

Anxiety & Fear

There is a wide range of terms to describe levels of emotional reaction toward an expectation of perceived future evil or danger. The mind is disturbed by the uncertainty or expectation with various levels of uneasiness ranging from mild to painful. Words describing this emotional state listed from mild to severe are: uneasiness or disturbance, trouble or solicitude, anxiety, fear, fright, dread, terror. The stronger the apprehension of impending danger or expected evil, the stronger the emotional disturbance and corresponding actions. Generally, but not always, the level of apprehension is directly related to the clarity, possibility and seriousness of the impending danger or expected evil. For example, a vague danger is usually at the uneasiness or troubled level. A clearly defined danger that has remote possibility is usually at the troubled level if the danger is mild, but at the anxiety level if it is serious. A clearly defined and impending danger will be at the fear level or higher depending on the seriousness of it.

Note that the danger does not have to be real to cause an emotional disturbance leading to even irrational mental thought and actions; it only has to be perceived as real. This is why identification of the source of the anxiety or fear becomes important. Fears with a basis in incorrect perceptions - falsehoods, lies, etc., will be dealt with in a slightly different way than those based in reality. Both types of fears - rational and irrational - will be overcome in similar ways in some respects, but the irrational fears will also have to have their false premises exposed in order to gain correct thinking.

The following should be considered when trying to understand an anxiety or fear

#1 - Emotional Circle: Feelings of anxiety are often related to unacknowledged feelings of anger and guilt.

Reason: Unwanted emotions may serve a wanted function. A claimed painful emotion or condition can often represent an acceptable strategy for expressing unacceptable emotions and reaching wrong goals. For example, A) The child that claims to be sick to avoid a school test (the related anxiety can cause actual physiological problems). Being sick is an acceptable reason to miss school, not wanting to take a test because you are not prepared is not acceptable. B) The wife that claims a headache because she is mad at her husband and therefore does not want to be intimate with him. Physical pain is considered a valid excuse, holding a grudge is not acceptable.

#2 - Volitional Circle

Feelings of anxiety which once served a useful purpose can become “functionally autonomous” and continue to grow despite the absence of continued secondary pain.

Example - A child that was defended by the parents as being “shy” and therefore excused from rude behavior of properly greeting others or even of playing with other children becomes self-fulfilling as the child grows older and the anxiety of being in new situations, meeting new people, experiencing new things, etc. becomes a controlling fear of public places (agoraphobia). The result is increasing isolation even to levels of becoming an eccentric hermit. Such a person may express the desire to be able to go out in public and experience new things, but the irrational emotional circle controls, and the anxiety may even cause physical ailments when attempts to overcome them are made (stomach upset, etc.).

#3 - Rational Circle

Feelings of anxiety are most quickly terminated by avoiding the anxiety-producing stimulus. Avoidance is therefore reinforced.

Example: A child that stutters is assigned to lead a class meeting once a week. Each time that meeting came up, the child “suddenly” developed some physical malady to avoid the possible embarrassment that could occur if he tried to fulfill the assignment. The result was reinforcing the idea of avoiding the fearful situation into a belief that the best way to face fear was to avoid the situations that might cause it. The short term strategy works quickly, but it never overcomes the basis of the fear resulting in the problem usually getting worse. In this case, the wrongful strategy could become avoiding any situation in which some flaw - stuttering - would cause embarrassment. Protecting oneself from possible ridicule becomes controlling.

It takes maturity to endure short term pain for long term gain, and doing it produces greater maturity.

#4 - Personal Circle

Sometimes the dreaded and avoided stimulus involves a perceived assault on the person’s self-worth.

Example: The person who stuttered came to believe that his worth depended on being approved of by others, so avoiding situations in which he might not be approved such as public speaking became a strategy to fulfill that goal.

Example: Fear of water can be caused by a number of initial sources such as swallowed water while trying to swim, reading about someone drowning, watching a frightening movie about a fish that eats people, etc. That initial emotional response controlled the behavior so that the person started to avoid the water. Since the anxiety was reduced by this, the person felt better each time he avoided the water and came to believe that avoiding water was the strategy of choice even though that strategy cost him having fun in the water. It became more important to avoid the fear of water as a strategy for succeeding in life than in what others thought or missing out on the fun others were having.

#5 - Anxiety can result in double-mindedness (James 1:8)

A person’s fear of losing control in an area that is important to them may result in seemingly unrelated symptoms.

Example: A person’s desire to be hospitable is sabotaged by his desire to remain in control of situations. A) She serves a dinner, but stays so focused on all the minute details of the meal that she fails to enter into any meaningful conversation with her guests. B) He invites people to come to his house for dinner, but is uncomfortable when a hospitality gift is given to him, in fact, he tries to give it back. C). She goes out of her way to help someone in great need, but then returns a thank you gift from that person.

The cure for double-mindedness is a clear commitment to do things God’s way and define a strategy for following that commitment.

Biblical Guidelines for Resolving Fear & Anxiety.

#1 - Perfect love casts out fear - 1 John 4:18 cf. Romans 5:8

When you become aware of and choose to trust Jesus' love for you, then you will be willing to do whatever He asks while trusting Him for the outcome.

#2 - God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline - 2 Tim. 1:7

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me - Phil. 4:3 (the context of this is being content in any circumstance)

The feared stimulus must be faced if any meaningful change is to take place. If the person chooses to face that fear and is willing to remain in the presence / experience the feared stimulus until the fear subsides, the person will experience meaningful and lasting reduction in fear. The person must not depend on a gimmick to reduce the fear. The essential ingredient is the choice to face the fear

#3 - Christians are to love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith - 1 Tim. 1:5

Look for the ulterior motive (secondary gain) behind the anxiety response.

“Hysterical symptoms” are physical problems with no organic base which serve a useful purpose to the person. A helpful question to ask in assessing a physical problem as a possible “hysterical symptom” is “*How would things be different if you did not have this problem?*” If the answer is only that they would feel better without mention of an additional activity they could engage in, there is probably not a secondary gain involved. If they do mention additional activities, then the physical symptoms could be a hysterical response. Until ulterior purposes (secondary gains) are resolved, the person will not give up their anxieties.

Reducing fear

Find out what they believe and are thinking and replace those with Biblical truth

Consider possible ulterior motives and deal with those

Plan a program of gradual exposure to the area of fear stimulus. Do this as gradually as required by the person, but insist that the person choose to approach their fears.

Fear / Anxiety Case Studies

Read through all the situations below. Pick one or two and write out how you would respond to the situation and counsel those involved. Include in your answer:

- *What test of faith may be involved or what sin(s) is being yielding to.
- *The questions you might ask to uncover what might be going on in their Emotional; Volitional; Rational and Personal circles;
- *Relevant Bible verses that would expose sin and encourage them in the faith and in a righteous response;
- *Advice you would give on how to handle the situation being faced.

Remember the basic counseling flow chart & basic stages of counseling handed out previously

Stage 1: Identify presenting problem (The test)

Stage 2: Identify problem emotion (E)

Stage 3: Identify problem behavior (V)

Stage 4: Identify problem thinking (R)

Teach Biblical commands concerning problem areas (Correction of V, R & P)

Stage 5: Clarify Biblical thinking (R)

Stage 6: Secure volitional commitment (V)

Stage 7: Plan and carry out Biblical behavior (V)

Stage 8: Identify Spirit controlled emotions (E)

Case Study #1

A lady in your church has been seeing a psychiatrist for some strange fears she has developed. Just recently she has become a Christian and believes that Christ can deal with the problem more adequately. There is no outwardly apparent reason for her fears. They seem to come on her without an connection to fearful events. How would you treat this problem?

Case Study #2

A person in your church has become convicted by the pastor's sermons and their own Bible study that he/she is not serving the Lord as he/she should. You know them only superficially because he/she is only comes to the morning service and usually leave as soon as the service is over. In talking with him/her you find out the following: The person has been a Christian for two years and came to Christ through reading the Bible. He/she has a PhD and works as a laboratory research scientist. His/her favorite hobbies are reading and playing musical instruments - but can not imagine playing in front of anyone. Upon further inquiry it becomes clear that he/she has no close friends and all their activities are solitary. He/she claims to be shy and prefers being alone. How will you help them fulfill their stated desire of learning to serve the Lord?

Case Study #3

A teenager in your church comes to you and pours out his / her heart about having a poor self-image. The teen says this has been a problem since early childhood. There are no obvious sin issues that you can discern. In fact, this young person is one of the exemplary young people in the church. The teen confides that in the last month or so the problem has surfaced again with some intensity. How will you deal with this problem?