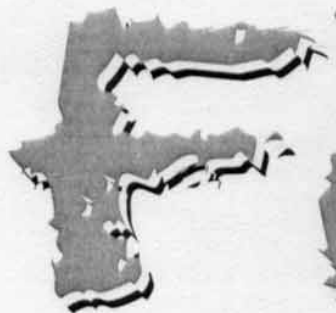


*"Rock climbers and long-distance ocean swimmers will tell you it isn't the mountain or the water that kills — it is the panic."*

—Gavin DeBecker

# FIGHT *the* National



by W. Hock Hochheim

**"H**ello. I am an American, and I live in fear," is an introduction you are not likely to hear because there are no support or therapy groups for one of the biggest epidemics facing our country. Instead, the disease reveals itself in personal conversations like:

*"I am afraid to walk at night."*

*"I am afraid of that guy at work."*

*"I am afraid to send my kids to school."*

Fear is a national commonality. Security systems, uniformed guards, metal detectors, car alarms, handgun permits, pepper spray,



# EPIDEMIC

bodyguards, the demands and expectations placed upon our criminal justice system, all speak to an intimidated national personality that is uneasy, even scared. Counselors all too frequently see the results of untreated fear in their offices in the form of patient neurosis or even psychosis. Police officers — long considered "street-corner politicians" of our government — work in this arena on a daily basis. As a result, they have learned that there is more fear in the United States than crime. Fear manifests itself in the individual's daily quality of life, affects how we as Americans work, shop, raise our children, recreate, drive and even sleep at night.

Considering the significant hold fear has gained over our culture recently, mental

health professionals and law enforcement officers alike need to give serious thought to why we, as a culture, are so afraid; should we be afraid; and what can we do about the national fear epidemic?

Since the late 1980s, a virtual revolution has occurred in U.S. policing. Something called community-oriented policing has swept the enforcement branch of the criminal justice system. It has reshaped municipal, county and state police agency mission statements, bringing with it terms like "improve the quality of life" and "create an environment free of fear," all a far cry from the gangbusters concept usually associated with police work.

Community surveys show a disproportionate fear of crime far greater than actual crime itself. The FBI's national Uniform Crime Reports reveals a general downward trend in crime over the last few years, yet perceived crime has become a new law enforcement catchword. Agencies espousing community-oriented policing often spend more time fighting perceived crime than actual crime with projects like block parties, safety courses, neighborhood watches and aggressive crime prevention teams. Once asked to "take a bite out of crime," now officers are dispatched to "take a bite out of fear!"

What has helped create these national perceived fears? Violent TV shows, movies and books. A distrust of the government. The modern nature of news and technology has clearly brought us as a nation to the nervous edge. News has become a 24-hour a day, in your face, exhaustive quest for ratings, and sensationalizing crime news always fits the bill. A recent *Time* magazine study revealed that on a slow news day, 75 percent of our country's television news led with a violent crime story.

*"The very fact that you fear something is solid evidence that it is not happening. Fear summons powerful predictive resources that tell us what might come next."*

We now live in a global village setting. A Chicago rapist is featured on a Mayberry R.F.D. television set, and suddenly that night a rural door is locked for the first time ever in a small, country town virtually free of crime. Couple that with their own local neighborhood problems, and it's easy to see how fear and worry can tug on America's nervous system.

Fear. Worry. Panic. They all can distract, debilitate and cripple to extremes. To effectively address the issue, counselors and law enforcement agents, must embark upon treatment for this national malady using the similar principles of:

- Education.
- Reason.
- Relaxation.

Education plays a crucial part in eliminating fear. Victims of fear need to know that statistics deem it unlikely that they will experience crime firsthand. Also, it's important to realize that in a crisis situation, rather than helping, fear hinders response time.

"True fear is a survival signal that sounds only in the presence of danger," says Gavin

DeBecker in "The Gift of Fear." This is the fear that causes a woman to leave her abusive spouse, the electrician to avoid high-powered lines and the teenager to pass on the car ride with an intoxicated friend. "Yet unwarranted fear has assumed a power over us that it holds over no other creature on earth."<sup>1</sup>

"Often you may predict violent behavior by paying attention to the subtle and sometimes blatant signals of intuition," DeBecker says. "You can refuse to be a victim."

In most cases, "The very fact that you fear something is solid evidence that it is not happening. Fear summons powerful predictive resources that tell us what might come next."

Should that front door be locked in Mayberry, N.C.? Probably. Should the owner sit up all night with a shotgun draped across her lap waiting for the Chicago rapist? No. That is unreasonable behavior based on perceived crime.

Today's community cops are dispatched to neighborhoods armed with crime statistics and prevention strategies to lessen perceived crime. They subtly ask the question, "Is it reasonable to believe that this crime will happen to you and your family?" Officers and counselors alike may soothe individual nervous systems by telling people that the

real odds and statistics are in their favor. Education, step-by-step problem-solving and preparation build confidence, and *confidence lessens fear*.

Relaxation exists on the other end of the spectrum from panic — the worst enemy to survival. Mental health counselors can teach a blend of thought-control and deep breathing that brings about relaxation. This relaxed state allows an individual to utilize their best intuitive skills in a crisis situation. Counselors, like officers of the '90s, might console their patients by asking them to assess what is factually occurring in their communities ... and then encouraging them to take a big... deep... national breath. ▼

#### References

1. DeBecker, Gavin, "The Gift of Fear," Little, Brown and Company (1997).

**W. Hock Hochheim** is a 23-year police veteran, 17 of those years spent as an investigator working crimes ranging from serial murder to theft. Author of three books, he currently tours the country teaching self-protection strategies and techniques.



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