prolonged periods of anxiety affecting your work and family life, you should contact your family doctor or other health care providers. The company or organization that you work for may also have an employee assistance program, EAP, which provides employees with counselling from trained professionals. If you are experiencing extreme distress over the situation or any physical symptoms, go to your nearest emergency department, of your local hospital. If you are in Toronto, you may contact the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's emergency department.

How can people cope with the war and other traumatic situations that are happening at the same time including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)?

People may feel extra stressed at this time with the global tension, war in Iraq and the SARS situation.

It is important to remember that measures are being taken in the Greater Toronto Area and other parts of the world to contain the spread of SARS. The experts assure us that the vast majority of

people are not in any danger. Health Canada, provincial governments and most local public health offices have set up hot-lines where you can call to get the most up-to-date information. You can also call your family physician.

For more information about dealing with the stress or fears you might feel because of SARS, please see the Canadian Medical Association's website at www.cma.ca. The materials on the website, prepared by the Mental Health Support Network of Canada, point out that people who have recently experienced a sad or traumatic event may find SARS and/or the war in Iraq more upsetting and that it's normal to feel more stressed under these conditions. At the same time, the site provides behaviours to watch out for, similar to those described above, including not getting enough sleep, watching excessive amounts of television and avoiding people. If you or one of your loved ones experiences such behaviour changes, you may want to contact your family physician or another health care provider.

What can people do about discrimination and racism in their community?

This is a difficult time for many individuals and groups who are facing the consequences of war and global tensions. This is a time when many people may experience increased feelings of vulnerability, racism, racial profiling and isolation. They may hear comments that are uncomfortable while at work, encounter people that are not sensitive to the issues, have personal experiences with relived trauma and not feel safe to speak with others or travel.

Racism and religious bigotry are often based on ignorance and fear and the abusive use of power against people based on race, skin colour, immigration status, religion or country of origin.

It is important to exercise sensitivity and respect with colleagues, friends, acquaintances and others with whom you come into contact with at this time. The Health Canada website www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/publicat/oes-bsu-02/comm_e.html has some ideas on what you can do in your community to help combat racism. These include ensuring that none of your words or actions give the impression that you approve of racism, that you teach your children that having people from different backgrounds and religions enriches your community and that you confront racism in a way that promotes acceptance and understanding in your community.

Supporting an attitude of respect and sensitivity is very important at a time like this, when many are vulnerable and uncertain.

If you have been the target of racism or discrimination, contact your local community-based agency, organization or support group for assistance or advice. You can also contact the Hate Crimes Unit of the Metro Toronto Police.

What is posttraumatic stress disorder?

Posttraumatic stress disorder, often referred to by its initials, PTSD, is a condition persisting for three months or longer, in which a person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which grave physical or emotional harm has been experienced (.e., serious accident, natural disaster, assault, childhood, sexual, physical, or emotional abuse or severe neglect).

For people who have PTSD, exposure to trauma, even repeated news coverage can trigger or retrigger symptoms of PTSD. Symptoms can include emotional numbness, sleep disturbances including

nightmares, exaggerated emotional or physical reactions to triggers that remind the person of the event, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating and exaggerated startle response. People who have PTSD may reexperience their trauma, have distressing recollections of the event and feel as if the event were recurring while awake. For further information about posttraumatic stress disorder, please see the Canadian Mental Health Association website: <http://www.cmha.ca> (or http://www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/mh_pamphlets/mh_pamphlet_27.htm for the PTSD pamphlet.)

If someone is from a country where they have experienced war or some other form of trauma, how might they be affected?

People who have survived war, political unrest or torture in their country of origin may be experiencing particular difficulties including feelings of unsafety at this time. Previous experiences with trauma may be triggered or retriggered as people who have experienced trauma in the past may be more vulnerable to the effect of another traumatic experience. If you are experiencing difficulties, please contact your family physician, other health care provider or a member of your clergy or community group for assistance.

The Canadian Mental Health Association has made available online mental health pamphlets in a variety of languages including Farsi/Dari, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Somali, Serbo-Croatian, Tamil and Urdu. Please see their website at www.cmha.ca and look for the Info Centre section.

Other resources that might be of help include:

- Women's Health in Women's Hands – a pro-choice, anti-racist, multilingual, participatory community health centre for women of diverse backgrounds in Metropolitan Toronto and surrounding municipalities. Call 416-593-7655 or see their website at <http://www.whiwh.com/who.htm>.
- Canadian Refugee and Immigrant Counselling Service –provides counselling to refugees and immigrants. Call 416-506-1163
- Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture provides mental health and social care support to refugees and immigrants. Call (416) 363-1066 or <http://www.icomm.ca/ccvt>.
- The Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre website lists agencies across Canada that provide help to new Canadians. Please see their website at <http://www.kwmc.on.ca/links/isa.html>.

It is also important for friends and colleagues of people who have experienced war to be sensitive as to how their associate may be experiencing particular stress at this time. Provide support, be respectful and lend a listening ear when possible.

What can be done to help children cope with this situation?

There are many websites with recommendations on how to help children of all ages deal with the situation of global conflict and war. One recommendation agreed upon by the majority of the experts is to limit children's exposure to war coverage on the news. Special care should also be taken to talk with children and adolescents about their feelings and thoughts about the war. In response to children's questions, adults can reassure them that they are safe and provide information that is appropriate to the child's age and maturity.

Health Canada's Office of Emergency Services also has a website with pamphlets available on such subjects as how to help your child and your teenager cope with terrorism and armed conflicts. Please see http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgsp/ep/emergency-urgence/index_e.html

The American Psychological Association has a series of articles on their website with tips for parents and teachers on how to help children of different ages build resilience during these troubling times. Please see their website at <http://helping.apa.org/resilience/war.html>.

The National Mental Health Association also has a variety of tips on how to help children, youth, college students and adults cope with the stress of war. They also have tips for military families. Please see their website at <http://www.nmha.org>.

Remember, these are challenging times, but taking the time to learn about appropriate resources, reaching out for help and providing support to one another will help us all cope better and together build a stronger community.