

ANXIETY

Counseling Guide

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is apprehension of a future problem. Think about the last time that you studied for many hours so as to avoid getting a bad grade on a test. Or the last time that you felt “butterflies” before a first date because you wanted to make a good first impression. Some anxiety can be a good and natural thing. However, anxiety can develop and intensify into a disorder that impairs functioning in life, work, and relationships.

WHAT MAINTAINS ANXIETY?

Anxiety occurs in part from a reciprocal interaction between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Here is an example of how this plays out with someone who is afraid to speak up in class.

1. Thoughts

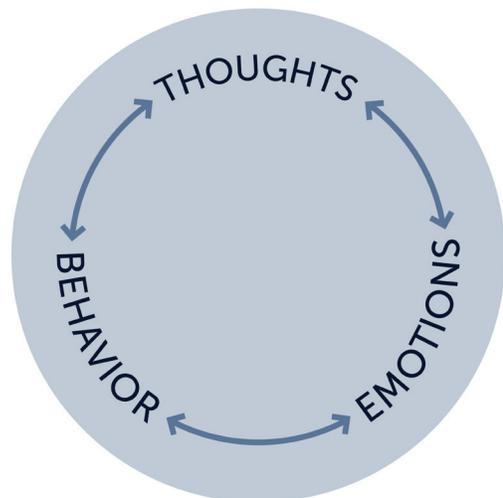
You think “I always sound stupid when I speak up in class, and I don’t seem to have anything good to contribute anyways.”

2. Emotions

You have something on your mind that you would like to contribute to the class discussion, but you feel nervous. If that weren’t bad enough, your heart is racing.

3. Behaviors

You decide to sit in silence and not say anything in class because it is easier to stay silent than to risk being perceived as stupid. The fear of speaking up is reinforced as speaking up in class makes you anxious!



CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

Anxiety disorders can be developed (or learned) over time through a psychological process called classical conditioning. Ivan Pavlov, a Russian physician, is well known in psychology for an experiment he did back in the 1900s where he conditioned dogs to salivate at the ringing of the bell. Basically, he gave food to the dog which made the dog salivate. During repeated trials the food was paired with the sound of a bell. Eventually the food was taken out. But the dog salivated in response to the sound of the bell! See the following figure to demonstrate the experiment:



AN EXAMPLE OF CLASSICAL CONDITIONING WITH ANXIETY

Before Conditioning

During her freshman year, Sally decided she wanted to try out for the dance team at her university, and she signed up for the tryouts (Unconditional Stimulus). Though many girls tried out for the team, very few were accepted because of the limited number of open spots. Naturally, Sally felt a little anxious (Unconditioned Response), as is normal when performing. However, Sally also had a tendency to be overly critical of her performance, and her anxiety only seemed to make these feelings worse. Her solution was to push through and ignore her anxiety. Much to her discouragement, she didn't make the team that year!

During Conditioning

Unfortunately, Sally became more and more anxious each time she tried out for the dance team. Over time she eventually began to expect that her performance would fail during tryouts (US), and she blamed her anxiety. She almost didn't try out for the team the next year. But, she worked hard, ignored her anxiety (and her critical thoughts), and signed up yet again to try out for the team. The tryouts (US) became more and more associated with how critical she always got about her own performance (Conditioned Stimulus). The result was a very uncomfortable anxiety (UR). Much to her discouragement, she didn't make the team again both her sophomore and junior years!

After Conditioning

During her senior year, Sally decided that she would apply for an internship with her school. The familiar tendency to be overly critical of her performance came into play on the day of her interview. This performance-based situation (CS) triggered painful anxiety (Conditioned Response) of a severe kind. She became anxious to the point she had a panic attack right before the interview. She was very confused as to why the anxiety was so strong in her.

SO WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

Sally slowly developed a tendency over time to view anxiety as the cause of failure in performance-based situations. Little did she know that her self-critical thoughts were weakening her performance. Because of this, she believed deep down that her performance would never be good enough. Each time she would enter into a situation where her performance was put to the test, these self-critical thoughts fueled her painful anxiety. Each time that she failed, her belief that her anxiety would always cause her to fail was reinforced. Notice that she coped with her anxiety by trying to ignore it. This is a common tendency and unfortunately, her attempts to avoid feeling anxious only made things worse. She was confused with the resulting panic attack that happened before the interview because she was unable to make sense of the flooding of self-critical thoughts. Sally could hardly cope with experiencing something as important as an internship interview with the belief that her anxiety would cost her the internship.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS CASE-STUDY?

- Anxiety is often due to the unhealthy ways that we have coped with situations in the past.
- In performance-based situations, some anxiety is natural. Bottling up anxiety can potentially increase into something more painful. The pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality (or dance shoe straps mentality in our example with Sally) rarely works in the long run.
- Anxiety that is learned over time can be unlearned, but the conditioning must be reversed. If we have learned to expect the worst with anxiety, it might be helpful for us to learn that it is okay to allow ourselves to be anxious. In other words, instead of avoiding the anxiety we must change our relationship with anxiety. This is easier said than done! Over time, we can replace irrational or self-defeating thoughts with rational ones. We can see anxiety as something that is natural and temporary instead of something that will control us.
- Avoidance of situations that bring about anxiety actually reinforces the feelings of anxiety.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ANXIETY

1. It is a sin to be anxious.

This is an oversimplification of anxiety. Though the Bible talks about how we should not worry, anxiety doesn't always come from making sinful choices, rebelling against God's standards, or even a lack of trust in God. Rather, anxiety is often more complex than that. It includes problematic thoughts that have often been learned over time, feelings which cannot be turned off easily, and behaviors that we engage in to minimize what we are thinking and feeling within.

2. If only I trusted in the Lord more (or prayed more), I wouldn't experience anxiety.

This is not necessarily true. The Bible does not guarantee that the pain of anxiety will go away after trusting the Lord. In fact, the Lord may allow you to experience anxiety as a way of pushing you to have a greater dependence on Him. The Bible tells us that He does not give us more than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

3. God isn't present when I am anxious or doesn't care.

When experiencing painful anxiety, it may be tempting to believe that the Lord is absent or doesn't care. The presence of God is not always felt in the moment, but sometimes we look back and realize that He was there the entire time giving us strength to get through the storm. Nonetheless, He never abandons us (Deuteronomy 31:6)!

TRUTH ABOUT ANXIETY

You are not alone!

Think about how many people that you come into contact within a day. How many of them do you think have psychological distress? The interesting thing is that you can't always tell the difference between someone who suffers from an anxiety disorder and someone who doesn't. Everyone's story is unique, but we can relate to one another in multiple ways.

You are not crazy!

When dealing with panic-like symptoms that are common with experiencing anxiety, it may be tempting to think that you are crazy. Your body is wired to fear things in your environment. It may just be that your fears are misfiring or coming from irrational thoughts. The good news is that you can learn how to change your thoughts and/or extinguish your fears.

ANXIETY IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has many different examples of biblical characters having feelings that are commonly associated with anxiety. Consider the following examples:

Luke 22:41-44 describes Jesus, praying to the Father to “take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” the evening before He was crucified. Scripture describes Jesus, in so much anguish and anxiety, that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

In Exodus 3 and 4, God called Moses to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. The Israelites were being held as slaves by Pharaoh. Moses was very anxious about this task.

Moses cried out to the Lord:

Exodus 3:11

“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

The Lord responded in 4:12- ...“Certainly I will be with you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”

Exodus 4:1

“What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’”

The Lord responded with a way to make the Egyptians believe him.

Exodus 4:10

“Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in the past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue”

The Lord responded in 4:11-12- ...“who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say.”

In Matthew 14:22-33, the disciples were terrified to see Jesus walking on the water. They thought that He was a ghost. Additionally, when Jesus called Peter to walk on water towards Him, Peter started to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused his attention instead on the wind. Jesus asked him why he doubted.

In Mark 4:35-41, the disciples cried out to Jesus when they are out on a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples saw that Jesus was sound asleep, and so they cried in fear to Him wondering if He truly cared that they were in such a life-threatening situation. Jesus calmed the storm and asked them why they were afraid.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

PRAY

The Bible talks a lot about praying to the Lord in times of trouble. It may feel like the Lord is absent when we are experiencing anxiety, but the Bible is clear about how the Lord cares and loves us. Here are a couple of encouraging verses to remember when in the middle of struggling with anxiety:

Matthew 6:25-26

“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?”

Philippians 4:6-7

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

1 Peter 5:6-7

“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.”

BREATHE

A lot of bodily sensations happen when experiencing anxiety. The muscles may tense. The heart rate increases. The breaths become shortened and quick. It can help to take a few minutes to find a quiet place to breathe and relax.

Try this at home:

A very simple exercise that you can do is to close your eyes and breathe in for 5 seconds and then out for 5 seconds. Each second should be a full second. If you need to, say “one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three” in your mind. Then breathe out for 4, then in for 4. Out for 3, in for 3. Then 2. Then breathe one final deep breath.

Helpful tips to remember:

- Breathe with your stomach and not your chest. When you breathe in, allow the stomach to expand. When you breathe out, allow the stomach to contract. If you need to, place two fingers on your stomach the first time or two to make sure your stomach is expanding and contracting enough.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Make sure to have a good posture with your feet flat on the floor.
- When you breathe in, breathe in all the oxygen that you need. When you breathe out, breathe out all the oxygen out.
- Play some soothing music if it helps you relax.

FACE IT

Do the opposite of what you think you should do

This can be very uncomfortable, yet very effective. If we are able to do this, we can grow accustomed to the triggers that spur on the cycle of anxiety. For example, if you get anxious about making class presentations, you might think about joining a public speaking group such as Toastmasters, where you would practice speaking in front of people.

SHARE WITH A TRUSTED COMMUNITY

Being open about your anxiety with others is a very vulnerable thing to do. It is not natural, nor easy. But sharing about these painful thoughts and feelings in the context of a supportive community can be healing! God, after all, wired us for relationships. We were never meant to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

SEEK COUNSELING

Seeking out professional counseling can be a great step in learning how to manage anxiety and reverse the cycle in the context of a safe and supportive relationship.