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WOMEN'S SAFETY, FINANCE, & LEGAL FAIR – October 2008

Upsetting Events

- Speakers today have talked about many kinds of safety including safety in your home, safety when you're out, financial and legal safety. Now, as a therapist, I'd like to talk about a different kind -- your mental and emotional safety.
- No aspect of our safety can be taken for granted. Out of the blue you, or someone you love, can have an illness, an accident, a serious financial or legal problem, you might be the victim of a mugging or a scam. If these happen, you can be shaken up, caught off guard and have to deal with an abrupt change in your reality. Your life can change just like that.
- Disasters and loss come in many ways. Some of the big losses are obvious, like losing a spouse or someone very close to you. You could lose that someone totally through death or divorce, or partially, through Alzheimer's, a stroke or other serious illness.
- And then there's financial losses through income or investment changes, as well as material losses such as burglary. Thefts like muggings or burglary can steal your sense of safety as well as your possessions.
- Other losses, such as loss of health, youth, or career, are not so obvious, but can be just as painful and disruptive. In many ways, these not-so-obvious losses can be more difficult to cope with because they don't evoke the sympathy and support of others the way an obvious loss does.

Reactions

Whatever the trauma or loss, there are a variety of reactions you might experience. Some common responses include:

- Feeling shock, numbness and disbelief of what happened
- Feeling fear for the safety of ourselves or loved ones, and anxiety about the future
- Feeling angry and suspicious of others
- Feeling guilty and helpless from thoughts like “why am I okay when others are not” and “if only I had done something more”
- Feelings of grief and sadness
- Loss of faith – in yourself, humanity, even in god
- Flashbacks or recurring memories or sensations of the event
- Physical symptoms like headaches, insomnia, or nausea.

Any one or combination of these symptoms may be considered a normal response to an abnormal situation. Some people respond immediately while others have a delayed reaction, sometimes hours, days, or even weeks later. Some people continue to suffer for a long time while others recover quickly. Everyone is different.

Clinical Depression

It is normal to experience sadness in response to a major loss. *And* it is important to recognize when normal sadness and grief become serious depression. Depression is much more powerful and debilitating than simple sadness.

Some of the signs of clinical depression to watch out for include:

- Ongoing sadness, anxiety or feeling empty inside
- Changes in sleep patterns (sleeping too little *or* too much)
- Changes in eating patterns (this can be *either* reduced appetite and weight loss *or* increased appetite and weight gain)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy
- Restlessness or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Fatigue or lack of energy

- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

If you have symptoms that continue for a long time or are uncomfortably intense, seek professional help. Don't try to tough it out alone.

It can be a crazy world we live in these days. If disaster hits close to home and throws you off balance for a while, it doesn't mean *you've* gone crazy. It just means something crazy has happened in your life. Take time to take care of yourself. There will be good days and bad days and you need to know that sometimes you may feel worse before you feel better. But you *will* feel better. You *can* survive.

Every day there is a little more letting go, a little more healing, gradually creating a new future. The old dream you had of your future has been altered. It is time to build a new dream using the memories and legacy of the past combined with the wisdom and strengths from your present.

Use this healing time to ask yourself questions like:

- What doors do you see opening for you now?
- What new choices can you make?
- What opportunities await you?

Healing and changing old patterns takes work, intention, and awareness of all the possibilities. It takes not letting fear get in the way of moving forward.

What To Do

So what can you do if something disastrous hits close to home?

Here are 10 ideas to help yourself get through it:

- First of all, be gentle with yourself and give yourself time to heal. Remind yourself: This too shall pass. I *can* get through this.
- Postpone any major decisions until the emotional intensity subsides.
- Allow yourself to *feel* your feelings. *And* to express them.
 - Talk about it. Sharing thoughts and feelings helps you heal and connect with others who may have experienced something similar. You can't heal what you don't feel.

- Write about what happened and how you're feeling. Notice when your thoughts all have a doom-and-gloom slant and do a reality check on whether there's not some other possibilities.
- Take good care of yourself physically. It is important to eat well, exercise and get plenty of rest.
- Stay in the Now. Don't waste energy beating yourself up for something in the past or worrying about the thousand "what ifs?" that may or may not ever happen in the future.
- Focus on the positive. Even in the worst of times, there are good things mixed in there somewhere, such as focusing on the kindness and courage of those who helped out and were there for you. Take time to *really* notice what's blooming in your garden or the children playing in the plaza.
- Spend time with others. Isolation and loneliness only make things worse.
- Learn how to ask for help. Women are often far better at giving than receiving help.
- Get back to your usual routines. This helps restore a sense of normalcy. Nurture yourself. Take time for pleasurable and relaxing activities.
- Reach out to others. Helping other people can be a positive and effective way to help yourself heal and restore your sense of faith and hope. Helping others helps you to feel your life has purpose.

Everyone's reaction to loss and trauma is different, but the first thing to bear in mind is that there is no 'just getting over it right now' because like so many other life challenges, getting through it is a process and not an event. You need to give yourself permission to feel. To hold it all in, to act 'brave' all the time, is not healthy.

Good News

Now for the good news. Just your being here, making your home in a new country, tells me you're all braver than the average bear. Plus, you are

women! That really is an advantage. I've noticed that a larger proportion of my grief clients are men than women, and I think that it's because many men don't have the variety of ways to deal with grief that women do.

- Women allow themselves to cry. Men often don't. They may see crying as a sign of weakness, but it's really a healthy release.
- Women are more willing to talk about their feelings, men find it harder to do that.
- Women more often have a social network, a support group. Men often don't. Look around you today, all of you women who are here with your friends or who have made new friends with the woman sitting next to you today whom you'd never met before. Women talk.
- This Lake Chapala area is one of the best places to be a single woman. Not the best place to meet a man, agreed. But there are a lot of strong, single women here. It's easy to make friends.
- If you've suffered a loss of any kind, don't hide yourself away. Everyone I talk with who is lonely thinks she's the only one feeling that way. She's not. It's a more common problem than you might think. And the way to stop being lonely is to get out there, meet people, get involved. There's so much to do here. Groups, workshops, classes. Focus on an existing interest or develop some new ones.
- You can do things here as a woman and feel comfortable doing them, things you probably wouldn't do anywhere else. Women here can dance together, can go to a movie or the theatre on their own. We have time for one another. There is a class or a group for just about everything, and if you're financially strapped, at least you'll be warm.

I'd like to end with a quote from Helen Keller. She said,

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all. Security does not exist in nature, nor do people as a whole experience it.”

May your life be a daring adventure, and may you have the courage and skills to get through it all with grace.