

DEALING WITH ANXIETY

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INTRODUCTION

In the 'State of the UK's mental health', anxiety is one of the most serious problems, along with depressive illnesses. Anxiety and depression are strongly connected in co-morbidity. From experience, either of ourselves or our loved ones, friends and acquaintances, we know that to be true.

We will look at three areas:

- Anxiety disorders – what are they?
- What are the causes of anxiety in our lives?
- How do we deal with unwanted anxiety? Encouraging a Christian response.

1. Anxiety disorders

Anxiety is a common, natural, usually self-limiting emotion which is experienced by everyone at some time. It is an appropriate and involuntary response to danger or threat. Most often, this anxiety is proportionate to the danger, i.e. the greater the danger the greater the anxiety. It is part of the 'fright, fight, flight' response to a perceived threat and involves an increase in the activity of the sympathetic nervous system. Hence, the heart beats faster, blood pressure and muscle tension increase, neurological and chemical changes occur within, sometimes perspiration appears, and the person may feel faint, jumpy, and unable to relax.

Anxiety becomes a problem when there is are intensely exaggerated emotions of helplessness and dread even when the danger is mild or non-existent. It then becomes disabling and seriously affects one's quality of life. That's when the sufferer requires pharmacological or psychological treatment in order to resume and maintain a normal life.

Fear can be thought of as the response to a close or definite danger; while anxiety is the response to a distant or possible danger. In these terms, anxiety is a lesser, but more chronic, form of fear.

Anxiety can arise in response to some specific identifiable danger, or it may come in reaction to an imaginary or unknown threat. This latter kind of anxiety has been termed 'free-floating'; the anxious person senses that something terrible is going to happen but he or she does not know what it is or why.

van der Hart and Waller divide worry into two practical ways, what they term 'solvable worry' and 'floating worry'.

'Solvable worry'

- Typically, they are about problems that are happening now, and have a solution that is required now or at some point in the near future
- They are understandable concrete problems we ought to worry about
- When they are shared with friends, they all begin offering sensible suggestions as to how the situation can be overcome
- E.g. we do something about our child with a high temperature or headache in the middle of the night, perhaps with an anti-pyretic analgesic

'Floating worry'

- This is not amenable to problem-solving, because it is about 'problems' that do not have answers
- We shy away from sharing them with friends because we fear that they will think we are worrying about nothing
- The level of anxiety is usually less acute, but grumbles along in the background
- Example, our child has three incidents of high temperature or headaches and you begin to worry about whether it is something more serious. What if it is some form of serious viral infection, meningitis, brain cancer, emotional trauma, bullying at school, etc.? **What if.....?**

Anxiety disorders

There is actually a whole spectrum of anxiety disorders, each with its own characteristic symptoms. These often overlap with one another, and are often co-morbid with other psychiatric disorders, in particular depression.

Major anxiety disorders include the following:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD):** characterised by persistent, excessive and irrational worries, apprehension, 'free-floating' anxiety
- **Phobic disorder:** an irrational and excessive fear which is out of all proportion to the situation or object at which it is directed. Examples include: agoraphobia (fear of any situation where the subject sees no quick or easy means of escape), social phobia (social anxiety disorder), fear of spiders, snakes, injections, heights, flying, etc.
- **Panic disorders (PD):** sudden, unpredictable attacks of severe anxiety which are unrelated to any specific situation
- **Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD):** obsessions (dirt, need for symmetry, sexual thoughts) and compulsions (hand washing, checking, touching, cleaning)
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** an intense, prolonged and sometimes delayed response to a particular trauma such as war, natural disaster, or personal disaster (rape, major assault, accident), or a witness to unpleasant events, etc.

Although there is considerable overlap between them, it is important to differentiate between them as they need different therapeutic drug treatments. Most pharmacological treatments hinge on their ability to modulate the many different neurotransmitters involved in the brain's anxiety system: noradrenaline (NA), serotonin (5HT), gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), cholecystokinin (CCK), dopamine (DA), neuropeptide Y, corticotrophin releasing factor (CRF). GABA is the major inhibitory transmitter in the brain.

2. Causes of anxiety

Why do we get anxious? What causes anxiety in your lives?

(Group discussion – 5 to 10 minutes)

Anxiety can arise from the following fundamental, though not exhaustive, reasons (adapted from Gary Collins):

i. Presence of real or potential threat

Anxiety can arise when there is potential threat to something or someone that an individual considers important, including to self:

- Danger: crime, war, bad travelling conditions
- Loss of self-esteem: fear of failure (job interviews, examinations), fear of lack of acceptance in new situations (professional, social)
- Separation from others: death of a loved one, moving homes, divorce
- The undermining of our values: political, social, change in religious values
- Impact of unconscious influences: you may not be able to put a finger on it but it causes you profound anxiety (perhaps it reflects something which happened to you as a child)

Anxiety becomes heightened when we feel powerless to do anything to prevent or reduce the threat.

ii. Inner conflict

When a person is confronted by two or more pressures there is a sense of uncertainty that often leads to anxiety. For example, if you are offered a promotion (with all the benefits which that entail) but it involves moving to a different region or country (impact on children's schooling, elderly parents, friends, new culture, church), then you are uptight. Ironically, in an era where choice is given paramount importance, it may actually lead to more stress and anxiety! Have you ever felt paralysed by the choice of holidays, different insurance schemes, different products with their pros and cons? Is searching for a holiday on the internet stress-free, as promoted?

How do you respond to instant communication, e.g. tweets, text, e-mail, messenger, mobile phones?

iii. Fear

It is debatable whether we are living in more fearful times than in the past, but we are certainly much more exposed to news about events which could cause us fear. This is especially true when the media amplifies and exaggerates any event, making everything a crisis. Who could be immune to all the potential for nuclear war in Korea, global warming, economic upheavals ('Brexit'), or the illnesses which can afflict us? Who cannot be affected by the constant barrage of public announcements and advertisements and articles about how a small lump in the skin, or a difficulty in urinating, or changes in bowel habits, or forgetfulness, or constant tiredness can herald an existing or impending cancer which could kill you or the beginning of a dementia which will lead you to lose your dignity and self-esteem, etc.

You cannot escape the information overload!

iv. Physiology

There can be a number of physical disorders that can bring anxiety and panic-like attacks. Mitral valve prolapse, a minor heart abnormality, can lead to symptoms associated with panic: chest pain, fatigue, dizziness, shortness of breath, palpitations, and intense anxiety. Hyperthyroidism can lead to symptoms which include nervousness, anxiety and irritability, mood swings

v. Individual differences

- Different people react differently to anxiety-producing situations. Some people are almost never anxious, some seem anxious most of the time, most people are in between. Even within these groups, people can react differently depending on the particular issue confronting them – laid back about some things (which terrify others) but over-react on seemingly unimportant matters (at least in the eyes of others).
- These differences may be due to personal experience (parental influence, teachers, unpleasant experiences in their lives), personality traits, social environment (cultural influences, social class, church culture), physiological (dietary imbalances, neurological malfunctioning, chemical or hormonal imbalances).
- A person's worldview or beliefs have a great bearing on the way someone reacts and deals with anxiety. What you think affect how you respond and act. If God is seen as all-powerful, loving, good, and in ultimate control of the universe (which is the Biblical teaching), then there is a basis for trust and security even in the midst of turmoil. If we believe that God meets all our needs on earth, then there is less cause for anxiety.
- Even if you are an atheist or agnostic, there are gaps and holes in your belief system that create uncertainty and contradictions.

Note: We must **NOT** assume that anxiety always indicates disobedience or a lack of faith or some unrepented sins (although they can be the case in specific circumstances). Neither can we conclude that believers will be less anxious than non-believers. The causes of anxiety are too complex for a simplistic answer. Even so, what someone believes about God (His character, whether God loves him/her or otherwise) often explains why a person reacts the way he does and how he handles anxiety.

3. How can we deal with anxiety? What can we do to reduce the impact of anxiety in our lives? How do we develop a Christian response?

(Group discussion – 5 to 10 minutes)

Dealing with anxiety

i. Trusting in God

The person who **learns** to walk in daily contact with God comes to agree with the hymn writer who wrote, *'I do not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.'* This conviction can bring a sense of security even when others are inclined to be anxious.

It is possible that such trust could lead to a denial of reality, a refusal to accept responsibilities, or to a rigid thinking that ultimately prevents the person from adapting to changing circumstances. What the Bible actually encourages is a realistic confrontation with problems and flexible decision-making, in consultation with wiser heads. This enables a person to adapt to change or danger, whilst at the same time maintain an underlying confidence in the sovereignty and wisdom of an all-powerful AND loving God.

Christians, however, need to remember that anxiety, in itself, is not a sin; it is an emotion. Anxiety, to a certain degree, is vital to avoid dangers and threats. When we are told that the Christian life is a life of peace, and we feel anxiety, we assume that the problem lies with us. This can lead to a downward spiral of worry, guilt, depression and despair.

That said, two persons facing the same anxiety-inducing situation can respond very differently. This depends on how they evaluate the circumstances, which in turn, depends largely on one's perspective. Belief in God, or otherwise, can be critical in the way someone views the circumstances and his ability to handle the issues.

ii. Learning to cope.

Developing our capacity and ability to cope with anxiety, **before**, and when they arise, can prevent anxiety becoming overwhelming. Learning to cope involves some of the following; each can become part of a person's lifestyle:

- Admitting fears, insecurities, conflicts, and anxieties when they arise
- Talking these over with someone else – on a regular basis if necessary
- Building self-esteem
- Acknowledging that separation hurts, attempting to maintain contact with separated friends, and building relationships with others
- Seeking help from God and others in meeting one's needs
- Learning to communicate more effectively, i.e., to vocalise the specifics of our anxiety
- Learning principles and techniques of relaxation, and time and stress management skills
- Periodically evaluating one's priorities and life goals, and keeping things in perspective
- Accepting life's changes and our limitations (finance, health, skills)

iii. Reaching out to others

People who care about others and who reach out to help, tend to be the people who cope better with the pressures and anxieties of life. Helping others and bearing one another's burdens may be one of the ways to control and prevent anxiety. One of the reasons why this is the case is that it gives us a wholesome perspective of our own situation and avoids over-introspection and self-focus.

iv. Help from the Scriptures

The Bible gives unusually specific and clear directions for overcoming anxiety. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, for example, we are instructed to stop being anxious about anything:

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. **Philippians 4:4-9***

Is the Biblical teaching workable?

It is practically impossible to stop worrying by an act of the will. Such deliberate effort directs our attention to the problem and can increase anxiety instead of decreasing it (much like insomnia and eating disorders). A better approach is to focus on activities and thoughts that indirectly reduce anxiety, as follows (adapted from Collins G & Lucado M):

(a) Rejoice

This is a command, repeated twice in v.4. Even when the world is dark and dreary, the Christian can still rejoice in the Lord. This is because Jesus promised He would never leave us, and that the Holy Spirit will be with us forever. Anxiety is often the consequence of **perceived chaos**. If we sense we are victims of unseen, turbulent, random forces, we are troubled. We are anxious when we are not in control (control is an illusion anyway!). But the knowledge that God is sovereign and is in charge of every detail of our lives can create a sense of calm. Hence we rejoice and constantly remind ourselves of who God is and how much He cares for us.

(b) Be gentle. The Greek word translated here as gentleness actually describes a temperament that is seasoned and mature. It portrays an attitude that fits the occasion, and is level-headed. Its opposite would be an over-reaction or a sense of panic. Hence the Christian can be calm when others freak out! Why? *'The Lord is near'*. You are not alone even if you feel alone. The sun is still there even when you cannot see the sun because of the rain or clouds or mist.

(c) Pray. v.6 gives instructions about prayer in times of anxiety. Such prayer is to be about everything (even small details). It should include definite and precise petitions; this helps us to identify and clarify the issues, rather than being overwhelmed with blurry free-floating anxiety. It should involve thanksgiving for God's goodness. And then you leave God to do His bit!

Max Lucado put it this way:

'Have you ever left a (broken) appliance at the repair shop?you explained to the specialist (repairer) the problem and then...

- *Offered to stay and help him fix it*
- *Hovered next to his workbench asking questions about the progress*

- *Threw a sleeping bag on the floor of the workshop so you could watch the repairman at work*

If you did any of these things, you don't understand the relationship between client and repairman. The arrangement is uncomplicated. Leave it with him to fix it. Our protocol with God is equally simple. Leave your problem with him. "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day (2 Tim.1:12)"

Prayer is a major antidote to anxiety!

(d) Think about what you think about (v.8)

Anxiety often comes when we dwell continually on human weaknesses, evil in the world, and things that can go wrong. Thoughts have consequences. There are many things which are outside our control, but we can often choose what we think about them.

It is foolish to live in denial of problems and ignoring dangers. The wise man in Proverbs, however, urges us to *'be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life'* (Prov. 4:23 NCV).

Max Lucado uses the illustration of the air controller who controls the traffic in and out of the airport and asserts that we can be the 'air controller of our mental airport'. Philippians 4:8 instructs us to let our minds dwell on positive ideas including that which is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. The Scriptures, therefore, give the basis, and the power, for positive, biblically based thinking.

'Your challenge is not your challenge. Your challenge is the way you think about your challenge. Your problem is not your problem; it is the way you look at it.'

(e) Act. Put into practice (v.9). The Christian's task is to do what the Bible teaches and not simply to sit listening. Anxiety reduction involves obedience and godly behaviour even in the midst of anxiety. It may involve dealing with some of our disobedient lifestyle. Like building our muscles and physical fitness, actually putting our faith in action is the only way to strengthen our resilience.

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