

How to Deal with the Anxiety and Fear Terrorism Fosters — Without Giving In

By [Suzanne Kane](#)

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According to an NBC news poll taken Nov. 15-17, 2015, 54 percent of Americans are worried about a terrorist attack here. On Nov. 23, 2015, the U.S. State Department issued a [worldwide travel alert](#), urging citizens to “exercise vigilance when in public places or using transportation.” Terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaida, Boko Haram and others may carry out planned attacks — although officials are quick to say there are “no credible” threats of attacks on U.S. soil at this time.

Still, it’s hard to ignore breaking news from around the world about suicide bombers, or erase images of police officers patrolling major airports carrying shotguns and AR-15s, accompanied by bomb-sniffing dogs. How can we cope with the feelings of [anxiety](#) and fear that terrorist acts foster? What are some practical things we can do to live our lives without succumbing to fear?

Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith, a Washington, D.C., [psychiatrist](#) who not only counsels individuals, couples and families, but also has worked with a lot of our leaders in government, shares her thoughts on the topic.

Time to Draw upon Courage, Trust, Patience and Faith

Dr. Gadhia-Smith says that while life is a constant state of uncertainty in general, given recent events, a lot of people are really worried, particularly in cities named as potential targets, such as Washington and New York. The attacks in Paris “pierce our denial” that there is a safe place. We want to think that whatever happens it happens out there, over there, to somebody else. But those attacks “were particularly disturbing because it was the restaurant around the corner, a music hall, and places that we all go and frequent.”

Now it becomes apparent that there is no really safe place. This could happen anywhere. But this should not cause us to stop living, Dr. Gadhia-Smith says. “These are the times that we have to draw upon courage, trust, patience and faith that we can continue to go on and live our lives and also to make a decision that we are not going to be controlled by fear. Because if we make choices based on fear, then the terrorists win and they accomplish what they are trying to do. While we need to be aware and vigilant and pay attention to unusual things that seem like they’re out of the ordinary and report those things, we don’t need to live in a state of terror and fear.”

Be Vigilant, But Carry Out Travel Plans

How do you plan for and carry out travel plans at this time of uncertainty and unrest? Dr. Gadhia-Smith encourages people to go ahead and carry out the plans that they want to have.

“There’s this wonderful British saying, ‘Keep calm and carry on.’ Apart from going to Paris or Brussels right now, I think that people need to carry on and continue with what they would normally do.”

Social Media: Does it Help or Hurt in Allaying Fears and Anxiety?

There’s no question that [social media](#) is a big part of our culture now. Dr. Gadhia-Smith believes social media can hurt and it can help in allaying fears and anxiety, depending on the emphasis. A lot of postings on social media are created to get attention and to create emotion. “We have now a very attention-seeking culture where everyone’s looking for a hit. It’s such an instant society.” She stresses that social media can give us information but not highlight the terror and not put the negative spin on things but try to keep the content balanced, rational, and genuine without overemphasizing fear and hype.

“The more that we’re bombarded with these messages that are covertly frightening, the more that builds up in people. We have to limit our exposure to media and social media and think for ourselves and decide what is really rational. Also stay connected so that you know what’s going on but not overdose yourself on it.”

Protect the Children – Especially Younger Kids

Our children, especially kids under 5, are the most vulnerable when violence and terror are so much in the TV news. How can we shield younger kids from such coverage, which they clearly cannot understand and which will only frighten them further? What about kids aged 6 and older, but not yet teens? How do we discuss what’s happening with them and reassure them that we’ll protect them?

Dr. Gadhia-Smith offers these tips:

- If they’re under 5, limit their TV exposure time. If they’re 6 or more, that may be harder to do. They should also be somewhat limited so that they’re not glued to it.
- Keep a dialogue going with them to talk about it. Help them express their feelings and tell you about what they’re thinking and feeling and seeing, what their friends are talking about. Reassure them that they can be aware and talk to someone if they’re scared or if they see something that confirms that.
- Affirm their capacity for awareness and action. Children are very aware, astute, sharp and observant, maybe even more so than adults, in some ways. We need to observe their capacity to recognize what’s going on and to deal with adversity by talking about resiliency and fostering a sense of self-efficacy in our children so that they believe in themselves more than they believe in the fear.
- Helping them to have, not only a sense of the ability to take action, but also some sort of a life of faith is very helpful so that they understand that there is something bigger in charge than all of us. It’s not just the bad guys who are in charge.

She also stresses that self-efficacy can be taught to a child. “Self-efficacy means the belief in one’s own ability to do things and to master challenges and tasks,” said Dr. Gadhia-Smith, who adds that this is one of the most important aspects of [parenting](#) that can happen for a child. Children will face adversity and challenges. They need their parents to believe in them so that they can believe in themselves.

“We develop a sense of confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy – we cultivate the sense that we can handle things and do things when we have parents who communicate that they

believe in us through words and actions. That's one of the most important things that we can ever give our children. They're going to have challenges that we never imagined. They have to believe in their ability to solve problems and be creative and master challenges beyond what they already know."

Combating Fear's Cumulative Effect

Many people have a tendency to internalize emotions, because we are taught that it's OK to have certain feelings and it's not OK to have others. Dr. Gadhia-Smith says it is very important to process our emotions and feelings during these difficult times so that they do not accumulate and build up within us. That leads to mental health issues such as anxiety problems, [depression](#), and [obsessive-compulsive](#) disorders, which are actually rooted in anxiety disorders. "The more that we internalize and let those toxic feelings layer up inside of us, the more we are set up to become emotionally unwell. If there is a cumulative effect that is even greater if we are not sharing and talking about we feel with trusted people in safe places at the appropriate times."

Of course, this isn't always possible. "That's why every one of us needs to have a support group so that we have places where we can process whatever is going on inside of us so that we don't have to carry it around with us and add to the layer and make ourselves sick." She says that's one of the powerful benefits of [psychotherapy](#), good friendships, strong families, and mentors and people that we can really talk to. "We need to really do that. It's not a time to suck it up."

Don't Allow Fear to Shut You Down

Practically speaking, there are some things you can do to keep fear from shutting you down, says Dr. Gadhia-Smith.

- Try to check in with yourself every day about what you're feeling. You may not be able to see it in someone else until it's reached a significant level. Each of us needs to check in with ourselves and ask ourselves: How are we really feeling? How are we functioning? How are we sleeping? How are we eating? How are we connecting with people?
- Driving can be a great barometer of our spiritual condition. When we're really agitated or disturbed, we'll be more impatient. We'll rush around a lot more. Rushing is a manifestation of fear. Going into the holiday season, that's certainly something that all of us can be prone to anyway because of the pressure of the holidays and all the extra activities and tasks.
- We need to pay attention to ourselves and how we are really doing. One way to do that is just to do a little written inventory every day, a little journaling, or having a talk with someone.

- If you see signs of distress in a loved one, then try to lovingly talk to them about what you see. If they're resistant, you may not be able to penetrate what's going on, but the most you can do is try. If you really care about someone, that's the loving thing to do, at least once. If you say something over and over again, it becomes nagging, but at least talk to someone once if you're concerned.

Good Self-Care and Managing Emotions

Dr. Gadhia-Smith says that self-care is critical in managing emotions. The cornerstones of self-care are good nutrition, regular exercise, getting enough [sleep](#) and rest, and psychological support. These are the basics that we all need.

“With nutrition, certain types of foods can actually aggravate anxiety, like caffeine, too much sugar, foods with lots of white flour — they can actually make a person more anxious than they have to be,” said Dr. Gadhia-Smith. She adds that we need to pay attention to what we put into our mouths and how that affects our emotions. Reflect on whether we're making enough time to wind down and rest and be able to have good quality sleep. Are we having anything in our diet that can disrupt our sleep? Since sleep is the linchpin to self-care, check to see if there's something in our diet that disrupt sleep.

“If you aren't getting good quality sleep, everything else will be out of whack — your moods, your energy level, your appetite. We really need to make sure that we are good parents to ourselves through good self-care. It's never too late to become your own loving parent.”

Americans are Resilient

Offering a final thought on how to deal with anxiety and fear that terrorism fosters, Dr. Gadhia-Smith says that we have what it takes. “When we talk about [resilience](#) we can also talk about the fact that, as Americans, we bounced back from Pearl Harbor, we bounced back from 9/11, and we'll bounce back from whatever happens. We know we can't prevent everything, but we are a country that bounces back. We're a very strong and resilient people and we have a lot of examples in our history that indicate that.”