

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Talking with Kids About War
www.abouthhealth.com

JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. If you're feeling preoccupied with the uncertainty in our world and the potential for war, you're certainly not alone. Millions of Americans are reporting feeling stressed and anxious and depressed. On this edition of *About Health* TV we'll talk about how vulnerable so many of us feel, what we can do to feel better, and how we can help our children through these anxious times. Dr. Glenn Saxe is the chairman of the department of child psychiatry at Boston Medical Center, and he's my guest. Dr. Saxe is also one of the directors of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, which is a federal initiative. Dr. Saxe, thanks for coming in to talk about this subject. So many people everywhere we go are talking about the stress level that they're feeling, with so much uncertainty, and I'm sure that you hear it every day in your practice as well.

DR. SAXE: Yes. These are extraordinary times right now. People are very, very anxious and worried. We hear news about terrorism and terrorist threats. We hear news about an upcoming war, and people are wondering what it all means for them, wondering how to behave, what to do, how to take care of themselves and their family, and this is very difficult for people.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, it's an extraordinary time. Is there anything that you can compare it to in our history?

DR. SAXE: I can't. You read the history books. I wasn't old enough to be around for the last world war, which was obviously a hugely anxious time, but with the threat of terrorism coming to our country, with 9/11 happening only less than two years ago, it really is unprecedented. I look around both at people I know in my personal life and people who I work with, and people are very worried and anxious.

JEANNE BLAKE: How are you seeing it manifest, not just in the children with whom you work, but in the adults, your colleagues and your friends?

DR. SAXE: Well, I think there's a wariness that people have, a sense of uncertainty, a sense of not knowing what's coming next. I sense a certain apprehension and irritability that people have.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, that's kind of what I was getting to. We all feel the uncertainty, but I'm wondering about the different ways that you're seeing it manifest in people that otherwise are pretty reserved.

DR. SAXE: Well, what happens, I think, when people are under stress is, people's ways of coping and ways of being get stressed, and so habits people have that they've used to manage emotion, may intensify: drinking, anxiety, people who get angry get more angry. It just pulls for people's coping mechanisms to get frayed.

JEANNE BLAKE: And also, when we first spoke shortly after 9/11, and day in and day out there maybe have been some periods of time last spring when we didn't have this preoccupation where we were able to get a little bit of distance, but in reality it's been a year and a half of huge up-levels of stress for people in this country. And as you said, I think people are getting wary of that, wary from that.

DR. SAXE: The news is very, very scary. It's extraordinarily frightening for people. People who saw the images of the planes going into the towers, people kept getting news flashes of terrorism coming, people are getting information about an upcoming war and what that might mean, and there is, I think, a cumulative effect of this type of information on people. It's become very difficult for people.

JEANNE BLAKE: You know, most of the people in my world talk pretty openly about the levels of stress, and I live between New York and Boston and so, frankly, I have to say that all of my friends feel a very high level of stress. And I was very interested to talk with people on the streets today who didn't seem to be tapping into that. Let's listen.

[VIDEO CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: I love that man's attitude, one day at a time, and if we all could live like that we wouldn't even be doing this program. But everyone does have a different reaction.

DR. SAXE: Yes. I think people have lots and lots of different ways of coping with adversity. As we were talking about, these are adverse times, there is a lot of stress. People are resilient also, even those we've talked about before. People are wary. They've developed ways of coping and ways of being. That man who said, You have to live one day at a time, the other person who said, What will be will be, is a way of coping, and that probably serves them very well.

JEANNE BLAKE: But for others to say that, basically what will be will be, is an admission that you have no control, and there's a tremendous collective feeling of helplessness in this nation right now. I think that is part of what feeds people's anxiety.

DR. SAXE: Well, people are very, very different and the way that people cope and adjust to these types of events are really individualized. For example, if you're the type of person who needs a certain amount of control, there may be other ways that help coping.

JEANNE BLAKE: Such as?

DR. SAXE: Well, for example, some people become news junkies about this. Some people need to know what's going on and that, in a way, helps them manage.

JEANNE BLAKE: But yet for others, I mean I really have to say that in the last day or two – and I am a news junkie. I mean, obviously this is what I do for my living, and I love the news, but I've really made a decision to not listen to quite so much.

DR. SAXE: Right. And that's the downside of needing to know. That's the downside of the way of coping by controlling it through information, is that it can be too much. I think that one general rule of thumb about coping mechanisms and coping strategy is moderation. Our coping strategy that is too much, out of control, either not wanting to know, not wanting to think about it, has its important downsides.

JEANNE BLAKE: That can be a very, very good thing, though.

DR. SAXE: It can be a good and a bad thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. Do you think that when we talk about having some modicum of control, the whole being prepared ... we don't have to go the duct tape route, and we've heard plenty about duct tape. But I do think a family having a plan, a what they'll do, who they'll call if something were to happen can help people feel a little bit better.

DR. SAXE: I think that's absolutely true, that there's a general feeling of helplessness that people have, and plans and actions and doing something, such as if something bad happened, exactly as you're saying. Who would they call, where would we meet, what would we do. They're all helpful

things to do. I think it's important with a general climate of helplessness for people to do things that might help them cope.

JEANNE BLAKE: But Dr. Saxe, there are people who, as we indicated before, I mean, I talked with people who seem to be doing better today on the street than others. Who are those ... is there a profile of the person that's having a tougher time right now?

DR. SAXE: Well, it's hard to fully know that, but there are people who may be more vulnerable to what is going on, people who may have a trauma history.

JEANNE BLAKE: Any kind of trauma?

DR. SAXE: Yes. I mean, the general theme of what's going on now is helplessness and feeling out of control, and if you in your own life happen to have an experience where you were hurt or felt very, very much out of control, then what's going on in the country can really pull for those types of feelings.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why is that? I mean, it's got to be something in the brain that feels familiar. I mean, why does that happen?

DR. SAXE: Well, it's a very complicated question. I think that what gets set up for people through a trauma history is a certain sensitivity to threat, and there are clearly brain systems that process threat. And what ends up happening with post-traumatic stress disorder, which is the psychiatric disorder related to traumatic events, is that these types of threat-response systems really get what's called potentiated or sensitized. And so today, when there is all this news about threat, this can really pull for those types of systems in the brain, and I think that's just true.

JEANNE BLAKE: That actually makes a lot of sense. And also, I think a lot of people are worried about children. Children are resilient, but there's still a lot of concern about what they're picking up, what they're registering, how much they understand, and what they might be carrying forth into the rest of their lives.

DR. SAXE: I think that's really, really important right now. For kids, safety is so important, and security, feeling like they're in an environment where they're cared for, where they're going to be safe, where their loved ones, their family is going to be safe, and information that a kid might hear either through the news or through hearing someone talk, can get really scary about whether they're safe.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's listen to what a couple of people said about what they think they would tell their children, and also what some young people said.

[VIDEO CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: My heart breaks for the kids who have parents that are going off to war. I mean, we might not go to war, but we probably will. That really tugged on my heart, to hear her talk about her very real worry about her dad.

DR. SAXE: Right. The war or potential war is very, very close to that little girl, and these are kids that are very vulnerable when we think about safety, as I was talking of before, and security. She knows her father is going to be under great threat, and this is very, very hard for a kid.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think it's really hard, then, to, as the other people that we talked to said, stay positive, don't go the negative route, stay calm. I mean, I believe stay calm, but I believe you also have to be very honest.

DR. SAXE: I think honesty is very important. Kids are amazing at knowing when you're not being honest or authentic. On the other hand, there's honest and there's honest, and I think what's good for kids is to be authentic but also know what they need. And different kids at different ages need different things. So, even though I might be frightened personally, I know that that fear may be very, very unsettling for my child. I might describe fear for them, but I'm going to be very, very careful about how I am in front of them, and I think it's very important. Kids pick up cues from the adults in their life, and I think it is important when you're talking about this to stay calm, to really reassure kids, to help them know that you will do everything you can to make them safe, to express the seriousness of this. And I think that you can't lie about that. These are very serious times. On the other hand, we need to do what we can to reassure kids.

JEANNE BLAKE: We've got some tips for parents that we're going to put across the bottom of the screen, and I'd just like to have you talk about each of those. The first one is encourage children to express their feelings. This, of course, goes back to the idea that we have to quickly, while we're talking, let children talk and ask them what they've heard and what they're thinking about, so we can get inside their head. So often we don't know and we think we do.

DR. SAXE: I think this is very, very important. Again, in these scary times it's very important for kids not to be alone with their feelings. And I think that families who have open communication, where kids know that they can talk with their parents and family members about their feelings, is really, really important. I think it's very, very important these days for family members, for parents to be very mindful about how their kids are doing, being on top of their kids' emotional state, are their children shut down, are their children distant, and to ask and to not presuppose what the kid is feeling.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, that's great, because you've just gone on to the second tip, which is Ask what they've seen or heard. And I think that's so important, because we so often assume that we know what they're thinking, and as we know, children of all ages can have a very, very distorted view of what's going on.

DR. SAXE: Right. And there's a lot of information out there, some of it true and some of it not so true. Kids hear things, see things, and interpret it in lots of ways, and for parents it's very, very, very important to know what type of information your child has. And then it's as important to know how your child is interpreting this information. Some kids may feel that, you know, terrorism is in their neighborhood and that their neighborhood is in imminent risk to be blown up. A parent needs to know that. A parent needs to be able to talk to their child to give them accurate information.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Saxe, you already touched on the third one, Assure your children you'll take care of them. That can't be said often enough.

DR. SAXE: Kids need to know this.

JEANNE BLAKE: How would you say it?

DR. SAXE: I would say something like, "I know these are scary times. We're talking about the war. You've heard about terrorism. I will do everything I can to keep you safe. Our country is doing everything we can to help people be safe, and I am doing everything I can to keep you safe."

JEANNE BLAKE: And the next one is assure children you'll help them cope. And what I like about that is that it is honest, that if something bad happens we'll all cope together. It's so honest.

DR. SAXE: Yes. I think that's very important, to help kids know that no matter what, you're going to be there to help them, that you are there for them just as you've been there for them before. And I think

in this type of discussion it's important to remind kids about other times when other things have happened when they've had to cope, and their history with you as a parent and being together with them. The worst thing when a kid is dealing with a big-time emotion like fear of safety, life and limb, is to feel that they're alone.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. And that actually is the next step, and it is Remind children of times that they've shown courage, and in a sense, that's really empowering your child. I don't often like to use that word, but I think it works in this situation.

DR. SAXE: I think it's true. Kids are resilient; people are resilient. People can cope with lots and lots of things.

JEANNE BLAKE: Even a young child can learn to respect themselves and trust themselves if they remember, "Yeah, I did a good job dealing with that the last time."

DR. SAXE: Yes. And a kid may not remember that, but just reminding them that they have ways of managing their fears, ways of managing events, that they are not quite as helpless as perhaps they think, is a very important message.

JEANNE BLAKE: And what about the final tip, Remind children that our government is intact and doing what it can to protect us. How would you say that to a child?

DR. SAXE: I think it's really important for kids to know and to have a sense that the authority figures in their life are in control and have their best interests at heart, and that there is a structure and organization to their world. And I think it's very important for kids to know that their leaders, their authority figures, are doing everything they can to keep them safe.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think it's important to remind parents that even their young children can pick up on their nonverbal and their verbal cues. We mentioned earlier to try to be careful of how you talk about your own anxieties, but even very young children can pick up ... one of my friends has a two-and-a-half-year-old, and I was with them for dinner the other night. And everything I said the little girl repeated, and it was actually cute. It wasn't in an annoying way. I said ... I'll make something up ... "Will you pass the butter, please," and she said, "Will you pass the butter, please." She was mimicking me, and it reminded me of how our children absorb everything and they feel the tone of a conversation

as well. I think it bears repeating.

DR. SAXE: Well, it's exactly as you're saying. Kids of almost any age are incredibly socially attuned to the caregivers in their life, and so it is very important to be mindful of what you're communicating, how you're feeling when you talk about this, what the kid is hearing in your conversations with other adults or older children, what's on the television set. I think it's very important. I also think ... you had mentioned little kids ... it is important to be mindful of the type of information that kids need at different ages. A discussion for an adolescent or what an adolescent might be able to manage through seeing television is very, very different than a very young child, and we really need to be very careful about that.

JEANNE BLAKE: There are some really good websites that have age-appropriate information, and we will be linking to those websites and offering them on our website. But you bring up a really important point. I'm wondering, when is it the right time to not turn off the television all the time? I mean, I would always vote for, around small children, to just keep the television off, because they don't have the ability to digest and translate everything that they're hearing, and I think everything has the potential for something scary for young children.

DR. SAXE: Yes. I think the television is a source of information that a parent has no control over. We don't know what is going to be shown, what type of image comes onto the screen, what type of discussion happens. I think with young children it is protection mode. I think the TV should be off. I don't think the news is appropriate, especially now, for very young children. For older children, I think there's more discretion, but I think these days it's important that if the news is on with an older child, to be with your kid, to know what information they're getting, and to be able to talk about what they're seeing with them.

JEANNE BLAKE: I had one father say, "You know, I wouldn't bring up this subject, but if my child wants to talk about it, I'm ready to do that." And yet, these are children who go to school and their friends are talking about it. I think that we can't protect our children no matter what age they are from the comments about this right now. Do you disagree?

DR. SAXE: It's as we were saying before.

JEANNE BLAKE: You should bring it up with your child?

DR. SAXE: Ask.

JEANNE BLAKE: And how would you do that? How would you say at the end of the day ... how do you bring up the subject safely without scaring them more?

DR. SAXE: You know, I think that kids have a lot of information, and a lot of information that we don't know they have, just as you were saying. And I might say, depending on the age of the kid ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Of course, yes.

DR. SAXE: ... but to a school-age kid, "Have you heard anything about what's going on in the world?" and usually you're going to get, "Yes." And then it's going to be, "Well, what have you heard?" And then, depending on what they say, there will be a different discussion about it. But I think an open-ended, empathic, interested question ... I think what you do with a question like that is to communicate your interest and willingness to know what's going on inside of your kid.

JEANNE BLAKE: And then falling back on the basics that we talked about, the reassuring them that you'll be there and you'll keep them as safe as possible, and the various things we discussed.

DR. SAXE: And depending on their age, not to give them more information than they can really handle.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Saxe, thank you. I hope we won't have to get together soon to talk again about a tragedy or disaster in this country.

DR. SAXE: I agree with that.

JEANNE BLAKE: But I do thank you for your expertise today.

DR. SAXE: My pleasure.

JEANNE BLAKE: And we'd like to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake and I'll see you next time.

About Health TV is sponsored in part by

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation.
Improving health through medical education,
clinical research and community service.