

## Surviving the Un-survivable

By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

I watch the news of the terrorist attack on the school in Beslan, Russia and a sickening feeling engulfs me. I find myself overcome with feelings of sadness and empathy for the children and families, pain for their suffering, heartache for the mothers and fathers, anger that this can happen, fear and anxiety that it could happen to us, relief that our children are safe, and confusion about how evil like that exists in this world. As a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, the textbook answers of dealing with grief, loss, and trauma circle through my brain, but are overwhelmed by questions of how this could happen and how you survive the loss of children from a terrorist attack. How will those families continue on in life, raise other children, and live with the memories of the last days? As a mother, I feel the desire to hold my daughter close to me and not let her grow to enter this world. I want to protect her and shield her from the evil that created this tragic event. But, I know that this is not the answer.

I know that she must grow and learn to live in this world and face the dangers that exist. I begin to search for the answers. How do we as parents balance between protecting our children and teaching them to survive in a sometimes seemingly harsh world? We know that we must. The answer I find lies in dealing with our own emotions and overcoming our fears so that we can empower our children to succeed.

In any tragic event, multiple feelings will occur simultaneously and often seem to conflict with each other. I have compiled several steps that can help us deal with our emotions as they occur. First, as we experience this barrage of emotions, it is important to recognize that this is a normal phenomenon. It is expected that we will be overwhelmed at times and confused by the scope and depth of our feelings. When the feelings arise, allow yourself to focus on and experience each feeling rather than discard or suppress them. Experiencing the emotions is our mind's way of dealing with them. We have a tendency to avoid the emotions in hopes that they will disappear; however, the opposite will occur. Hanging on to emotions will prolong your discomfort and create anxiety.

Next, accept each emotion without judgment. When the negative feelings arise, you may have a tendency to associate negative thoughts about yourself with the negative emotions. For example, someone feeling angry may think, "I must be a bad person for harboring this much anger towards the terrorists and having thoughts of wanting revenge." Further, another person may feel guilty as a result of feeling relief that her children are safe. These negative emotions are normal and expected during times of crisis and tragedy. When you accept these feelings without judgment, you are allowing your mind to deal with them and let them go. Otherwise, you will hold on to them and find yourself caught in a cycle of negative feelings and self depreciating thoughts, which only leads to more emotional turmoil.

After we have allowed the feelings to exist, we must find appropriate outlets to express them. Anger is an acceptable and sometimes motivating emotion when expressed appropriately. When provided the right outlet, anger will be released and sometimes leads to positive outcomes (consider that Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) was derived partially out of anger at the situation). Similarly, feelings of sadness and pain need to be expressed appropriately in order to help them pass. Find those outlets for you that allow you to express each emotion. That may be talking to a friend, going to counseling, journaling, or using expressive arts including music, painting, creating, etc. It may help you to relax by reading, taking a walk or bath, praying, meditating, or connecting with spirituality or nature. Exercise is also a great stress release. Don't be afraid to simply allow yourself time to express each raw emotion. When you feel the need to cry, make time to cry. If you need to be angry for a time and rant and rave, allow it. Raw emotions, when managed effectively, help us release the tension.

The key is to find the balance between allowing the emotions and not becoming overwhelmed to the point of impairment. Either extreme of suppressing emotions or not being able to stop the flow of emotions will impair our daily functioning. One strategy is to set aside a time and place to allow the emotions to occur. For example, you may not be able to break down and cry at work; therefore, you need to temporarily suppress the emotion of sadness. However, you can give yourself thirty minutes in the evening or morning to let all of the emotions flow when you are able to manage the external environment. This enables you to deal with you emotions while simultaneously maintaining your level of functioning.

As you work through your feelings, remember that everyone will experience each event somewhat differently. Resist the temptation to compare yourself with others and their experience. Your experience is unique to you and subsequently your resolution will also follow your own pattern. Further, as you attempt to help other people with their emotions, you can share the techniques that helped you while allowing them to find their own healing path. Your children may need help identifying and expressing their emotions about the event. Children will ask you to explain this tragedy, but no rational explanation is possible. Besides, explanations don't help us manage our emotions. It is more helpful to them if you are able to teach them to identify and manage their emotions, but in order to help our children we need to be proficient first.

It is often times of tragedy that bring us closer to one another. It is my hope that we will find the avenues to deal with our own emotions surrounding this tragedy and connect to our friends and family and address our spiritual needs. As we succeed, we are modeling and teaching these skills to our children and subsequently providing them with the tools to survive in this world. As parents, I think that what we want most for our children is to outlive us, live better than we did, and to be happy and successful. When we live better, we teach our children to live better.