

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Anxiety is the intense emotional energy that is triggered by a perceived threat.



Who's driving the bus of your life?

Have you ever stopped to consider how often you react to some unseen sense of threat? You might think about the last time someone cut you off in traffic. How did you behave? Have you ever thought about how much energy you spend being reactive rather than being proactive and intentional in life?

All of us have moments when we behave in ways that we later regret. We live in a culture that is reactive. We all have things that “trigger” us. Everyone has “buttons” that get pushed. Even the most well-intentioned individuals behave in ways that are less than healthy. We react without thinking when we get stirred up. We say things that we don't really mean, or we do things that don't really reflect who we are or who we want to be. The cause of our reactivity is **anxiety**.

“If your *autopilot* is the vehicle that takes you where you don't want to go, anxiety is the fuel that makes the trip possible.”

Lurking underneath all of our exasperating surface behaviors is the invisible but immensely powerful force of anxiety. If your *autopilot* is the vehicle that takes you where you don't want to go, anxiety is the fuel that makes the trip possible. When we use the term “anxiety,” we are referring to the intense emotional energy that is triggered by a perceived threat. This energy is biochemical in nature and operates without consulting your thinking processes. In fact, it bypasses your thinking processes. When you feel threatened, your brain kicks off a series of chemical secretions that allow you to react instantaneously without having to stop and think. The biochemical reaction begins seven to nine seconds before you begin to “feel” any sense of threat. When you do begin to feel the sense of threat, you will react in many different ways—for example, anger, depression, elation, terror, distracting yourself, disengaging, etc.—it is not limited to feelings of worry or nervousness.

No matter how we react or behave, the root cause is a sense of threat. Often that threat is tied to our vows. When our vows get stirred up, we get triggered and become reactive.

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"After anxiety reaches a certain level (different for each person), it overpowers thoughtful response. Logic is unavailable. Without the ability to be logical or give a thoughtful response, a relationship snag cannot be resolved. So, the anxiety continues to escalate."

(Roberta Gilbert in *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, p. 21)

Two Kinds of Anxiety:

There are two kinds of anxiety, and the untrained brain doesn't distinguish between them.

Acute anxiety occurs when there is a real threat happening right now. Your child is in the street or your house is on fire. Your brain, bypassing your prefrontal cortex, processes the threat in a nanosecond; you leap into action and solve the problem. Your brain eventually returns to a more normal state as the threat is removed. Our bodies react to acute anxiety in typical ways: fight, flight, freeze, or caretake.

Chronic anxiety is any sense of threat that is perceived, imagined, or interpreted. Chronic anxiety is below the surface, and so we are usually unaware of it. It is more like background noise. You carry it around with you, and it can be triggered by any number of experiences or events. Generally, chronic anxiety has some tie to your vows. As a child or adolescent, you learned to deal with real threats to your physical or emotional wellbeing by vowing to be a certain way in the world. At the time, the vow helped you to manage the anxiety posed by that very real threat. However, now that you are an adult, you may find that many things may trigger the memory of that vow. Psychiatrist Roberta Gilbert explains chronic anxiety this way:

"Chronic anxiety is not triggered by the possibility of actual physical danger"

Emotions often are patterns that became established early in one's personal history, and these patterns may or may not be relevant to the present. For example, a person who was reared by a father who beat him or her after raising his voice may be triggered into extremely intense life-and-death emotions whenever he or she is around people who raise their voices. Although this reaction is inappropriate to adult life when no abuse or threat is present, the pattern became part of the emotional repertoire of the nervous system early on. (Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions, p. 36)

A person, a smell, a song, or a place can all take you back to the wounded place within. When that happens, your brain reacts as though the past threat is real in the present. The difference is that the threat is not real—you are not actually in danger, even though you react as though you are. It feels real. Your heart races; your palms sweat; your muscles tighten. But no actual threat exists.

The goal is to learn to manage yourself in the midst of anxiety.

Typical Ways We Deal with Anxiety:

We develop typical ways of dealing with our anxiety when it gets triggered, and we use our preferred methods over and over again. Anxiety shows up in our bodies physically, and it always feels bad. These typical ways of dealing with anxiety are our attempt to make the bad feeling go away.

How do you learn to recognize your anxiety? How do you learn to recognize when your family, your workplace, your church, or your missional community is vibrating with anxiety? (We use *vibrating* as a metaphor for what happens when anxiety takes control.) When people begin to vibrate with anxiety, they tend to fall into predictable patterns or postures. We encourage you to become familiar with each of these and learn to recognize the presence of any of them as an indicator of the presence of anxiety.

1. **Conflict** emerges when the desire to maintain unity collides with all-or-nothing thinking. People with the conflict response push into opposition. When someone disagrees with them, they seek to aggressively change the other person's opinion to match their own. They can't bear to be wrong or to lose but are unwilling to change themselves, so instead they bully or dominate others in the system. When both parties respond in conflict, the result is usually a heated argument and, if things escalate, physical violence. (Note: Persuasion is a mild form of conflict.)
2. **Distancing** occurs when people cannot tolerate conflict in relationships. As anxiety rises, they create distance between themselves and others. They may literally disconnect from the group by leaving the room or avoiding meetings, phone calls, or emails. They may withdraw emotionally, keeping the relationships peaceful but superficial or remaining physically present but disengaged. In groups where peacekeeping is a high value, this can look like a more mature response. In reality, it has the same negative impact on the group's functioning as conflict does. Extreme expressions of distancing are called "cutting off." The result of cutting off is a nonfunctioning relationship.
3. **Overfunctioning and underfunctioning** occur when an individual in a system responds to anxiety by allowing/encouraging one or more persons to take responsibility for the whole system. When people take on more responsibility than is reasonably theirs, they are overfunctioning. Likewise, when people take on less responsibility than is reasonably theirs, they are underfunctioning. When overfunctioning is present, underfunctioning must also be present. It is a relational reciprocity. People may overfunction or underfunction around tasks—when 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work, for example. People also overfunction and underfunction around emotional process. Overfunctioners manage anxiety by taking responsibility for the feelings of others, while underfunctioners refuse to take responsibility even for their own feelings.
4. **Triangling** occurs when anxiety arises between two people and one (or both) of them "triangles in" a third person to offload some of the anxiety he or she is experiencing. This pattern takes many different forms and is so common that it is generally at work alongside

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the three postures listed above. When two young siblings are fighting (conflict), they often triangle in one of their parents to settle the argument. When anxiety is present between a husband and wife whose autopilot is to distance, they may overfocus on one of their children and come to see the child as the source of the problem, rather than their relationship with each other. Venting to a third party is also a form of triangling. Any time someone tries to cope with an anxious relationship by turning to a third party instead of dealing with the problem directly, a triangle is present.

"Anxiety is defined as the experience of threat, whether real or imagined."

(Ronald Richardson in *Polarization and the Healthier Church*, p. 35)

None of these ways of reacting out of anxiety are good or bad in and of themselves. There are moments when each of them might be appropriate. These actions become unhelpful when we react without thinking. They are unhelpful when they are simply our autopilot way of being when our vows get triggered. These actions can be helpful when they are responses based on our clear and best thinking. When we've taken the time to reflect, to think, and to discern God's voice, these actions can be important and helpful tools for managing relationships.

Anxiety is Contagious:

Anxiety is like a disease: it is contagious. Others "catch" our anxiety either directly, when we pour it on them in a reactive way, or they catch our anxiety indirectly. Other people catch our anxiety indirectly by sensing our anxiety and then becoming anxious because we are anxious. Unchecked anxiety will spread through any system. It will spread through your family, your workplace, your congregation, your club, or any other group of people.

Here is how anxiety works. We sense a potential threat in a relationship, and our chronic anxiety kicks in. We immediately react to the threat in an attempt to make the bad feeling go away and to protect ourselves. We react in typical repeated patterns. Our typical reactivity leaves a trail of "less than" relationships behind us. The relationships are "less than" we would have hoped them to be. The trail of less than relationships leads to a loss of confidence, a loss of self, lost opportunities, and a loss of satisfaction in life. Ultimately our reactivity will result in a future that will be determined by default.

Two Goals:

1. Learn to manage your anxiety so that you can show up in any given moment as the person you want to be, in spite of your anxiety. Getting rid of the bad feeling is not the ultimate goal. If you can learn to regulate your own anxiety, your anxiety will be far less contagious.
2. Learn to become less anxious. Becoming anxiety free is impossible.