

The Psychobiology of Fear
Dealing with Terrorists Threats and Their Biological Warfare
Mario E. Martinez, Psy.D.

Although the threat of biological weapons against our country should be taken seriously, there is much we can do to keep our immune system in the best shape to fight germs.

Anthrax is a bacterium that has always been with us. Terrorists "weaponize" it to make it more lethal than it is found in nature by modifying it to spread easier and more effectively. Anthrax is usually found in farm animals and just like the HIV virus, it is the most damaging when your immune system is weak.

We know from research in psychoneuroimmunology that feelings of helplessness weaken immune function but a sense of empowerment strengthens it. Selfish intolerance reduces natural killer cells (NK) that fight viruses while righteous anger increases these immune system protector cells. Setting appropriate boundaries increases t cells (immune cells that orchestrate and control immune responses) and letting others walk all over you decreases them. Acts of cynicism decrease IgA 's (antibodies that fight upper respiratory viruses) and compassion increases them.

Now lets translate what we know about the immune and belief systems to protect us during times of infamy.

The words we use to describe a situation affect our immune responses. The word "tragedy" implies sadness and promotes helplessness. The word "terrorism" promotes fear. The word "event" sanitizes the action and promotes indifference. The word "infamy" however, triggers righteous anger and action against evil.

Living in fear of the unknown disrupts our daily rituals that ground us psychologically and keep us healthy. Taking action to be reasonably cautious without giving up our joy maintains healthy immune function.

Feeling we are victims of forces that can inevitably destroy us creates a state of chronic alarm that suppresses immune function, whereas assessing what we can do to fight those who wish to destroy us triggers a state of righteous anger that enhances immune function. Using acts of infamy as opportunities to assess how we neglect those we love is a powerful tool to fight fear.

Commitments to healthy living and increasing our faith in ethical behavior strengthen our "spiritual backbone".

Redefining how we describe events with labels that promote helplessness to those that trigger empowerment, can take a fearful reaction and inspire an ordinary person to perform extraordinary deeds.

Daily relaxation, meditation, pondering or prayer can promote immune function and reduce fear.

To deny anger and suppress your feelings of aggression toward acts of infamy, weaken natural protection against illnesses and germs.

To deny fear during acts of infamy is as destructive as suppressing anger.

What to do with this information?

Use the acts of infamy of September 11th 2001 to acknowledge your vulnerabilities and your strengths. Perception of an event determines our immune reaction to that event. Continue to live in joy; reconnect with those you love; reduce your intolerance to insignificant events; increase your righteous anger toward those who want to destroy you and your family; love and protect your country from foreign and domestic enemies and increase the life style that enhances what you ethically believe. Do not hold on to negative emotions for longer than needed to resolve them. Forgive those who hurt you while taking protective action to prevent being hurt again. You should note however, that forgiveness is an act that enhances immune function only after experiencing righteous anger and taking proper action to protect yourself against further assaults.

Dr. Mario Martinez is a clinical neuropsychologist who specializes in how personal beliefs affect our biology. He is a member of Caroline's Expert Forum and answers questions related to the psychology of health. He lectures worldwide and is a visiting professor of clinical psychology at several universities in South America and the United States. His most requested lecture from his specialty in psychoneuroimmunology is titled: "Does The Immune System Have Morals?" For more information on Dr. Martinez, please visit Caroline's Experts Forum at <http://www.myss.com/myss/Experts.asp> or visit his website at www.biocognitive.com