



# The Politics of Hope Ezine

## *“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



### **Free-Floating Political Anxiety**

By Donna Zajonc April, 2008

A “free-floating anxiety disorder” is the label psychologists use when their patients describe anxiety that exists for no apparent reason. Unlike anxiety that is based upon a specific phobia or panic attack, it is unclear why the person feels anxious. All that they know is that they are waiting for “the next shoe to drop” that will add to the chaos in their lives.

For many in our country, September 11, 2001 is the fault-line that triggered the inner quaking that seems to be ever present. **The last time this level of free-floating anxiety was present was in the 1960’s following the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy.**

This free-floating anxiety describes what is happening in our public world right now. Many of us are feeling anxious about a long list of issues. In fact the list is so long it is difficult to pinpoint even the top two or three concerns.

An on-going war has caused a deep level of anxiety for most of us, no matter what our position on the Iraqi war. I realize it is a war against terrorism yet I am not exactly sure who the terrorists are. Who should I be afraid of?

For some, the recent mortgage melt-down has certainly caused a state of anxiety. The stock market climbs Pikes Peak one day and plummets into Death Valley the next. I frequently wonder if my modest pension is safe.

If you are closely watching the Clinton/Obama race, you may be anxious about whether your candidate will say or do something that will cause them to “crash and burn.” Or you may simply be a faithful Democrat worrying about the party in-fighting and its affect on the fall election or a Republican who wonders about the state of your party.

Oh yes, how about climate change. Any worries there? Am I driving the wrong car or using the right light bulbs?

Each day there is a new research that says, “Don’t eat this. Don’t eat that.” Medicine you think is safe, isn’t. Dog food from China could poison your best friend and certainly don’t buy toys for your kids anymore.

Should I go on? The list is longer than this – much longer. **Anxiety is everywhere these days and it is affecting all of us---possibly more than we know.**

Theories about anxiety hold that if we don’t know how to act in a certain situation (public speaking for example) our anxiety level will rise. In this case, we might fear that making a speech will cause us to be judged or have negative feedback. The anxiety is very specific to an event or situation.

A normal level of anxiety can enhance our ability to focus and function. When I have a writing deadline, I am motivated to meet the deadline and feel productive when I complete the task. A healthy level of anxiety alerts our body and mind to danger or situations where we want to focus on our work or what we value.

**When we are in a state of free-floating anxiety we can’t put our finger on what is wrong. We don’t even**

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**know what to focus on that will help us feel more productive.** Confusion reigns. Anxiety feeds on anxiety. We get anxious about the anxiety we feel and say to ourselves, “I don’t know why I feel so anxious. There really is nothing in my life that I should be upset about.”

Free-floating anxiety is a constant state of feeling uneasy but not knowing why. As a result we might observe:

- ◆ An inability to focus or concentrate
- ◆ Irritability for no apparent reason
- ◆ Disturbed sleep patterns
- ◆ Muscle tension, especially neck, shoulders and back
- ◆ Focusing more on what is going wrong than what is going right

Our language may be filled with gloom and doom, even though our own life is pretty good. If you are a public leader, this condition is especially problematic. Citizens may already have their own case of free-floating anxiety. The last thing they need are more public leaders who wallow in fear.

What to do? First, **recognize that free-floating anxiety may be affecting you.** That insight could help you catch yourself when you are emphasizing all that is wrong and sliding deeper into the anxiety.

Second, **working harder in reaction to your anxiety will only heighten your state of anxiety.** Scheduling time during your day for breaks is essential. Removing yourself from the stressor for just fifteen minutes can help dissipate the anxiety. Take a walk in nature and smell the spring flowers instead.

Third, **be in the world, but not of it.** Anxiety breeds reactivity that further increases the anxiety. The question then becomes, what do we choose to focus on? Attempt to shift from your urgent need to fix the world to compassion for the challenges that we all face.

The Dalai Lama is currently in Seattle and leading a five-day conversation on how to imbue our world with compassion. He has challenged me and millions of others to respond to world events with compassion and understanding rather than reacting in ways that only further the anxiety that engulfs our world. In the end, compassion and understanding may be the antidote to free-floating anxiety.



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