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Coping

By Cathy Healy

I am a fireman's daughter and the sister of five Vietnam Vets. As a third grader, I watched as a small plane careened out of control and crashed into the parking lot, and later as an adult mother of three, I survived a plane that filled with smoke while sitting on the runway. I am a survivor of various weather related natural disasters, and assorted other threats to my safety. Yet, never have I felt such terror and vulnerability as I have experienced the week after the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings. As the mother of a child with a disability I, like many other parents, simply ran out of coping skills. Numbed by fear and shocked by the horror and devastation of the terrorist attacks, it all became too much. I struggled to manage life and overcome my own feelings of grief so I could help my children get through this terrible time.

Children cope with grief through the spoken word, through activity and through behaviors that may not seem to have roots in emotion. The adults in their lives are key to helping them through the process by modeling actions. But when our children have disabilities such as cognitive and developmental delays, physical/sensory impairments or emotional/behavioral disorders and the demands of caring for these children have already greatly overtaxed us, how can we help them? Though we do not refer to parents of school age children with disabilities as caregivers, we are. We too may have the same feelings of loss and despair

that other caregivers experience. At this devastating and tragic time in our country's history how can we help our extremely vulnerable children when we feel helpless?



We parents of children with disabilities walk a fine line between despair and hope on a daily basis and when a tragedy paramount to this most recent one occurs, what help is there for us? It is often said that channeling energy into a constructive project helps bring about a semblance of control over one's life.

Friends of mine went to church or temple services, some donated blood, while others volunteered their time making sandwiches and sorting out goods for emergency crews at the Pentagon.

But for those of us who are the caregivers and are unable to devote extra time away and who work diligently to provide a balanced life for our families, we risk a greater sense of isolation and a longer recovery period, which may have a deeper and more deleterious consequence on our children with disabilities. For those of us feeling lost, we must take care to tend to our own breaking hearts first and to protect the sanctity of our own mental health. Our children are depending on us.

Mental health professionals have some suggestions for taking care of the caregiver.

- Do at least one good thing for yourself each day.

- Try to tackle overwhelming tasks by breaking them into much smaller pieces and giving yourself lots of positive reinforcement for accomplishing those smaller things.
- Acknowledge your own sense of loss and allow yourself the time to grieve. Tell your child that you are sad and even for children for whom words are difficult, give them a name for the feeling.
- Remember that anxiety feeds other anxiety. Hug one another if that is acceptable to your child. Teens are especially vulnerable now and may actually allow you to hug them. Play music or eat comfort foods. Our family is feasting on mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese.
- Try to get back to a normal routine. There is comfort in a daily routine for children and for ourselves.
- Just be with your children. Children feel safe when parents are nearby doing ordinary activities. Dust off the summer reading books you've been meaning to get to and read them to your children.
- Engaging children in some kind of activity that fosters communication helps. Playing or drawing is useful for some. Still others of our children who have less obvious communication methods will appreciate kicking a ball around outside or taking a walk with the family.
- Find other parents and share your stories and coping strategies. Other parents of children with disabilities are our greatest resource for figuring out how to cope in these trying times. Now more than ever we need to draw upon each other's strengths.
- Look for opportunities to laugh. Invent them if you have to, but laugh. The added oxygen to the blood stream produces endorphins, which help transmit feelings of well-being.
- Try to *feel* hopeful because after a time you actually may *be* hopeful.
- Do your best to be available emotionally to your children. It's important to be able to pick up on the subtle clues for what our children are feeling but recognize your own humanness. As a parent there are times when we have no answers and we may have very little else to give. Caregivers sometimes need to be cared for. Don't be afraid to ask for help.



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