

# Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

**Dear Kathleen,**

**I live in Northern Virginia and I'm barely leaving my house these days. After the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> last year, and now with a sniper randomly killing innocent people (including one murder within a mile of my house), I'm terrified and stressed. I go to work and race back home, lock my door, and stay in for the night. I feel isolated and depressed. How can I overcome my fears and take my life back?**

**-- Evelyn**

Dear Evelyn,

We're living in frightening and challenging times. On one beautiful Fall day a little over a year ago, with exploding planes, collapsing buildings, extinguished lives, terror, and heartbreak, our world changed forever. And since then, we've seen other terrorist bombings in Europe and the paradise island of Bali, attempts to blow up a transatlantic airliner with a bomb hidden in sneakers, and now a sniper – whether linked to a terrorist organization or a lone madman -- threatening the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

In the United States, we've been blessed with fifty years of relative peace, and it's easy to believe that this is the natural order of things. If only that were true. Recent events have exploded this myth. Perhaps our expectations—about a safe, orderly world-- were an illusion. The facts show that the vast majority of people in many other nations – and many fellow Americans living in impoverished and drug-ridden communities -- live in a constant state of danger. What has been shattered, for those of us who have enjoyed relative safety in the past, is our sense of personal control.

We believed that if only we showed good judgment, avoided treacherous places, and were reasonably cautious, we could avoid becoming a victim of senseless violence. Images of carnage and sudden death and destruction fill our media, haunt our dreams, and blast into our consciousness. Our leaders urge us to return to our everyday lives, yet every cell in our body implores us to gather up our loved ones and take cover. Many of us have not yet adjusted to living in a world more uncertain, unpredictable, and dangerous than the one we had taken for granted; the one to which most Americans had become accustomed. We are numb, wondering when, if ever, we will return to “normal,” and what “normal” will actually mean for the future.

You are not alone in feeling fear, Evelyn. But each of us has an important decision to make about how we will live fully in spite of the sudden violence that seems to surround us. We'll have to determine our “new normal.”

Ancient insights may have something to offer us as we strive for this answer. Buddhism teaches the wisdom of “The Middle Way.” This is a way of avoiding extremes: Don't go too far and don't fail to go far enough. Too tight and it will break; too slack and it will be loose. Neither tight nor slack, and it will turn out right. I'm not trying to sound like a Kung Fu master here, but applying the concept of the middle way to our present reality means finding a balance between fear and risk.

### Ten Strategies for Living Richly In Spite of Fear:

1. Recognize and acknowledge your feelings. Talk about your fears, but don't ruminate on them. If your fears, depression, and stress are severe (and not getting better with time), consider working with a competent therapist to help you get through this hard time and reestablish some equilibrium in your life.
2. Realize that in spite of the horrors of terrorists and snipers, you are statistically in greater danger of being hurt in a car accident. Be aware of specific behavioral suggestions offered by law enforcement and other authorities in your community.
3. Stay current with what's happening, but don't sit glued to twenty-four-hour news channels to the exclusion of everything else. Switch the channel to some mindless television fare from time to time. Find something that will make you laugh.
4. Do things that you enjoy. Find activities that challenge you and engage your interest and passion.
5. Spend time with friends and family.
6. Stay physically strong. Eat right. Exercise regularly. Get plenty of rest. Keep to a schedule. Not only will you feel better, but also you will be stronger and more empowered about the things you can control in your life.
7. Take comfort in your faith or spiritual tradition. Pray or meditate.
8. Find ways of giving comfort and help to others. One of the best ways to overcome feelings of powerlessness is to take power where we can and nothing makes us feel better than knowing we've helped another.
9. Recognize the stories of courage, compassion, heroism, unity and generosity often hidden by the horror. Remember that there is grace amidst the rubble of shattered building and shattered lives.
10. Accept that we cannot always choose what confronts us, but we can choose how we respond to these challenges.

Neither the avoidance of life because of fear, nor throwing caution to the wind is the middle way. Our new reality is one in which we must combine both. We are wise to be vigilant, aware, and awake to potential dangers. At the same time, we cannot live well hidden away in our homes and apartments riddled with fear, cut off from others, and the rich flow of life. Individually and collectively, we've got to discover ways to face this new world bravely.

We must be courageous, and that does not mean that we will not experience fear. Mark Twain rightly observed, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear."

I take comfort in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt – who lived through a terrifying period of history herself. She said, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along."

When we stand together, we'll all find ways to take the next thing that comes along and live our lives with dignity and grace.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com), call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949.

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