

Voices: Dealing with anxiety, panic attacks, fear and tension

December 16, 2019

We all have heard news reports or stories of people diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, or what is commonly known as PTSD. In this condition, people experience their body being taken over by the good protection system God put in our bodies and brains. Their fight/flight/freeze system that prepares the body to deal with threats to life is stuck in overdrive.

Several years ago, during chaplaincy training, I participated in a weekly group meeting with inpatients on the psychiatric floor. One day, a patient came into the room and sat next to me. She was shaking visibly and couldn't stop. Her fear and anxiety were palpable. It made me hurt for her and wonder if she would find relief and peace.

On another occasion, when I earned my living as a pilot, one of my colleagues lost his footing on the plane's stairs and fell. Fortunately, he wasn't injured physically, but shortly after, he began experiencing a racing heart rate, sweat and fear of a heart attack. He felt like he couldn't breathe. He experienced a panic attack. He was under a lot of stress at the time.

As I dealt with depression over a long period of time, I also experienced frequent tension, even a continual undercurrent of tension. Fear—specific and unspecific—plagued my thinking, behavior and life. I often felt anxiety around people—and still do, especially if asked to get in front of a large group. Speaking and singing in front of a large group might send me to the restroom but always filled me with apprehension.

When is anxiety more than a nuisance?

Anxiety is experienced along a spectrum from everyday tension and worry to an all-encompassing and debilitating anxiety that requires hospitalization.

Everybody experiences worry, fear and tension, but what makes such anxiety a mental illness? When worry, fear, tension and anxiety last for days, weeks or even months and feel debilitating, intrusive or isolating, when it affects sleep, causes a person to feel like they're going crazy or is excessive and non-stop worry and fear, then anxiety may be a mental illness.

Am I anxious because I don't have enough faith?

When anxiety is making a mess of daily living, work and relationships and there is no sense of peace, is this a sign of "not enough faith" or sin in one's life? Maybe, and maybe not.

I'm not an expert in theology or psychiatric issues. I am someone who has lived with depression and anxiety, who loves the Lord and has wanted to be someone who isn't "anxious about anything" and who "casts every care upon the Lord." I have learned and am learning.

Sometimes I haven't exercised the faith God has given me, and an unconfessed sin may lead to feelings of depression and anxiety. But if I have kept the confession list short and acknowledged, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief," then a simplistic "turn it over to the Lord and stop worrying" doesn't help or solve the problem. At that point, anxiety isn't from a lack of faith.

What may be happening in all forms of anxiety is a “malfunction” of how God designed our bodies to work. Sometimes, the fight/flight/freeze response meant to prepare us for action and equip us with the energy to respond instead turns into a chronic and near-continuous preparedness for action that forces our body into working against itself. What God meant for good becomes harmful.

Five forms of anxiety and ways of addressing them

There are five specific “malfunctions” of the fight/flight/freeze system: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Confirmation of what may be happening requires the help of a family doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist or counselor. Medication(s) may be needed to manage the symptoms. Additional therapies may be needed, as well as good support from family and/or support groups.

Particularly important is continuing to grow in one’s spiritual life, which is needed for a return to health and a rich, purposeful life.

Paul instructs us to “renew our minds” and to “have the mind of Christ” through the Holy Spirit. One of the basic problems with any of the disorders listed above is what many call “stinking thinking.” Recognizing the negative thinking patterns and false beliefs we hold is vital. Then, we need to replace them with positive, scripturally-sound patterns and true beliefs.

A handful of suggestions for addressing anxiety

- Recognize that just because you may have had a life-threatening event or condition doesn't mean you have a mental illness. It also doesn't mean you don't. If anxiety really is messing up your life, check it out.
- Don't hide it or minimize it. Don't isolate yourself or be tough. Seek out trusted help. A pastor, confidant, doctor or mental health counselor are good starting points. Follow through.
- If you know someone who is struggling, be there for him or her. Don't have an agenda. Listen, reflect back what you hear, care about them, and when the person opens up, gently suggest he or she pursue seeing a doctor or counselor. Be "quick to listen, slow to speak."
- There are many good resources, such as *Overcoming Anxiety, Worry, and Fear* by Gregory L. Jantz and Ann McMurray.

I am not an expert, but I am one who is living through some of these issues and seeks to encourage others. If you have questions or thoughts, feel free to contact me at johnphereford@gmail.com.

John Hereford is pastoral ministry associate at The Woodlands First Baptist Church in The Woodlands, Texas. The Woodlands First provides several [mental health resources](#). If you are in a dark time and need immediate help, call 911 or the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-8255.