

Coping With Stress and Surviving Challenging Times

by Alan Cohen

What better setting could there be for writing an article on ongoing stress!

Place — Middle East (Israel's northern border with Lebanon to be precise).

Time — the start of "War with Iraq II" following a long build up of military activity and an even longer period of uncertainty in the region.

Mood — mixed. People are fed up with war and violence, but live in the hope that one last action, one final decision on the part of the leaders, one step in the right direction, and things will at least start to look up, but in the meantime . . .

The Community Stress Prevention Center (CSPC) has been looking at the effects of ongoing stress on toddlers, school-children, and adults for over 20 years now. What started as a project with a small group of schoolteachers in a school in Kiryat Shmona in the north of Israel has turned into an international concern. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s Kiryat Shmona was subject to regular Katyusha rocket bombing from across the border.

When the young educational psychologist Mooli Lahad (now professor of Dramatherapy and CEO of the CSPC at Tel Hai College) suggested to a school principal that the psychological needs of teachers and students should be considered, not only their physical needs, he was met with simple refusal. The principal claimed that they all knew what to do and how to do it (run to the shelters) and then, once back in the classroom, things continued as normal. The story goes that at that point in the discussion someone slammed a door and several classes ran together straight for the shelter, screaming and shouting. There was room to admit that nerves were frayed and that something could be improved.

The first small group of teachers met and together with Mooli they devised a series of ten lessons leading up to how to

prepare for and act in a confined space under bombardment. The success of this program was proven, unfortunately rather soon, as once again the children were sheltering from more rockets. Those children and teachers who had partaken in the planning and the lessons showed less signs of disturbance than other classes. They were ready with activities to do in the shelters, they cried and shouted less, they worked together in group activities more, and were more helpful to each other. This provided the impetus for much wider ranging work in the community.

The next group to be focused upon, and indeed the focus of our attention in this article, were kindergarten-aged children aged three to six and their teachers. A similar process was followed in producing a booklet for kindergarten teachers containing information, exercises, and stories. This booklet was called "A protected kindergarten" — it sounds better in Hebrew — "Gan moogan"! Over the years we have been working with organizations — businesses, local authorities, and entire communities in planning how to be ready for stressful incidents, emergencies, and disasters. Unfortunately, over this period of time, some 23 years, we have also had much direct experience in intervention following emergencies and disasters of different scales and in many different places worldwide.

Let us look at the situation in the spring of 2003 and examine what we know about helping young children and their care-



Alan Cohen is a psychology graduate of Manchester and Aston Universities in Great Britain. He moved to Israel in 1984 and currently is the research coordinator for the Community Stress Prevention Center (CSPC) in Kiryat Shmona, on Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Together with CSPC director Prof. Mooli Lahad, Alan has edited a series of books on Community Stress Prevention and has written a number of articles. He has made several international presentations

including lecturing at the 2001 World Forum on Early Care and Education, in Athens on "The Effects of Growing Up Under Stress of War and Terror." Alan is trained in psychological trauma treatment and is an EMDRIA Institute Approved Facilitator in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. He is married to special education occupational therapist, Katia, and they have four children aged between 19-11. He copes with occupational and situational stress in Israel with a well-honed sense of humor, excellent powers of denial, and a belief that it will all work out well in the end.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

givers cope with stress that lasts for an extended length of time. I would like to note at this point that the emphasis in all our training activities is on the fact that humans from birth are born copers. They do their best to manage. They survive. Young children usually remain in remarkably good spirits in tough times. It does not mean that young children don't realize something is wrong. They catch on very quickly. However, just because some of them don't show signs of anxiety, it doesn't mean all is well and we can ignore the problems.

Even within a group of very young children we can identify different styles of coping with adversity. There will be those who are very aware of what's going on (their parents talk about it openly, have the television on freely, and encourage discussion). There will be those who have some vague idea that something is not right in their world; there may be disruptions to routine, there are worrying tones of voice, and there are messages floating around above them, without a parent or caregiver ever having taken the time to explain directly to the children what is going on. And, of course, there will be those who are blissfully unaware that anything out of the ordinary is taking place. This could of course be the routine to which they have become accustomed from birth, or indeed they may be dreamers in their own happy world.

To add to the complexity of the picture the teachers and caregivers themselves have their own personal coping styles. Some may address problems by learning the nature of the difficulty and coming to grips with it. Others may seek outside professional help. A third sort might prefer to ignore the problem in the hope it will go away — or reason that time helps everything and their belief in a just society will help them weather the storm.

One particular feature of work in a kindergarten, definitely in Israel but most likely in many places worldwide, is the fact that kindergarten staff are usually on their own for many hours. Sure, they can call people on the phone, they can meet colleagues after work, they can attend training sessions from time to time; but in the end, it is usually just two or three of them and the children. And in an emergency and disaster that is when they feel most alone. Even the thought that they will be with just one or two other adults when a crisis happens is not reassuring. So, how does one cope with stress and survive challenging times?

This is where our Integrative Coping Model "BASIC Ph," devised by Prof. Lahad, (1993) is important. BASIC Ph is a summary of the different coping styles mentioned earlier,

each letter representing a different coping style: **B**eliefs, **A**ffect, **S**ocial, **I**magination, **C**ognition, and **P**hysical. These styles can be strengthened and added to. If we are aware of our own coping modes and those of the children we work with then we can best help them under pressure. In times of calm or even in challenging times of uncertainty, we can develop some of those coping skills that lay dormant.

The first step is one of troubleshooting. What are the likely things that you as a caregiver have to plan for in your environment? In Israel currently, we are talking about possible prolonged stays in a small, enclosed area — an air-raid shelter or security room; how to relate to a terror attack within the community or how to put on a gas mask. We are also talking about prolonged uncertainty — where is a safe place to be? Will my father/brother be safe when they do military reserves duty? Each item must be translated into age appropriate terms and explained to the children and acted upon.

Let us now consider for a moment what the psychological threats on your community are — the result of accidents, everyday illness, terror, natural hazards? How does this relate to the children in your care? How can you best prepare them for these possibilities without scaring them unduly, and if possible help them learn some useful lessons for life along the way?

Once we have some idea what we wish to prepare for we can start thinking about our plan of action. Let's take a closer look at the model "BASIC Ph" and see how it can help us plan, for example, for an expected tornado. The plans, of course, are generalizable to many other life events. Each letter represents a particular mode of coping that we can illustrate in the kindergarten.

■ **B — Beliefs and Values.** Help young children clarify what we believe in as a society, as a group, or as individuals. Activities can include writing to people in need showing we care, telling a heroic story — with older children it is possible to make use of stories of older family members (like grandfather or grandmother) or other exemplary figures who overcame different obstacles in their lives.

■ **A — Affect and Emotions.** Encourage the expression of feelings through pictures. For example, cut out from newspapers a few pictures related to the events that you are coping with (not pictures that are too difficult to look at) and some unrelated photos of people or animals. Ask each child to choose a picture that he/she wants to talk about.

Each child in turn will explain how he made his choice. A conversation will develop. Let it flow.

Express feelings with drawing and pasting — according to the age and ability of the children. It is important to remind them and ourselves that “It is permitted to be afraid — but it is imperative to keep on going.”

■ **S — Social Roles, Society’s Resources.** Assume even the tiniest responsibility. This will enhance the child’s feeling of having control and will make them feel a useful part of the group that is getting organized. Simply being part of a group and having others around is a great help for the child who is socially oriented. (This is a major problem for the teachers who lack this support in times of pressure).

■ **I — Imagination.** Creative thinking, relaxation, guided imagery. Transform a threatening situation into an adventure. Children are naturally gifted in this area, and these gifts can be enhanced to create far-reaching solutions to all the problems. Humor — what is the funny side of all this?

■ **C — Cognition.** Knowledge, facts. Make a chart of things we know for sure, things that are partially known or uncertain, and unknown things. See how they move over time (hopefully from the uncertain to the certain) as the situation progresses. Make lists, explain what the children need to know, but with the right degree of details — not too much to frighten — but not too little to leave scary voids in their picture.

■ **Ph — Physical.** Do things, keep busy. This means having a list of activities ready for keeping the children occupied (within a confined area); games they like to play, special books for coloring, puppets already packed in a special, accessible box especially for emergencies.

Thus as you can see the BASIC Ph is an integrative model that can serve us in:

■ Understanding child behavior from the a point of view of resiliency and coping;

■ Analyzing children’s and adult’s reactions in times of disaster as a “communication of the way they survive” — and so giving us guidelines how best to respond to them; and

■ As a blueprint for prevention and intervention programs for professionals and parents to help the child and the family plan for and cope with complex situations.

Within the framework of everyday activities many of the ideas we suggest are known to trained professionals and experienced parents. The beauty of the BASIC Ph model is its ability to generate more ideas and match these ideas with the temperament and nature of the child, the situation and the caregiver. Emergency plans are vital for all at all times. Please let me know how you choose to implement some of the ideas you may have gleaned here and any more that you add to this repertoire. You can e-mail me: alcohen@telhai.ac.il.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Stressed?: Are some children in your program under stress? Do these children show signs of anxiety? Cohen raises the important issue that children often don’t show external signs of stress even though stress is impacting them. Explore this idea with teachers, considering carefully whether children might need intervention and support even though they show no external signs of concern.

BASIC Ph: The model discussed in this article suggests that coping with stress can be mediated by considering six components of coping. Using this model, work with teachers to identify strategies for coping for both individual children and classroom groups.

Planning ahead matters!: Cohen suggests that planning ahead can ameliorate many of situations that cause stress for children. Take his idea of coping with a tornado alert (or a similar naturally occurring phenomena in your geographic area) and work through how children might cope, ways teachers might help children manage and endure the stress, and ideas for applying the six coping ideas of the model.