

# Anxiety - The Nagging Emotion

By Clyde M. Narramore, Ed.D.

It was Thursday morning and time for the weekly staff meeting. The twenty or so employees filed into the conference room, some laughing and talking. But Michelle was quiet as she sat alongside other co-workers. If it had been possible to accurately assess just how each person in the room was feeling, it would have revealed that Michelle was more anxious than the others.

Was she especially frightened or threatened that morning? No, not really. It was how she felt much of the time. A persistent feeling of nervousness and worry marked her life. She often felt ill at ease, tense, and restless.

All people experience some anxiety at times. But millions feel anxious and fearful nearly all of the time. They are rarely free of this nagging emotion.

Once, during the course of a seminar I was conducting, a woman raised this question: “My grandson, who is in his thirties, is having some serious problems. The doctor says he has an ‘anxiety disorder.’ Would you kindly discuss this and the causes?”

Naturally, I would need to see this young man and spend time working with him before I could accurately know about his particular problem. Psychologists identify at least twelve different anxiety disorders, ranging from specific phobias and panic attacks to generalized anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders. Each of these has a different set of symptoms, but they all have anxiety at the root of the problem.

Perhaps the most obvious symptom of persistent anxiety is an intense concern or fear in the absence of actual or impending danger. Restlessness, difficulty concentrating, sleep problems, or muscle tension often accompany the fear. The person may be fearful in situations in which there are few indications of probable difficulties. They may worry, for example, that things will go wrong, that something unpleasant is going to happen to them, that they or a family member is going to get sick, that an accident will occur in their family, or even about routine daily activities.

Generalized anxiety is different from panic attacks. Panic attacks are limited to specific periods of time when the person feels incredibly fearful, often with physical symptoms like choking sensations, dizziness, heaviness in the chest, excessive sweating, heart palpitations, difficult breathing, and nausea. People suffering panic attacks may fear they are dying, going crazy, or losing complete control over their lives.

Conditions in today’s society, such as terrorism, crime, and secularism give all of us reason to feel pressured. Wars, both small and large, are raging in many parts of the world. Severe weather catastrophes are plaguing many countries. Floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, extreme heat and cold, volcanic eruptions, and other devastations impact all of us as we view these tragedies on television. Diseases for which there are no cures are rampant. All of these can make any of us somewhat anxious. Indeed, the Bible tells us that one of the signs of the last days before Christ returns to earth is “perilous times” (2 Timothy 3:1, New King James Version). But people suffering from anxiety disorders are not necessarily focused on these events. They are restless, tense, fatigued, or having difficulty sleeping and concentrating without knowing why. The roots of their excessive anxiety usually run deep.

## Causes

The fundamental underlying cause of anxiety is the belief that in some way danger is lurking. Typically, those perceived dangers have to do with the concern that we are vulnerable and not in control of our circumstances or inner thoughts, feelings, and wishes. Anxiety usually relates to one's performance expectations, that is, fear of making mistakes or not being good enough; distrust of one's environment, such as the fear of being rejected or punished; or one's own unwanted thoughts or feelings, like repressed anger, rebellious desires, or the wish to hurt others.

Problematic anxiety usually has at least some of its roots in childhood experiences. Here are examples of childhood experiences that may program certain people to be especially anxious as adults.

Billy was sensitive and a bit awkward, making his share of mistakes. His mother wasn't a happy person, and she pounced on Billy at every turn. "You always spill your milk." "Do you have to trip over everything all the time?" In public she would embarrass him by calling attention to the things he did that irritated her. Naturally, Billy felt like crawling into a hole. His father wasn't any better, and so Billy had no one to talk to about his troubles. Consequently, he stuffed his feelings deep inside. The result? He grew up feeling he couldn't do anything right. He became highly anxious because deep down he believed he could never please others or live up to their expectations. No matter what he was about to do, he inwardly assumed that he would mess it up. Billy also developed strong feelings of anger and resentment because of the verbal abuse he suffered as a child. Now part of his anxiety is due to his fear of losing his temper and lashing out in anger.

Mary's life fell apart at age seven when her parents got a divorce. She felt lonely, abandoned, confused, and fearful of what the future would bring without both her mother and daddy. Her parents continued fighting after their divorce until her father moved to another state. But who was listening to Mary?

People often forget that when parents get a divorce, the children do also, and they are much less able to handle it. They probably love both parents and can't figure it out.

Now as an adult, Mary's deepest fears center on abandonment. She is always afraid she will be rejected, unloved, or left out. Like Billy, Mary kept her fears and uncertainties to herself. As a child, she couldn't know they would nag her for years to come.

Donna had a hard time obeying her parents. She's so stubborn, they thought. Rather than seeking professional help, they determined to "teach her a lesson." They frequently pushed her into a dark closet and locked the door. The child almost died of fright, and although she didn't talk about those dreadful experiences, neither was she able to forget them. Today as an adult, she's unduly nervous, anxious, and depressed. She always expects something terrible to happen to her, and is fearful of abuse, rejection, and mistreatment.

One of the most serious of all childhood traumas is losing a family member by death. This happened to Laura. Her sister, who was just two years older, died suddenly. The friends and relatives were so busy consoling the grieving parents that little attention was paid to Laura. No one explained death to her. Not being Christian, her parents were at a loss as to what to say. Laura was left with the overwhelming thought that her sister, whom she loved dearly, was now buried in a dark hole in the ground. The traumatic experience was stamped indelibly on her young mind. This and other negative experiences produced a lingering concern that something similarly dreadful would go wrong in her life. Little wonder that now, as an adult, she is insecure and nervous.

In the case of each child mentioned above, severe feelings of anxiety persisted through their adult years. Even though the original experiences and thoughts were not always on their conscious minds, the anxiety continued just the same because the painful memories lay just below the surface.

## Is Everything Spiritual?

Sometimes Christians forget that not all problems are spiritual. If a person suffers from anxiety, their friends at church may immediately think the roots of the problem are strictly spiritual. Some well-meaning Christians quote verses like, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You . . .” (Isaiah 26:3) or “Be anxious for nothing . . .” (Philippians 4:6). They then expect their friend’s anxiety to miraculously disappear.

These are examples of splendid Bible verses, and they are potentially helpful to any Christian. They can bring great comfort by reminding us that God is ultimately in charge of the world, and that we can find security in our relationship with him. But simply knowing these verses will rarely alleviate serious problems of anxiety. Why? Because we are not only spiritual beings. We have bodies, minds, feelings, and personalities that are shaped during our developmental years. God puts babies in families with parents who help to shape their emotional and relational lives. When those relationships are poor, it takes time, understanding, and other healthy relationships to help them change. Some well-meaning Christians do not have an understanding of this fact. With genuine concern for the victim of anxiety, they may prescribe a cure that is doomed to fail.

Take Mrs. S. who lived in a constant state of nervousness and apprehension. Her Christian friends began to tell her what she should do to overcome this condition. One suggested, “Maybe if you spend more time writing to missionaries or helping at a rescue mission, you would feel better.” So she tried to busy herself with a variety of good activities. She liked helping others, but it did little to solve her problem. The nervousness continued. “You need to pull yourself together,” counseled another well-meaning friend. But as Mrs. S. shared with me, “I don’t know what or how to pull!”

Mr. J’s friendly counselors advised him to “just read the Bible.” They figured this in itself would take care of his nagging worry. But Mr. J. had already been reading his Bible and spending time praying each day. He usually got a little relief, but it didn’t begin to eliminate the suffering. His problem – and those of victims of deep, debilitating nervousness and anxiety – warranted professional help.

We can be grateful that when life includes struggle with anxiety, depression, and serious relational problems, God has raised up well-trained Christian counselors to help. Skilled and experienced, these men and women can sit with us in our worry and help uncover the causes of emotional trauma. They can help the Bible become even more alive as they help sweep away the barriers to feeling comfortable with ourselves, with God, and with the people around us.

Just as there are many causes for headaches, there are also various causes for anxiety. Eliminating the true cause most effectively relieves the symptom. That calls for a broad, comprehensive look at the problem and careful diagnosis.

## Health Factors

Anxiety and nervousness are often caused by physical disorders. They can also be exacerbated by inappropriate medication. For example, when Jeff became ill, the doctor prescribed medication to help ease the pain. Jeff soon experienced a more troublesome problem than pain. He was not able to relax enough to get a restful night’s sleep. When his medication was reviewed and changed, the anxiety disappeared.

In addition to side effects from certain medications, anxiety may also be a medical problem. Excellent medications are available for treating anxiety. A medical specialist should be consulted in any prolonged case of severe anxiety.

Mrs. T., a fine Christian woman, became so upset and anxious that she could barely function. She saw a counselor and discussed her problem with Christian friends. But nothing seemed to help. Becoming worse, she resorted to her family medical doctor; still no help. Finally, she sought out an endocrinologist (a medical doctor who specializes in glandular functions). After extensive tests, the specialist pinpointed the cause of her emotional problems and prescribed treatment, and she gradually improved. Now she is relatively free of the nagging anxiety and chronic nervousness she suffered for so long. Her problem was actually physiologically based.

## **As the Twig is Bent**

It's a fact of life that we are what we have been becoming. No one suddenly sprouts a personality. Rarely does a person have a case of "instant maladjustment" or "instant anxiety." So let's look, then, at the anxiety and other problems that childhood emotional deprivations can create. Parents of infants and young children need to be reminded that the early years of personality development can be critical. They can establish lasting patterns of tranquil relaxation and enjoyment of life . . . or the opposite.

When a child comes into the world, he or she has certain needs. A primary need is to be loved and wanted. Children need to hear their parents tell them every day that they are loved and that their parents are so happy because God gave them to them. And children need to be hugged and shown affection for who they are – not so much for what they do.

God also made us with an intense desire to be a part of something significant. It was God who set people in families to meet each other's need. Children need more than the same surname and address of their parents. Their inner needs call out for acceptance as loved members of the family. As such, they will be disciplined when the occasion calls for it, but even this will make them feel cared for and indicate that their parents love them enough to want them to be happy and productive as they grow up.

In all of us there is also the need to feel we are worthwhile human beings, that we can contribute something to our world. If we're going to grow up reasonably well adjusted, we need to feel confident that the world can be a better place for our having journeyed through it. It is in childhood when these and other basic needs should first be met. But in many homes, perhaps most homes, they are not.

Tommy was fortunate to grow up in a family where his basic emotional needs were well met. Consequently, his early years were happy and relaxed. Naturally, he had the normal ups and downs of childhood, but essentially his life was satisfying. As he entered into manhood, he took with him wholesome feelings and a healthy self-image that stood him in good stead. He was relatively confident about using his God-given abilities. He felt comfortable with others. Consequently, he was not plagued by anxieties and insecurity.

## **Prevention Is Important**

It is difficult to bring about major changes in behavioral patterns once they have become established. At the 1962 Seattle's World Fair, so-called "psychotic" monkeys were on exhibit. They really weren't psychotic; they had personality disorders. This happened because Dr. Harlow removed them from their natural mothers as soon as possible after birth. "Surrogate mothers" — cloth skins stretched over wire netting — fed the baby monkeys with exchangeable bottles of warm milk inserted into their frames.

The baby monkeys grew strong and healthy physically, but their behavior was strange: they did not act or play like normal monkeys. Among other things, when they became older, they demonstrated little or no interest in mating. When a few of these monkeys were induced to mate and have offspring, the mothers showed almost no interest in their babies. No amount of retraining was able to build into these adult monkeys the traits possessed

by normal monkeys who learned them naturally during the critical periods of development. Since they lacked normal contact with their mothers, they grew up emotionally unhealthy.

We humans aren't as set in our ways as monkeys. With insight, professional help, and spiritual assistance, we can resolve many of our childhood problems. But it doesn't happen overnight, and it is much better to have our needs met correctly as infants and children than it is to work out the kinks later.

## **The Spiritual Dimension**

One of the most necessary ingredients for peace of mind is being related to our Creator. There is no real security in any of the temporal factors of our few short years here on earth that will compensate for insecurity about our eternal destiny. "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul (Matthew 16:26)?" When any human being comes to Jesus Christ in faith, confessing his or her sins and receiving Christ's free pardon, he or she enters into a relationship with God himself. This is the spiritual beginning point for dealing with anxiety. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear because fear involves punishment" (New International Version). One incredible resource for overcoming fear is the assurance that all of our sins have been paid for. God isn't angry with us, and he will never punish us, because his Son took the punishment we deserved. Knowing that God has forgiven our sins, that his Holy Spirit indwells us, and that we will spend eternity with him provides a wonderful spiritual foundation for overcoming anxiety.

We seldom think of Christian parents or of church teachings as having a negative effect on a child. But it is possible in a distorted sense. Take, for example, the concept of *father*. Most people's concept of God is much like the concept they hold of their own earthly father. They perceive their heavenly Father, whom they have not seen, as being much like their earthly father whom they have seen and known. If you would ask children what God is like, they may very well describe their earthly fathers. This is reasonable, inasmuch as from the time of early childhood, children know that along with their mothers, their fathers are in charge, that they are providers, that they represent authority, and that they can make things happen. So it is with God.

Consequently, a child's view of God is usually shaped by the qualities of his or her dad. When a father (or mother) is critical, mean, short-tempered, unkind, impatient, unloving, or punitive, the child is likely to grow up thinking of God as having many of the same characteristics. This is often true of adults who are unduly anxious. They think of God in negative terms, afraid that he will punish them or reject them or find them unacceptable. This adds to their anxiety and affects nearly everything they do.

Occasionally, a well-meaning pastor or evangelist repeatedly threatens the parishioners with fears that God will toss them out if they don't do things God's way. Instead of proclaiming God's love and forgiveness right along with his righteous judgment, such pastors may keep their listeners in a constant state of uncertainty, fearing that they may lose their salvation and never measure up to God's demands and standards. This is a common cause of spiritual anxiety.

But the message of God's grace is just the opposite. God places us in his family because Christ paid for our sins, not because we live well enough to earn it. The Bible says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30, NKJV). This is real security! It is a gift God gives to us.

## **Solutions**

If you are a person who is anxious and nervous in most situations, you can realize some relief through practical

procedures. First, find someone with whom you can discuss your anxieties. All of us do better when we have a caring friend with whom we can share our burdens. In fact, the Bible instructs us to “bear each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2), and to encourage each other and build each other up.

Next, try to identify the culprits in your environment. Make a list of the situations that trigger anxiety in your life. Perhaps in your marriage or your daily work there are conditions that you can avoid. If you know that certain situations will cause you difficulty, do your best to avoid or change them.

With people, if you know there are certain personalities that cause you to feel ill at ease and insecure, don’t keep asking for trouble. If it isn’t necessary to be around them, choose to stay away. If it is a family member or someone you want or need to be in a relationship with, talk with that person and tell him or her how you feel. That person may be doing things that upset you and yet may never be aware that he or she is causing you real concern and pain. Even if it is strictly your problem, others might take steps to help you.

Next, take note of your activities. For example, are you being pressured to volunteer to do jobs that will only cause you anxiety? If so, try to make the necessary changes. It is not pleasing to the Lord to needlessly put yourself in harm’s way. Many people who once suffered from anxiety have learned what to avoid, just as a person who cannot tolerate certain foods does not eat them.

Modern life may also be bearing down on you to the extent that you need to simplify your lifestyle. There are numerous ways to reduce stress by living more simply. Take time for renewal and restoration.

If your marriage is unfulfilling, seek help from a Christian counselor. If a child is causing you undue worry, get counseling for him or her. If in-laws are creating pressure in your life, talk to your mate about making definite changes.

Look inside. Since most anxiety comes from longstanding inner conflicts, memories, habits and concerns, it is usually necessary to gain greater understanding as to the reasons for your anxiety. Sometimes talking to a caring friend is enough. But often we need a trained professional counselor to help us uncover the hidden sources of anxiety and learn to overcome them. Don’t keep living with undue anxiety when there is help available.

Rework your childish thoughts. Once you have identified the causes of your fears, decide whether the threat you have so greatly feared is real. Often, we have been afraid because we have been continuing to view things through a little child’s eyes rather than through the eyes of an adult. The Bible says, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11, King James Version). As adults we can put off childish thinking, including childish fears, to see things more realistically. Things are rarely as potentially catastrophic in an adult’s eyes as they are in a young child’s!

Take time each day to read a portion of God’s Word. It may not supernaturally make your anxiety disappear, but if you let it penetrate your life, it can bring unbelievable comfort. God gives us this promise: “For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11-12, NKJV).

In summary, nervousness and anxiety have various causes. Some are physiological, some are spiritual, and some are emotional, growing out of childhood experiences involving losing control.

While we are all products of our past to some extent, we need not be prisoners of our past. We don’t have to go through life feeling nervous and anxiety ridden. We can turn to God and we can also have the help of friends, family members, or professional counselors whom God has gifted in doing his will on earth!

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**Dr. Clyde M. Narramore** (1916 – 2015) was the founder of the Narramore Christian Foundation. He was a well-known radio and conference speaker, and the author of more than 20 books including *The Psychology of Counseling* and *The Way to Happiness*.