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Creating a Strong Family Strengthening Families and Communities in Times of Crisis and Uncertainty

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

The national and international tragedy that unfolded in the wake of the plane crashes at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania affects countless families and communities in America and across the globe.

It has been said that all problems in the world either begin in families or end up in families. The crisis following the plane crashes will cause untold damage to family and community well-being in the months and years to come. Feelings of despair abound, and yet, the impulse to step forward and help in some way is strong.

Working Together Rather than Pulling Apart

The immediate reaction in this country and many others has been to look to each other for solace. Our families come together to watch events develop on television, and an unspeakable sadness grips us. Our friends at work, many of whom are like family to us also, share their grief and we feel closer to each other. The need to lean on each other is strong. Even in the greater community that we share with strangers, there seems to be a more pervasive spirit of common humanity. We seem more solicitous to each other at the supermarket, more willing to offer a kind word and a polite demeanor at the florist.

Are people even kinder and gentler behind the wheel of an automobile? We can only hope.

When the shock of the tragedy wears off, however, we are likely to return to our more cantankerous and very human behaviors. As the government develops its political and military response to the attack, the bond we have created with each other is likely to unravel. Our common grief will be supplanted by hardened individualistic visions of military and political strategy and tactics. The tone of public discussion is likely to become shrill once again.

We all are aware of the pattern: The delicate weave of common humanity in a despairing time is likely to return to the tribal warfare that abounds. We will move back to the more familiar territory of *Us vs. Them*, rather than the more fruitful land of *You and Me*. Lines will be drawn in the sand, and we

will divide up against each other. Americans will be once again separated from each other as the discussion of enormously complex issues comes to a boil. And America will be once again separated from the other countries and cultures of the world, as all scramble to emphasize self-interest over the best interests of the global community.

Apocalyptic thinking is rife. There are those who see this tragedy as the beginning of the end. There are others who see the possibility for a new beginning. Some fear a resurgence of prejudice and bigotry aimed at the newcomers in our own country and those who are different from us in other countries. A few may welcome the chance to cause strife among us, but their voices are not likely to dominate public discussion in this country because we are moving steadily down a path that sees cultural diversity as a strength.

Strong families rise above crisis by working together toward a common goal. Perhaps we can all find a common vision in the world, one that recognizes the universal need for safety, security and positive human connection. Perhaps we can understand both our own personal tragedies that derive directly from the plane crashes, and at the same time understand the global tragedy we all contribute to by not striving in the coming months and years to create a peaceful world community.

We all can contribute to this. Before the days of CNN and round-the-clock and round-the-world reporting and discussion, we left the governing of our country to the politicians. Today, we're all part of the story and contribute in myriad ways to the problem and the solution.

In our families, then, we can be especially sensitive to each other's feelings and needs. In our communities we can strive to connect with each other rather than spending so much energy on winning some kind of self-imposed race we have decided to construct against our competitors. We can reach out, rather than push away.

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