

Anxious for Nothing (radio transcript)

What Makes You Anxious?

What makes you feel anxious? What do you worry about? Finances? Conflict at work or with your neighbors? Making today's appointment on time? Perhaps your family or your health.

Anxiety seems everywhere these days. September 11th brought fears of flying and of the mail. Homeland security alerts have raised tensions.

A necessary war with an uncertain future can make stomachs churn. An unpredictable economy can affect bank balances, business plans, education, and retirement.

One bright sign: In the wake of the terrorist attacks, pizza sales were up. Have you ever used pizza as comfort food?

"Death is the only joy, and the only release." "Contrary to popular belief, there is no hope." These anonymous statements from a university newspaper and classroom blackboard exhibit what psychologists call "existential anxiety," concern over frustration with a meaningless existence.

When I was a junior at Duke University, I wrote a paper for an abnormal psychology class investigating a biblical therapy for anxiety. I had come to faith as a freshman and found it brought me peace of mind. While studying psychology, I was fascinated to see that complex psychological disorders often stem from simple problems like anxiety, problems for which faith offers practical solutions.

I sent a copy of my paper to the author of our textbook, a prominent UCLA psychologist. A month later, he replied that he liked the paper and asked permission to quote from it in the revision to his text.

I picked my jaw up off the floor and said "By all means!" Actually, the first thing I did was send a copy of his letter to my parents in Miami so they would know their son had not gone off the deep end with my involvement in a campus Christian group. (They were beginning to wonder.)

This professor's response to the paper indicated that the principles it contains — which certainly were not original with me — had both academic and personal relevance.

Anxiety has many causes, including emotional struggles, relationship deficiencies, aimlessness, poor diet or exercise, and chemical or hormonal imbalance. In this short essay, we will consider

three possible causes: guilt, fear, and lack of friendship. And we will consider a solution to each cause that very well could make a difference in your life.

Have you felt guilty recently? Let us look at guilt, a significant cause of anxiety.

Guilty or Not Guilty?

Guilt can make you feel anxious.

What makes you feel guilty? Losing your temper? Shading the truth? Maybe taking office supplies from your employer? Cheating on your income tax return? Cheating on your spouse?

Some psychologists say that feelings of guilt come from unresolved past conflicts or from following outdated moral codes. Solutions in these views involve recognizing our past problems or relaxing our moral codes.

Of course, past problems can affect us. And many people follow overly rigid behavior codes. But should we also consider that sometimes — maybe often — people feel guilty because they are guilty?

Admitting you are wrong can be hard. Perhaps you've heard of the writer who asked his domineering editor if he had ever been wrong. "Yes," replied the editor. "I was wrong once. It was when I thought I was wrong but I wasn't."

O. H. Mowrer, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, pointed out a common dilemma for people trying to face their own shortcomings:

Here, too, we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until first they acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgement unless he has "already changed." In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego "insult," and one must have a new source of strength to endure it. {1}

A biblical perspective offers a new source of strength. The biblical God loves humans and wants our happiness. We all blow it at times, by harmful actions or unhealthy attitudes, and miss His standards. One follower of Jesus outlined what he saw as God's solution: "God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." {2}

If I had a traffic fine that I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. Similarly, Christ paid the penalty due our sins through His death on the cross. He offers us new life when we personally trust Him to forgive us. One early believer wrote, "God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins." {3} When we feel guilty, we can admit our sin to God and He will forgive us. {4}

Take it from a guilty person: being forgiven is wonderful. And the complete forgiveness — freedom from guilt — that Jesus offers is free.

Fear is another cause of anxiety; let us look at that next.

What's Your Greatest Fear?

What do you fear most? Confrontation? Maybe financial loss or abandonment? Your stomach, neck and shoulders tense up; your heart races; your mouth becomes like cotton and your breath gets short. Anxiety strikes.

Fear of death is perhaps humans' greatest fear. In college, the student living next door to me was struck and killed by lightning. Shock gripped our fraternity house. "What does it mean if life can be snuffed out in an instant?" my friends asked.

If you cannot answer the question "What will happen when you die?" you may become anxious.

Fear of circumstances — from the trivial to the traumatic — can bring anxiety. Once at a bookseller's convention my wife and I had spent an exhausting day on our feet promoting a new book. Late that

night, after a reception crowd had thinned to mostly authors and our publisher, we stood in a circle engaged in conversation. I left her side momentarily to attend to a matter.

Upon returning to the circle, I walked up behind my wife and began gently to massage her shoulders. She seemed to enjoy that, so I started to put my arms around her waist to give her a little hug. At that point, I looked up at the other side of the circle and saw . . . my wife. I had my hands on the wrong woman!

In that instant, I knew the true meaning of fear. Fear of circumstances. Even fear of death.

Is there a solution to fear? Jesus of Nazareth said He could replace fear with peace: "I am leaving you with a gift," He told His followers, "peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid." {5}

For fear of death, He offers eternal life. He told a worried friend, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me . . . are given eternal life . . . and will never perish." {6}

Faith can help allay circumstantial fear. Believing that I am in God's hands has helped keep me calm.

Or maybe I should say calmer. My life is not fear-free. I have even become anxious about speaking on anxiety! I can be fearful over an important project, a deadline or a strained relationship. Having God as a friend has not eliminated fear, but when fear comes I know whose hand to hold.

Speaking of friendship, lack of it can also make you anxious. We will look at that next.

A Little Help from Your Friends

William Glasser, a psychiatrist, says we all experience two basic needs: the need to love and to be loved and the need to feel a sense of worth to ourselves and to others. To satisfy these needs he recommends developing a close friendship with another person who will accept us but also confront us if we act irresponsibly. {7}

We all need close friends.

1996 was a terrible year for me. My wife of 20 years, whom I loved dearly and continue to respect, divorced me. Some trusted coworkers turned against me. I had a cancer scare. (It turned out to be kidney stones, but it still was no fun.)

Divorce hurts. Imagine the pain of the worst spat you have ever had with a friend or spouse, multiplied by a trillion. I felt like an emotional Roto Rooter was reaming me out. I cried buckets.

In the midst of my pain, several wonderful friends held my hand. They would invite me to eat or to attend a sporting event. They listened. They called to see how I was doing. They prayed for me. They sat with me in divorce court. I learned through them what true friendship can mean. They helped me to survive this tragedy and to land on my feet. I am eternally grateful.

Good friends are very important. But human friendship, necessary as it is, is still fallible. People can let us down and make mistakes in judgment. Wouldn't the ultimate in therapy consist in becoming involved with our creator? The biblical documents say that God is "faithful and righteous." {8} He never lets us down and He always has the best advice. He loves us, so much that He would send His son to die for us.

Paul, a prolific ancient writer and speaker, wrote of the depths of God's love:

I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. . . . Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”{9}

Wouldn't it be great to have a friend like that?

Faith in God can help treat causes of anxiety like guilt, fear, and friendship-deficiency. But could faith be just a psychological trick?

Is Christianity Just a Psychological Trick?

In this article, I have claimed that God can treat several causes of anxiety such as guilt, fear and lack of friendship. You might wonder, “So what? The Christian faith could just be a psychological trick.”

Sigmund Freud taught that Christian faith was merely an illusion driven by wish fulfillment, a fairy tale invented by needy humans to satisfy their emotional needs for security.

Is Jesus' belief system an illusion? Consider three issues.

First, consider the object of the Christian's faith. As somewhat of a skeptic, I was surprised to learn that the evidence for Jesus' deity, His resurrection, and the prophecies He fulfilled make a strong case for the validity of His claims.{10} The fact that Christian faith can be described in psychological terms does not negate its validity. Examine the object of any faith. If the object is valid, we would expect the faith to have practical benefits.

Second, human personality alone cannot explain all faith-related behavior. Our personalities have intellect, emotion, and will. Many psychologists believe the will cannot completely control the emotions.{11} Nor is it likely that the intellect could completely control our emotions. Yet many followers of Jesus have suffered humiliation, beatings, torture, cruelty, and death but still have loved their enemies and forgiven their persecutors. Something beyond human personality seems at work here.

Third, the Book in which Jesus' solutions to anxiety are recorded has unusual credentials. Written over a period of 1,500 years, in three languages and by 40 different authors (most of whom never met), the biblical documents are thematically coherent, internally consistent and historically accurate.{12} Completed more than 1,900 years ago, the Bible continues to provide workable therapy for millions. A book with these credentials bears a closer look.

This article on anxiety started with a college paper that the author of our textbook found intriguing. This professor told me he lacked personal peace and wanted to know God personally. I showed him a simple four-point outline and he invited Jesus to forgive him and to be his friend. An internationally acclaimed scholar linked up with, if you will, the greatest psychologist.

Anxiety plagues millions of us. God offers genuine peace. Is that worth considering?

Notes

1. O. H. Mowrer, "Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils," quoted in Henry R. Brandt, *The Struggle for Peace*, (Wheaton IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1965).
2. 2 Corinthians 5:21, NLT.
3. Colossians 1:14, NLT.
4. 1 John 1:9.
5. John 14:27, NLT.
6. John 11:25-26, NLT.
7. William Glasser, MD, *Reality Therapy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
8. 1 John 1:9.
9. Romans 8:38-39, NLT.
10. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).
11. S.I. McMillen, MD, *None of These Diseases*, (Old Tappan NJ: Fleming H. Revell Publishers, 1968), 77.
12. McDowell, *New Evidence*.