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## Coping: What Does That Mean in the Wake of September 11th?

by

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**W**ithin minutes after the events of 9/11 began to unfold, our office, along with representatives from several other key offices on campus, was summoned to the President's Office. After that meeting, we positioned ourselves to be as available as possible for the Dartmouth community. There were tears. There was anger. But most of all, there was a pall of disbelief—shock, if you will. How could this happen? What would happen next?

Webster's Dictionary defines coping as "to fight or contend (with) successfully". In the initial hours and days of the tragedy, contending meant many things to many people. The first priority was accounting for those most important to us, and that did not necessarily mean contacting those who resided or worked in New York. We were phoning our family members in Arizona, overseas, or even calling our child's local school. It really did not matter whether it was rational or not—we needed to be reassured. Then, more concerns: "Could we fly safely? Could I trust the person sitting across from me? Will my children be called to war?" And as the days went on, an even more incomprehensible question: "Can I open my mail?"

The EAP was asked to speak with a number of departments on campus, including a group that happened to be in New York on business at the time of the tragedy. Rushing in to console someone immediately after experiencing a tragedy is a daunting task, and there needs to be a profound respect for whatever means an individual uses to "contend" with a tragic situation.

We all use a variety of coping strategies, and some work much better than others. Humor may be your way of coping, but completely inappropriate for the person working with you across the hallway.

Finding solace through a religious practice or setting may seem odd to some, yet crucial to others. Individuals may find that the services of a mental health professional can be comforting; for others it very well may not be necessary—and should not be forced upon them. One of the most effective healing agents that we experienced was Dartmouth's commitment to offer open lectures and discussions. This allowed participants to gain knowledge of the experience of others during these troubled times—and, as a result, the understanding of how these events affect us all in some universal way.

Our office was profoundly moved in a very unique way by a number of the people who sought our services several weeks after 9/11. They had purposely scheduled appointments several weeks into the future, wanting to ensure that those who may have been directly affected by the tragedy would have ample opportunity to make use of our services. The Dartmouth community was truly concerned about the Dartmouth community.

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In summary, we would like folks to remember that the key to coping with what life sometimes presents to us depends on a unique blend of several entities, including experience, tradition, commitment, and determination. And whether we run laps around Occum Pond, or watch 12 hours of "I Love Lucy" reruns, sooner or later we must come together as a community to "contend" with the stressor.

For some of us, we need to rely on the community to contend with ourselves, when the stressor is the manner in which we cope.