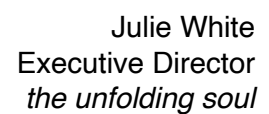


SOME CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES & CURES



About the Author

Julie Ann White has a diverse personal and professional background. She has lived in different states, traveled extensively inside and outside the U.S., and has served in a variety of roles as pastor, businesswoman, wife, mother, grandmother, and friend. These experiences have equipped her to speak into the needs of people from many walks of life, and enable her to better understand how anxiety can show up unexpectedly and cause damaging ripples in our lives.

Julie served as a Women's Pastor on a large church staff for over a decade, was an adjunct professor at a Christian College, held positions in various for-profit businesses, and is the founder and Executive Director of a ministry called "the unfolding soul" (<http://theunfoldingsoul.org>). She has published a unique set of interactive devotional materials entitled *Meet Me by the Water*. Her desire is for this material to equip people – particularly woman – with specific tools to develop a closer, more meaningful relationship with the Lord, and to energize and refresh their spiritual lives.

In assessing herself, Julie writes: "I believe that God's light can reveal what I try to conceal... such as my insufficiencies and my anxieties. His light can re-shape what I reveal, liberating me from the bondage of wrong thinking. As a result, I am free to focus on what is right and pure. I encounter the living God who re-shapes my heart and transforms me."

Her hope is that this article will lead you to better understand your own anxiety, so you can understand what a different life God has planned for you.

"Anxiety: Some Causes, Consequences & Cures"

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ANXIETY

SOME CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES & CURES

"In my experience Christian women tend to emphasize the 'go out and do' passages of Scripture more than the 'be still & know' parts. We wear our stress like a badge of honor, as if all our activity on God's behalf is adding up like frequent flier miles."

Lisa Harper – Missionary

When we over-emphasize "going out and doing", we likely will increase the level of anxiety and stress in our lives. This issue is of personal interest to me, because I have – to a great extent – been guilty of living the kind of life described in the quote above from Lisa Harper. Over a period of many years, my anxiety level increased to the chronic level, which ultimately resulted in some personal health issues. At the time, I did not see the connection between my health and my elevated level of anxiety. However, I did live with a vague sense of unease, as I battled restlessness and experienced difficulty in slowing down.

During a ten-year period, the demands of life began to press in on me. My workload grew... several members of my extended family passed away...my children were working their way through the high school and college years. I tried to control my circumstances, working harder and harder... which only added to my anxiety and weariness. I become emotionally fragile and worn out.

In 2009 I left my position on a church ministry staff and participated in a two-week retreat at a "pastoral care center", along with my husband.

For the first time in my life, I began to understand the way I was creating and nurturing anxiety, and allowing it to drive me. I learned some new habits to help me live with a greater sense of peace, and I continue to cultivate these habits as anxiety continues to rear its head in my life.

Because of my personal interest and journey, I pay close attention when people around me mention "anxiety" or "stress", or when I run across a book or article that addresses these issues. Here are some of my findings on this devastating problem that burdens the lives of many people...particularly modern American women.

"NORMAL" ANXIETY

All human beings face a modest level of anxiety on a regular basis, because God has created us with an internal fear-arousal warning mechanism. We can experience this as uneasiness, fear, worry, or apprehension. The basic message of anxiety is transmitted to our brain and warns us to get away from this situation.

This anxious state is usually accompanied by surges of adrenaline, an increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and increased blood flow to the major muscle groups. The stress response also halts or slows down various processes (such as sexual responses and digestive systems) to focus on the stressor situation. The body prepares for "fight or flight".

The fight response may be manifested in angry or argumentative behavior. Males are more likely to respond to an emergency situation with aggression, exhibiting this "fight" response. The "flight" response may be manifested through social withdrawal, substance abuse, watching television, or sitting in front of a computer screen. Females are more likely to exhibit this particular response, fleeing from the situation,

turning to others for help, or attempting to defuse the situation.

This fear-arousal warning mechanism within all humans is managed by regions of the brain's limbic system that process our memory, our emotional responses, and our spatial navigation. In other words, when we face trouble, our own bodies are equipped to give us survival messages.

PROLONGED ANXIETY

However, if a high level of anxiety is frequent and/or prolonged, a person will begin to respond to *perceived* rather than *real* threats. If this state persists, it becomes a default condition for the individual. He or she begins to live with a constant and anxious evaluation of their actions and attitudes, often responding with unrealistic feelings. In this situation, the human body will act and respond as if it is living in a constant state of emergency.

This winds up taking a huge toll on the body, mind, and emotions of the highly anxious individual. Such people tend to anticipate the worst and thus experience a heightened sense of fear, worry, or apprehension. They may experience ongoing feelings of dread, be constantly irritable and tense, or even experience panic attacks. They often second-guess their every decision, or try to control the decisions of others.

As a result, these over-stressed people may experience chronic back pain and muscular tension, fibromyalgia, headaches, chest pain, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, or other physiological symptoms.

The long-term results? A deep and abiding weariness; a sense of constant drain on the inner resources. Many people in this situation experience damage to their immune system, which leaves the body open to infections, or causes a downward spiral into clinical depression. Unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives break down the internal and external abilities to have a healthy, productive life. The person simply cannot take any more stress.

ANXIETY IN THE U.S.

- Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older (18% of U.S. population).
- More than ten years ago, it was reported that anxiety disorders cost the U.S. more than \$42 billion a year, (almost one-third of the country's \$148 billion total mental health bill) according to "The Economic Burden of Anxiety Disorders", a study commissioned by the ADAA and reported in *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 60(7), July 1999.
- More than \$22.84 billion of these mental-health costs are associated with the repeated use of health care services, as people with anxiety disorders seek continued relief for symptoms that mimic physical illnesses.

ANXIOUS WOMEN: ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

The term "anxiety" encompasses both behavioral issues and mental issues. Some women are more inclined toward anxiousness due to family history, type of personality, or life events...but each of us, at any time, can experience an increased anxiety level. Below are some of the attitudes and behaviors often displayed by anxious women.

PERSONALITY

Women with unrealistic expectations of themselves and others, or with perfectionist tendencies, are at risk for high levels of anxiety.

A person who is normally task focused may become overzealous in meeting obligations. She has been affirmed and praised for her thoroughness or her high level of responsibility. This can lead to the people around her functioning at lower levels of performance, knowing that this over-functioning woman always will do more than enough. If this pattern is repeated, the over-functioning woman feels responsible to handle more and more tasks; not just her jobs...but also the jobs of others. This will raise her anxiety level as she continually tries to do more than she should. She also will wind up neglecting her own need for personal and spiritual growth and care.

TIME COMPRESSION

In his book *Subversive Spirituality*, Paul Jensen writes, "Busyness promotes an image and acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties." For driven and performance-oriented women, our very ability to be busy can cause our schedule to become an intense driver of our time.

If we don't regularly examine how we spend our time and energy, we can find ourselves feeling as if our time is compressed. We will become anxious and have a sense of "time pressure"; unable to complete our tasks correctly, to complete them on time, or to feel satisfied with whatever we have accomplished.

This then can lead to "time urgency", where our sense of reality is distorted. In this case, we actually do have enough time to complete our tasks, but we don't believe that we do. If our time pressures escalate, and our time urgency becomes chronic throughout our day, this can lead to a life of "hurry sickness" (a term coined in the 1950's by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman). This is where we gain little respite from our tasks, and define ourselves primarily (or even solely) based on what we *do*.

SELF-IMAGE

A person's self-image is a deeply-held mental picture that depicts not only objective facts, (height, weight, hair color, gender, I.Q. score, etc.), but also information that has been gleaned from personal experiences or by internalizing the judgments of others.

A simple definition of a person's self-image is their answer to this question: "What do you believe people think about you?"

If a woman includes inaccurate or untrue information in her evaluation, it will influence the way she thinks and remembers, twisting the view she has of herself.

This can lead to a poor self-image and greater susceptibility to "negative talk", which is talk that puts down others, a situation, or ourselves. Negative talk is not only unrealistic, it also is untrue...just as a poor self-image is untrue. Negative talk has great power, making inroads into how women act based on unreliable feelings. If we give "power" to such negative talk, believing things about ourselves that are untrue, it can become self-fulfilling.

LACK OF DIFFERENTIATION

The power of relational desire within women – a desire to connect – can lead them to a heightened lack of differentiation. This inability to separate our own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of other people is a particular problem for us, and it produces within us a high level of emotional reactivity to the behaviors and beliefs of others.

Relying on other people to approve/ disapprove my beliefs, attitudes and behaviors...or looking to others to affirm how I "should" be...causes uneasiness and worry in social or business settings. It can make a

person unable to go through even a short block of time without feelings of inadequacy, as they question the reliability of their own feelings or behavior.

Normal comparisons can take on monster proportions, with a running internal check-list making women feel emotions ranging from intense distress to incredible relief. The underlying issue is the constant feeling of “lack”, of not measuring up to others. This constant internal checking and evaluating does nothing but elevate our internal anxiety levels.

To help us identify whether or not this issue is a problem for us, we should ask ourselves this question: *Do I struggle to be comfortable with, and accept, my own beliefs and choices? If my answer is “yes”, then in response I can:*

- Clarify the beliefs, values, commitments and the principles that make sense to me, and that I want to uphold in my life and relationships.
- Develop a sense of my own responsibility and life direction.
- Not rely on others to tell me how to think or act, but instead rely on God’s Word for my identity and direction.

WATCHING AND WAITING

We all desire to be involved, to be in the know, or to have some excitement or adventure in our lives. We don’t want to miss out, feel behind or not be up to date, so we join Facebook, Twitter, and click on YouTube videos to know what “everybody” is talking about. This deluge of information can increase our anxiety, as we try to keep up with others. We can become overwhelmed with too much information saturating our internal world.

Certain types of reading material can increase our desire for excitement or escape. This is where reading romance novels can be irresistible for women. In North America, romance novels are the most popular genre in modern literature, comprising almost 55% of all paperback books sold in 2004. Romance novels are sometimes referred to as female pornography, and are the most popular form of modern erotica for women. Women admit to reading romances as an antidote to stress, for mental escape, and to learn about history and new careers.

However, escaping into a romanticized world causes women to become less appreciative of the real world in which they live. Ultimately, such attempts at escape only cause further anxiety, because we cannot live up to the perfect world of fantasy, and neither can others.

EATING AND SLEEPING

Stress can lead to unhealthy lifestyle choices and nutrition deficiencies, which in turn produce greater stress. Drinking too much coffee or eating the wrong foods, skipping meals, eating fast food or constantly munching, having a crash diet or forgetting to drink lots of water, are all unhealthy choices.

These choices can cause blood sugar imbalances that lead to mood swings, fatigue, poor concentration, and other negative consequences in the short term...and greater health problems like hyperglycemia in the long run.

Not only are eating habits and choices affected, but sleeping periods are affected as well. Results of various studies show that individuals with high anxiety and worries – even without depression or other psychiatric problems – have documented changes. Specifically, it takes them longer to fall asleep, and their deepest sleep is interrupted. Of greatest concern is that these disruptions occur mostly during the first half of the night. The early portion of our sleeping cycle is critical for our physical restoration, so such disruptions may cause chronic fatigue.

CONSUMERISM AND CLUTTER

The message of our culture is that we constantly need more stuff...and this message creates anxiety within women, as we compare ourselves to others.

And consumerism can lead to clutter – another issue that can elevate anxiety. Clutter costs. We must pay for it and keep track of it; we must store it and clean it and worry about it. Clutter can make us feel guilty, because we sense that we should do something about it...but we don't, and this can raise our anxiety level.

TRAUMA OR CRISIS

A trauma or crisis can make even the calmest person feel anxious. Time is needed to work through shock and denial, as well as periods of anger, depression, loneliness, and reflection. The length of each of these steps is different for everyone. Eventually we can – if we choose – reconstruct a new life and feel hopeful in accepting it.

However, if a woman does not allow herself to feel emotion during such trying times, she will elevate her inner anxieties. Making a “loss” list can help women to process traumatic emotions in a healthy way (see “Make a Loss List”, pg. 7)

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Here are some specific strategies women can use to fight back and overcome the chronic anxiety that hinders us from becoming the women that God wants us to be.

IDENTIFY CAUSES

We should set aside some time to consider the various people and circumstances in our lives; asking questions such as:

- How do I feel?
- Are my feelings based on reality?
- Is there any way to create peace for myself?
- What steps do I need to take to begin creating change?

Being willing to identify the causes of our heightened anxiety, and seeking help from others if needed, sets us onto the path of healing and restoration. Below are some exercises to help us battle anxiety and break out of the routine of being too busy.

BREATHING AND WALKING

Some of the ways to fight back against anxiety are amazingly simple, according to various physicians and researchers. For example:

- The goal of deep breathing is to expand the lungs and the diaphragm, increase oxygenation to tissues, invoke relaxation, and massage the lymphatic system (Dr. Marcelle Pick).
- The practice of such intentional, “mindful” breathing can be calming and energizing (Dr. Andrew Weil).
- Our general health is affected with every breath, so deep breathing is therapeutic for hyperventilation and anxiety disorders (Doug Keller, author of "Refining the Breath.").

Simply practicing the discipline of deep, regular breathing helps us manage stress and improves the quality of life.

Performing breathing exercises while taking a walk can be particularly beneficial. We should take the opportunity to listen to nature's sounds around us as we walk.

- What kind of smells waft by my nose?
- What beauty do I see?

We can use our senses to refocus our minds and to encourage a spirit of thankfulness to God for the world around us.

CREATE SOMETHING

We can choose to give ourselves permission to create – to scrapbook, paint, sew, cook, write – whatever gives us pleasure and enables us to focus on something other than our anxieties. And by engaging in such activity, we will be battling (and defeating) the lie that we do not have enough time for such activities.

HAVE COFFEE WITH FRIENDS

"One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). Sharing some laughter and fun activity with others can lower our anxiety level.

BREATH PRAYERS

Prayer is not complicated; it simply is a conversation between God's heart and ours. It is a dialog where all of our questions...and all of God's answers...can find each other. It is an opportunity for us to reflect on who God is, and for God to strengthen and comfort who we are.

We do not need to worry about or intellectualize prayer.

We just need to learn to pray by praying. And because prayer draws us into the heart and the presence of God, it is one of the best ways to combat our chronic anxiety.

To offer a "breath prayer", we simply get into a posture for praying (on our knees, sitting, standing...).

We slow our breathing and ask God to calm our mind and heart, and then silently repeat a prayer in a smooth rhythm that matches our breathing:

in...out...in...out. As we use this time to enjoy God's presence, it reminds us of God's acceptance of us and love for us.

"There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God's breath. We are the asthmatic people who are cured of our anxiety...we receive a new breath, a new freedom, a new life.... Prayer, therefore is God's breathing in us."

Henri Nouwen – Author

To focus our attention on God, we can repeat a simple phrase with every breath. Here are a few suggestions:

- (Breathe in) "Lord, I invite your presence (breathe out) with me today."
- (Breathe in) "May your peace (breathe out) encompass me."
- (Breathe in) "Help me to hear (breathe out) your whisper of love."
- (Breathe in) "Lord, have mercy (breathe out) on me a sinner."

BE STILL

We can ask God to calm our minds and to remove distracting thoughts. We can repeat this phrase to help us settle down: “Be still and know that I am God”. As thoughts come, we do not dwell on them; we let them pass on. We simply rest in stillness, listening to the thoughts that *God* brings to our minds.

RELAX AND ENJOY

Try the following breathing exercises:

#1

Lie flat on your back.

Raise your hands above your head and rest them. Don’t grasp anything.

Take a deep breath and hold for a few seconds. Relax and breathe out.

#2

Stretch your hands up as far as you can. Stretch them farther.

Hold them there. Take a deep breath and hold for a few seconds.

Relax and breathe out. Slowly repeat this exercise three times.

#3

Push your feet down as far as they will go. Farther.

Take a deep breath and hold for a few seconds. Relax and breathe out.

Slowly repeat this exercise three times.

#4

Hold your arms and feet stretched out as far apart from each other as possible.

Count slowly to ten...

Relax and let your feet and hands return to their original position.

Slowly repeat this exercise three times.

After any of these exercises:

...remain immobile, resting and relaxing for another 15 minutes. Then get up slowly.

MAKE A LOSS LIST

This is a powerful tool for helping us work through the losses that can permeate our lives. Simply divide a sheet of paper into two columns. In the left column, we make a list of any people, jobs, etc. that have created within us a sense of loss. Then we take some time to consider and reflect on each item, evaluating the emotions we feel. What was the specific sense of loss? Was it disappointment, anger, resentment, abandonment, pain, absence of love, or...? Once we identify the particular loss, we write that down in the right hand column, next to the item.

Most importantly, we then need to take some time to sit in the presence of God with this particular emotion of loss. We wait to embrace the good that came from the situation...we simply take some time first to allow God to meet us in our loss and help bring us through our sense of loss.

JOURNAL

Reflective writing – sometimes called “journaling” – is a powerful way to communicate with God and deal with our thoughts. Sometimes our thoughts catapult from side to side in our brain and we struggle to slow them down or make sense of them. Writing them down – both good and bad – helps us to focus, be honest, and develop a more thoughtful relationship with Jesus.

Honestly expressing our thoughts and identifying our issues can lower our anxiety level. As we write, we must remember that we are talking to our loving heavenly Father, who understands us and cares for us. A couple of ways we can approach journaling are listed below.

Read a passage of Scripture and ponder questions like these:

- Is there one idea or image that strikes me as particularly important or thought-provoking?
- What does this passage say about God's character?
- What is God asking of me? What is God offering me?
- Is there an area of my life in which I am struggling?

Another powerful approach is to write out a Bible passage and personalize it by inserting our own name wherever appropriate. Then we can read this passage aloud and receive it as a personal message from God to us.

CHOOSE TIME SPACES

There are many demands on our time. But in a 24-hour period, we cannot meet every need, nor should we try. It is best to ask God to reveal what He wants us to do with our time. If we struggle with procrastination, we should choose one task or responsibility that needs to be accomplished.

If necessary, we can ask someone we trust to hold us accountable, or give ourselves a personal incentive as a reward for completing a task. If the task seems too big, we can break it into manageable steps. Here's another approach: choose three tasks for a day and be sure to tackle those first. You will gain a sense of accomplishment by bringing something to completion.

INCREASE PHYSICAL EXERCISE

Exercise releases endorphins that produce feelings of exhilaration and also relieve pain, anxiety, and stress. Because of these effects, we increase the likelihood of feeling good more frequently when we exercise consistently.

Don't be overambitious; choose an exercise regimen that is doable on a consistent basis. Ten minutes of walking twice a week is better than 30 minutes of walking once a month. Base your plans on your weekly routine and your season of life.

This list is not exhaustive by any means, but can get us started in making progress to address our anxiety. As we adopt these strategies and others, we will find that anxiety has less power to control our feelings and behavior.

THE POWER OF SCRIPTURE

Reciting and meditating on Scripture can encourage and uplift our spirits, thereby calming our minds and refocusing our hearts.

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy (Ps 94:19).

Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up (Prov 12:25).

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Pet 5:7).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:6-7).

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Phil 4:8).

Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness (Ps 150: 1-2).

WHAT WE'VE FORGOTTEN

In *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman writes, "I loaf and invite my soul". He reminds us of the time when summer was a barefoot season of ease, quite before we grew old enough to mentally convert the time to dollars earned or places seen. Now we're caught in the adult world. It has new goals. Results – preferably visible results – are what count in our adult world.

We've forgotten so many things.

We've forgotten that God delights in us and we can delight in Him. Our quiet time is filled with the urgency of hurried prayers or intense reading. We always have words in our mind. There is no silence. There is no time.

"I've heard it said that every day you need half an hour of quiet time for yourself, unless you're incredibly busy and stressed. In that case you need an hour. I promise you, it is there. Fight tooth and nail to find time, to make it. It is our true wealth, this moment, this hour, this day".

Ann Lammott – author & public speaker

We've forgotten what David knew - that nothing matters but that we trace the hollows of God's face like a blind man groping.

We've even forgotten the small things... like how to watch a butterfly and how to roll down a hill faster and faster and faster.... Instead, we've learned to produce. In fact, we've learned it so well

we all agree it is necessary, even if we agree reluctantly. What we haven't learned is how to sometimes be childlike in this adult world.

We haven't learned when to forget results and goals...and just marvel at being.

God truly is more concerned about our "being", than our "doing". ***To each one of us, God says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).***

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