

Anxiety and Worry

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INTRODUCTION

The term anxiety, or worry, covers a wide range of problems, which are a result of unfounded fears. Norman Wright (a well known author, lecturer, licensed marriage, family counselor and Director of the Graduate Department of Marriage and Family Counseling at Biola University), has stated that "anxiety and worry can be two very destructive emotions that tie many of us in knots. Worry takes time and seldom produces anything constructive in a person's life. They are capable of destroying friendships, peace of mind, and even our physical well being." Consider the following when we include the topic of death into this dialogue:

"Death" was walking toward a city, and a man stopped Death and asked, "What are you going to do? Death said, "I am going to kill 10,000 people." The man said, "That is horrible," Death said, "that is what I do." As the day passed, the man met Death coming back from the city, and questioned him: "You said you were going to kill 10,000 people and there were 70,000 killed!" Death replied, "I only killed 10,000; worry and fear killed the others."

What is the difference between fear, concern, and worry? What about anxiety; is it any different than the first three? Let us take a long look and define these terms accurately. Do you agree or disagree with these terms?

FEAR

Often we use the words fear, worry, and anxiety interchangeably, but there are distinct differences between the three. It is important that we be aware of the distinction.

Fear is an emotional response, which is consciously recognized and is usually stimulated by a real problem. We know what the problem is and we feel afraid because of it. If you are driving down the highway and someone swerves into your lane and is coming at you head-on, it is normal for you to be afraid. If you walk into a yard without believing the sign that says "Beware of Dog" and suddenly a 185-pound dog comes

leaping at you, you will probably have a fear response. Therefore, fear is the legitimate protective response. We need to experience fear, because it protects us from harm.

Years ago, an experiment was conducted with firemen. Most firemen have a healthy fear response towards fire. However, under hypnosis, psychologists took away that fear response and then, under controlled conditions, allowed the firemen to fight a fire. Each man who had been hypnotized was assigned to another man who was not under the influence of hypnosis. The firemen who had undergone hypnosis went into deadly situations that they would have ordinarily avoided. Thus, their un-hypnotized partners had to constantly restrain them from taking unnecessary risks. Obviously, the fear response that they ordinarily had was very important. After the experiment, the psychologists put them back under hypnosis and restored the fear response so they were capable of fulfilling their jobs safely.

CONCERN

There is a difference between worry and concern. Concern involves being bothered or troubled about a specific situation or condition. It could be that you are wondering, "What is going to happen when my son goes to high school next year?" "Is it going to be a good school?" "How is he going to deal with some of the new concepts that he is going to run into?" This is what we would call concern. Worry comes when you spend time each day going over and over it in your mind. "What if he gets in with the wrong crowd?" "What if there are drugs there?" "What if he gets bad teachers?" "What if his teachers do not like him because of his Christian convictions?" Expanding the problem out of proportion is worry. Concern, on the other hand, is justified. If you are concerned about your son, you could go to the school and meet the teachers. Ask about their philosophy, the curriculum, or the extra-curricular activities. Concern leads to concrete action.

WORRY

Worry is a cause of fear and anxiety. It is a state of fearfulness that can be tied into a problem situation, whether it's real or imagined. There is no sharp line of separation

between worry and anxiety. The words are often used interchangeably, but worry actually means to fret or to be *overly* concerned.

Another definition of worry can give us an important insight. Webster's Dictionary defines worry as, "a mind that has been divided." You probably know what it is like to try to sleep at night when you have something on your mind. You lie there trying to get to sleep, but soon begin mulling over the situation. You go through it once, then again, and then another time. It is interesting that the second time you think it through, you've amplified and added to some of the events. Moreover, by the fifth time you have thought it through, it is really blown out of proportion.

Worry is identified by the question, "What if?" What if this happened? What if that happened? What if, what if, what if!

THE EFFECTS OF WORRY

Have you ever stopped to think what worry does to you? What does it accomplish? You may be like the person who said, "I have worried for twenty years. I am so good at it, I am a professional worrier." However, what does it get you?

Scripture has this to say about the effects of worry and fear:

*I heard and my inward parts trembled,
At the sound my lips quivered.
Decay entered my bones, and in my place, I trembled.
Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress,
For the people to arise who will invade us."*

Habakkuk 3:16

ANXIETY

The Bible actually teaches that anxiety is a part of our lives and we should expect it to occur. This is another word that is used extensively. Close your eyes right now and try to imagine what it feels like to experience anxiety. How would you describe it? If you

said anxiety was a feeling of dreadfulness, you are right. It is a feeling of apprehension or uneasiness that produces a sense of approaching danger, which does not always stem from a reasonable cause. Perhaps you have been in a situation where you felt on edge or uneasy. You felt bothered and tense but could not put your finger on any specific reason for your feelings; that is anxiety. Some people experience what is called "Anxiety States." This is a mental or emotional reaction characterized by apprehension, uncertainty, and irrational fear. Such a state can be accompanied by physiologic changes such as diaphoresis, tremors, rapid heartbeat, dilated pupils, and what is called Xerostomia (dry mouth). They feel that something is desperately wrong, but haven't the foggiest idea what it is. This is the extreme form of anxiety.

I experienced that intense fear that almost immobilized me. Proverbs 12:25 says, "Anxiety in a man's heart weights it down." Is that not graphic? If you are struggling under a load of worry or depression, you actually feel like there is a heavy weight on your body, and you don't function as you would, under normal circumstances.

In the area of anxiety, a familiar passage comes to mind. Matthew 25:24-25 states:

"And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed.

And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours'."

In this parable of the talent, Jesus is pointing out that anxiety, or fear, squelches responsibility. It inhibits productive activity, stifles initiative, and drains us of courage. We can actually miss some of the great opportunities of life because of intense fear. It simply comes down to the point where we have to be willing to reach out to God and trust in His perfect will for our life, no matter the circumstance. We will always find ourselves in uncomfortable situations where we can begin to doubt Him if our faith is weak. As the man above learned, when he doubted Christ, he suffered the consequences of not reaching out in faith.

In interpersonal relationships, we find that a person who is not willing to run the risk of being hurt cannot be involved in a love relationship with another individual. For example, there are many people who have said, "I was really hurt last year by someone, and I just don't know if I want to attempt it again." They have to overcome that worry and be willing to run the risk of opening their life to the extent that they could be hurt.

There is another way of looking at the effects of worry and anxiety. When you worry about a particular problem, the problem is magnified. Worry prevents you from thinking logically about the subject. The reason for this is simple. When you worry, you may experience adverse changes in your body as certain glands over-react to your mental state. Your thinking ability is lessened because of the physiological changes occurring within yourself.

Perhaps you have experienced this type of physiological change in connection with anger. Someone rubs you the wrong way, and you flare up at him or her. Later you confess, "When I get angry like that I can't think straight. I'm at a loss for words so I just shout."

It seems a part of our make-up that when we experience an intense emotion we cannot think as clearly as usual. Later, however, when we are out of the situation and the emotions have subsided, we can see the facts in a clearer perspective.

Worry can paralyze us and prevent us from doing things constructively. The most capable person may become so tied up in worry that they actually become less effective. Problems call for decisions and specific action, but when you worry you cannot decide and, therefore, you do not act. Worry can make you very indecisive. The most decisive and clear thinking people can immobilize themselves by over-analyzing the problem; in the end they are still unable to decide, and leave the decision to another.

THE SOLUTION

In order to overcome worry we need to start identifying what worries you. Earl Nightingale once shared a study on what people worry about, and found that 40% of our worries are about things that never happen. How many things have you worried about that never happened?

The research found that 30% of peoples' worries concern things that are in the past, which can't be changed. We spend time endlessly going over experiences of the past, worrying about its lasting effects on our lives.

That same research revealed that twelve percent of worries are needless concerns about our health. You get up in the morning, feeling under the weather / unwell, and you begin wondering if you're coming down with something. Though we need to have a positive concern about caring for our bodies, plain worry accomplishes nothing, and can become detrimental. The data designates 10% of our worries as petty and miscellaneous, unworthy of the attention. That leaves a total of 8% for real, legitimate concerns.

The Bible just comes right out and says it: "Don't worry." The Apostle Paul said it very clearly in Philippians 4:6-9:

"Don't worry about anything, instead, pray about everything, tell God your needs and do not forget to thank Him for His answers. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus. And now, brothers, as I close this letter let me say this one more thing: Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about. Keep putting into practice all you learned from me and saw me

doing, and the God of peace will be with you" (The Living Bible).

Paul says not to worry. The sense he gives is to, "stop worrying!" Not, "If you feel like stopping, stop," but simply, "stop it!" Not if your circumstances are comfortable, but IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE! No matter what is happening to you, make your wants known to God and do not worry. God has promised you His peace if you will do that. It does not say that your circumstances will change, but that His peace will guard your heart.

Verse 8, in the above listed scripture tells us what to think about: Whatever is true, pure, and lovely. We are to fill our heart and mind with good things and we'll have less time for worry.

We cannot just stop at verse 8, though. Verse 9 is just as inspiring, for it tells us to practice what we have learned. Many people make an effort to do as the Bible says, but after having tried it only once, they claim it doesn't work. The whole point here is REPETITION; we have to do it over and over again. We must practice living God's way.

Another passage of Scripture that relates to worry and anxiety is I Peter 5:7

"Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you."

The all-inspired words of Peter are telling us what to do and even explain why. The word "cast" means to give up. Thus, it refers to a one-time commitment to God; "cast" all our concerns on Him.

A college student was having some trouble with worrying; he fretted over several genuine issues. In an effort to remind him that God would help him, he cut out some letters and pinned them on his bulletin board. They read, "Let God." It was a comfort, but he still kept worrying. Then one day a breeze blew in the room and the "D" fell down. When he looked at his message, it carried new meaning, "Let Go." He got the point.

All our worries are to be cast upon the Lord. We can do this with confidence because He loves us. God knows how much we can take. Isaiah 42:3 says:

"A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish."

God knows how much we can bear; He knows our limit. And as we approach this limit He is present to keep us from breaking under the strain.

Because God is omniscient (all-knowing), He knew we would need assurance during these times and gives us specific guidance in His Word.

Psalm 37 has been called a psalm for the answer to worry. It begins by saying:

"Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.

Trust (lean on, rely on, & be confident) in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.

Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your ways to the Lord, trust (lean on, rely on & be confident) also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass...Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him."

Fret is an interesting term; it means to eat away, to worry, or wear away. When you are worrying, you are eating away at yourself. Worry can have an effect on your body, as mentioned earlier.

However, Psalm 37 verses 1-5 & 7, gives us four basic principles to counteract worry:

"Trust" in the Lord, "Delight" in the Lord, "Commit" your way to the Lord, and "Rest" in the Lord.

Trusting and committing involves completely letting go. It is actually flinging yourself upon God, transferring the burden onto God, and releasing it to Him. It means that you can go to the Lord and say, "Lord, I am concerned about this, however, I am going to

give it to you. As I finish praying, I can rest in the confidence that you are working even though I do not know the outcome. It might come out differently than I anticipated, but it is not something I need to worry about anymore."

Delighting means that you enjoy the Lord for who He is, not just for what He can do for you. Enjoying God's presence is an area most of us need to cultivate. A way that might be helpful in applying this is to begin by praying about the problem that is troubling you. However, spend only about 10% of your prayer time on the problem. Use the remaining 90% for praising and worshipping the Lord for Himself. This will take your mind off your problem and put your focus on the Lord.

Rest means to be silent; to submit, in silence, to what God ordains. Many may say, "I would really like to put that into practice. However, when I sit down or lie down at night I am tense. I can not relax." Along with reading the Word of God and committing this to the Lord, there are some exercises you can do to promote relaxation.

When you sit or lie down, purposely tense up some of the muscles in your body, maybe in your arms or legs. Let them tense up for several seconds until you feel that you are straining. Then, release the muscles and notice the surge of relaxation that comes into them. As you focus on this good feeling, you will be lessening your overall tension.

CONCLUSION

We must remember that the problems both you and I are dealing with are not really ours; they are God's, and He is involved. In Psalm 37, the following commands are directed toward our walk with God: Trust, Dwell, Delight, Commit, and Rest. When we acknowledge God's perfect nature, we will be willing to commit to each of these commands with a loving heart, as He continuously extends His love to those of us who want to receive it.

We can pray something like this:

"Lord, I confess my sins to You. I commit my soul to You and trust that Your Holy Spirit will dwell within me for eternity. I will delight in Your will for my life knowing that You will shape me into the person that will glorify You; and I will rest in the saving knowledge that I will stand before you one day and receive Your blessings only through Your grace. Amen."

You may have to pray that many times before your emotions are settled, but keep at it. God shall surely honor your effort.

Remember the comforting wise counsel given us from the Book of Proverbs 3:5-6:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (New King James Version).