

Your Personal Coach

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The Outer Banks and much of the east coast have experienced a devastating time at the hand of Hurricane Isabel. As all of us clean up and many rebuild their lives and businesses, it is helpful to remember that our inner life – our spirit – needs the kind of dedicated attention that we are giving to our property. Two years ago – in the week after the terrorist attack on September 11 – I was asked to offer some advice about recovering from loss and grief and I'm reprising some of those thoughts here.

Crisis intervention professionals know that losses caused by human beings – as in a terrorist attack – create stronger feelings of rage than if the very same loss had been caused by a natural disaster. Nevertheless, Isabel has left plenty of suffering in her wake. People say that time heals all wounds and while there is truth in that, research from critical incident stress studies have shown that there are some things that we can do to facilitate the recovery process, effectively work through our pain and loss, and reduce the potential for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Here's some food for thought: **HEAL US.**

H – Help others and hear their stories. One of the most effective approaches to healing ourselves is to offer a hand to others who are also suffering. Give blood, make contributions if you can, volunteer for the Red Cross or other local agencies that offer comfort and rescue in times of crisis, help a neighbor clear branches and trees from her yard. Listen openly, non-judgmentally to friends who need to talk about their feelings and reactions to this storm. It is not necessary to have answers for them. It is only necessary to listen and to care.

E – Express your feelings. Talk about your feelings to trusted family and friends. Write in a journal. Draw, paint, or express in music or dance your deepest feelings. These non-verbal forms of expression can be particularly important ways for children to share their feelings with you. Reach out to your support system. If you lack this support or believe that your feelings are too intense or are becoming worse not better over time, seek out a priest, minister, rabbi, or a mental health professional.

A – Affect. Let yourself fully experience your feelings. Realize that you are not alone. At this time many of us are confronted with a rash of different feelings: sadness, anger, fear. Find comfort in your religious and spiritual beliefs. Visit your church, synagogue, or mosque. Read the wisdom in texts of your own tradition and others. Find comfort in prayer or meditation. In the face of many intense feelings we can easily feel overwhelmed. That is why it is so important to find healthy ways to express your feelings. Don't rely on alcohol or drugs to try to "take the edge off." These chemicals will only make things harder in the long run. Finally, don't be surprised if old losses – ones you thought that you had dealt with and resolved – surface in the midst of your present grief. This is not uncommon. Let yourself feel everything and express these feelings.

L – Let Time Pass. Recovery knows its own time and tempo. We live in a fast-paced world and we expect things to happen immediately. If you have lost a lot, know that you will feel sad for many weeks – perhaps months – to come. During this passage of time, strive for balance between focusing on your loss and taking time away from it. Take a break from cleanup or rebuilding. A walk on the beach, a night at the movies, fishing, playing with your kids, dinner with friends are necessary respites and are like an oasis of cool water to a thirsty traveler.

U – Understand that you are not alone. Together we can and will rebuild. Take a look around you. It's already happening.

S – Structure. As much as possible, keep to a normal schedule. Meet your responsibilities, go to work, mow the lawn, walk your dog. Practice good health habits. Try to sleep on a normal schedule. Eat healthy meals at regular times (even when you don't feel like it). Exercise. Keep yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually strong.

It is my hope that these ideas will help each of us take good care of ourselves and of each other. Remember, we're still standing.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.