

Overcoming anxiety

Breathing ourselves calm: Sit comfortably. Try putting any distractions away in an imaginary box ... just think of peace and calm.

Relaxation: Relaxation is a skill, and we need to practise it regularly – initially perhaps daily for a month. Techniques are available online and in books.

Using the 'A-W-A-R-E' Skill

Acknowledge and accept our anxiety.

Watch our anxiety: It can be helpful to take on the role of a curious observer, monitoring the anxiety's intensity, noting when it peaks and subsides.

Act with our anxiety: As far as possible, we keep behaving normally, and aim to do what we want to do.

Replace our irrational thoughts: Learn to *challenge* irrational thinking by asking questions such as: *What evidence do I have to support my thoughts? What evidence do I have against them?*

Expect to improve and overcome anxiety: Expect the anxiety to get better because it will get better. Although it may not be totally overcome, it can be lessened so that it is manageable.

Break anxiety down into manageable stages. For example, if anxious about driving, aim for the simplest goal first, then the more difficult ones.

Anxiety and our spiritual life

Becoming more dependent upon God

Casting anxiety on God (1 Pet. 5:7) encapsulates the true starting point of dealing with anxiety. Confess your anxiety to God and ask for His help. Work on replacing the lies that anxiety whispers into the mind with God's truth concerning who you are.

*'Cast all your anxiety on him
because he cares for you.'*

1 Peter 5:7

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

ANXIETY

Insight into Anxiety

We live in an 'anxious society', where numerous lives are dominated by fear. It is little wonder, then, that so many people experience the symptoms of anxiety in both mild and extreme forms. Anxiety impacts both our physical and mental wellbeing, causing heart trouble, high blood pressure, stomach disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, back and neck pain, migraine, depression, and many other conditions.

Understanding anxiety

'Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.' *Arthur Somers Roche*

What is anxiety?

In its simplest form, anxiety is a response to a threat – *real or imagined*. Both may equally result in increased anxiety levels, triggering a biochemical function in the brain. We feel our anxiety in our body. We may experience a wide variety of emotions including confusion, feeling out of control etc. Our thoughts can actually make the anxiety more intense. A common response to anxiety is to avoid the situation that creates it. Sadly, such avoidance nurtures the anxiety rather than dealing with it. We need to evaluate how well we are meeting our deep spiritual needs in God in the presence of anxiety.

Anxiety is a normal response

The first thing we must recognise is that anxiety is a normal part of the human experience. Anxiety is also an essential response to an imminent or future difficulty or threat. While a normal and healthy anxiety response protects us, unhealthy anxiety is exaggerated and irrational. It causes cycles of distress to develop.

CWR Applying God's Word
to everyday life and relationships

ISBN 978-1-85345-642-8



9 781853 456428

Copyright © 2011 CWR. Published by CWR, Waverley Abbey House, Waverley Lane, Farnham, Surrey GU9 8EP, UK. Registered Charity No. 294387. Registered Limited Company No. 1990308. www.cwr.org.uk

This material is adapted from *Insight into Anxiety* by Clare Blake and Chris Ledger. Bible version used: The Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society.

CWR

Common sources of anxiety

The objective real threat: This is a very concrete form of threat – for instance, a firefighter must handle his fear of fire to perform his job properly.

The subjective assessed threat (phobias): When we become irrational about what might threaten us, these anxious thoughts can become phobias.

Threats to expectations and self-image: These threats can come from a wide variety of sources at home, work, school or socially.

Anxiety and expectations: Because anxiety is a response to a perceived threat, it often triggers the ‘fight or flight’ mechanism. Fleeing (avoidance) when the threat is irrational generally maintains and strengthens our anxious feelings.

Anxiety and our spiritual being: God has created us with deep spiritual needs: needs for security, self-worth, purpose in life. Anxiety arises when these spiritual needs are not being met appropriately.

Anxiety and beliefs: Similarly, we can also have deep beliefs about ourselves of which we may not even be conscious, but nevertheless these beliefs may be a powerful anxiety-producing force beneath the surface.

Anxiety and goals: We are fine if the goal is within our reach, but if it is not and appears uncertain, we can get very anxious, especially if our important belief is dependent upon achieving that goal.

Security in God: In order to cope with the uncertainties in life without our anxieties hitting the ceiling, it’s important we focus our attention on learning how to meet our needs in God.

How anxiety affects us

Spiritually: On the one hand, we are professing faith in God; and yet at the same time, we cannot seem to grasp the truth of His promises. This affects our relationship with God.

Physically: We may say things such as, ‘I felt sick with worry!’ or ‘I was so nervous my hands were shaking.’ Our frightening symptoms are actually a normal response to a threat caused by the release of adrenalin. This normal response becomes a problem when the adrenalin is not only released in response to real threats, but by irrational ‘dangers’ in our mind.

Psychologically: Irrational thoughts are a distorted response to the information we receive that will then cause our anxiety. Anxiety-producing thought patterns may include:

- **Thoughts of anticipation:** Anxiety always relates to a threat, and anticipatory thoughts will leap ahead to what bad experience may occur.
- **‘Can’t cope’ thoughts:** These are typically expressed through negative statements.
- **Thoughts misinterpreting bodily symptoms:** Rising levels of adrenalin cause us to be increasingly worried and think there is something seriously wrong with us.
- **Escape thoughts:** The final thought pattern commonly found in catastrophic thinking involves seeking to escape.

To overcome these problems we must identify what our thinking pattern is, and know that far from freeing us from anxiety, our way of thinking is actually making the problem worse through maintaining and feeding the catastrophic thought pattern.

Specific types of anxiety

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

This is an anxious state which is sometimes called free-floating anxiety, because it is not linked to specific situations and may be experienced on an almost daily basis.

Phobias: A phobia is a persistent, abnormal, and unreasonable fear of a specific thing or situation that compels us to avoid it at all costs, even when it is not dangerous.

- **Agoraphobia**

The agoraphobic fears being in any situation or place where they do not feel safe, or where they feel trapped.

- **Social Phobia**

Social phobia is characterised by our fear of saying or doing something humiliating or embarrassing that will make us the focus of attention and cause others to judge us in a negative light.

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

The World Health Organization defines PTSD as ‘a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (either short- or long-lasting) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause distress in almost anyone’. PTSD is present when the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced with distressing recurring recollections of the event, including images, thoughts or perceptions, nightmares, and/or flashbacks.

- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

OCD can be overcome with a type of behaviour therapy known as ‘exposure and response prevention’. In this approach, a person is deliberately and voluntarily exposed to whatever triggers the obsessive thoughts, and then taught techniques to deal with the anxiety and to avoid performing the compulsive rituals, sometimes with anti-depressants.

Panic attacks

A panic attack is terrifying. A true panic attack is characterised by a period of intense anxiety, fear or discomfort with four or more physical and/or psychological symptoms. Some examples: chest pains; nausea; feeling faint; fear of going crazy; fear of dying.

The cycle of panic

Trigger experience: →Person panics →Help! I fear the fear→distress→anxiety rises

Physical reactions: palpitations – breathlessness – dizziness – sweating palms

Conclusion (irrational thoughts): I can’t cope – I will collapse – This is a heart attack – I think I am going to die – I feel trapped

Anxiety Increases: tightness in chest – heart pounding – muscles tense

Overcoming panic attacks

Try to understand what is happening, and then face the fear with gradual exposure to the cause of the panic to reduce the fear step by step.

About 70 per cent of panic attacks are accompanied by acute hyperventilation, which simply means over-breathing – breathing in excess of our body’s needs. Rapidly breathing in pushes out the carbon dioxide that normally forms a reservoir in the lungs.

Overcoming hyperventilation

Firstly, we need to stop over-breathing, and secondly, we need to get enough carbon dioxide back into our lungs to restore the correct balance. One of the best ways is to improvise some sort of mask, such as a paper bag (not plastic). This allows the carbon dioxide that we exhale to be breathed back into our system, correcting the balance. Another helpful way to stop hyperventilation is vigorous exercise, breathing through our noses.