

Non-Anxious Living

Faith Resources for the Stress Response

A talk on anxiety from a Christian faith perspective,
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Mihi

I te tuatahi, ka mihi au ki te Atua kaha rawa, kaihanga o te ao katoa, te kaha o te ngakau.
I te tuarua, ka mihi au ki te whare nei, te Whare Wananga o Waitaha.
Tena kōrua e John, e Jane, ngā minita.
Ki ngā kaiako, ki ngā tauira - tēnā tātou katoa.
No Ingarani ōku tīpuna. Ko Zealandia te waka. Ko Ayers te hapū.
Ko Silvia Purdie ahau.

Greetings.

Thank you for your courage in looking at this topic. Even thinking about anxiety is enough to make you anxious – stress feeds stress!

I will attempt to give you some tools to understand the sensations and effects of anxiety, and some ways to genuinely help yourself and others when anxiety takes hold. I explore some resources from the Christian faith and tradition that are, in my opinion, relevant and helpful.



Can we begin with a short grounding exercise.

I invite you to put down anything you are holding, and put both feet flat on the floor.

Notice where the tension is in your body, and just breathe in and out. Move a little to release tense places. Let the breath out more, and slowly breathe in more.

Breathe deeply in and out a few times and relax.

Where do you notice tension in your body?

How does pausing to breathe and relax change that?

The Stress Response System

So let's dive in: What is anxiety? Why does it feel so bad!? What does it do to us?

To get us to answer to those questions I want to invite you to the alleyway behind our house. My husband and I live in Burnham on the army base with our cat Katie. There's a lane behind the houses, where my cat and I like to go for walks together.

Here she is - not walking, just enjoying the Spring sunshine:



But there's a problem. 3 doors down lives a large dog. So Katie and I walk cautiously past that house. She stops at the gate and goes very still and quiet, looking and listening – is the dog outside or inside? If the dog is outside she freezes, her tail gets bigger, her fur fluffs up, and as soon as the dog spots us and starts barking, Katie backs slowly away. Me, I can see that the dog is on a leash and actually is no threat, but there's no telling Katie that. But what would happen if the dog was not on a leash, and came rushing out, chasing the cat? If you could freeze-frame that moment, what would you see? Katie's ears would be flat, and every muscle in her body would be flooded with adrenaline and she would be zooming away in a flat panic. But what if she got cornered? Stuck unable to run any further? What would happen to Katie then? Instantly her whole body would change as she turned to face the dog, teeth bared, claws out, spitting and hissing and hurling herself at him in a wild attack. There is one more, very different response to threat. If Katie was attacked by the dog, and she could not fight and could not run, any idea what she would do? She would play dead. Flop. Suddenly all the life would disappear and she would make herself as small and as dead-looking as possible.

Psychologists have for many years studied these very different reactions to threat. These make up our defence system. They are refined over evolution to protect us, and our animal cousins, from threat. We call these our Stress Response.

When we face a threat our brains trigger three powerful reactions, mostly before we've had time to think about it:

Flight, fight or freeze.

Run, attack or flop

If we map out these various responses to threat, we can map them in terms of which part of your brain is most involved in each different reaction. I am not a neuroscientist so I won't try to explain brain structure or function. But I do know that your brain has the clever stuff at the front and the instinctive bits buried down deep sitting right on top of your spine, ready to burst into action without consulting all the clever bits.



Let's start at the bottom.

The deepest, most visceral stress response is the ability your brain has to disconnect your mind completely. Shut down. The most extreme stress response. If you are totally overwhelmed with terror you can't think, you can't act, you **freeze**. You can't remember later what happened. We call this **dissociation**. Unplugged.

Next step up is panic. Every shred of energy goes into one thing – escape. Run. **Flight**. You know the sensation: fast heart beat, queasy stomach, shakey, hard to breathe. In the Christchurch earthquake some people described like coming to and finding themselves in a totally different place, they didn't remember getting there. They just ran.

Up from that is the response of **anger**. A **fight** response. Of course some people prefer to be the dog rather than the cat – if in doubt, attack first! Not a great strategy for sustaining friendships, workplaces or marriages, but I get it. Most of us, however, only fight when we feel attacked, and then we can get pretty nasty and reach for any weapon at our disposal. At root, for most of us, fighting is a stress response to feeling under threat.

- How do you experience fight, flight or freeze?*
- Can you recall the physical sensations of each?*
- What situations might trigger any of these reactions in you?*
- What strategies have you learned to cope with them?*

However, my topic is not panic or anger but **anxiety** - which is related to each of these, but different in a very important way.

The flight-fight-freeze reactions happen in the face of actual threat. Or your brain can trick you into thinking that your life is in danger, when really it's not that bad. In NZ, thankfully, hardly any spiders can kill you, but plenty of people would have a panic attack if one lands on their head. That is not anxiety.

Anxiety is dealing with **ongoing potential threat**. Anxiety is my cat walking past the gate of the house where the dog lives. She wants to get to the other side, she enjoys walking with me, she knows she has to cross the danger zone, and so she steps forward anxiously. Her eyes get bigger. Her ears focus. Every fibre of her body is in the potential of attack. Am I safe?

So two key ideas for our map:

Vigilance: scanning for threat. Hyper alert. Checking and re-checking, alert, tense. This is very useful at moments such as trying to cross a busy road. But if you are in this state for more than a few minutes you end up in sensory overload. Too much information.

and the second is **Internal Conflict**

And this is where we are engaging more of our brain in the stress response. It gets complicated – because we want to step into something but we are also afraid that it will be bad. You want to get a degree but you are afraid of failing. You want friends but they might reject you. Different motivations compete with each other amid a constantly shifting **experience of risk**.

Our brains were just not designed for 2022. We are trying to run a massive volume of information input into hardware that was designed for a far simpler age, with far more escapable problems.

I work in the area of climate change. The predications are genuinely scary. Fear and anxiety for the future is totally rational. It is also counter productive to stew in it. We see all of these reactions to climate crisis: from the blanking out of total denial to the knowing panic to the information overload.

So there is my map of the defence system. It's all good! It's all there to protect you from harm. God designed it. We share it with our animal cousins. The main difference for humans is that we struggle to extricate ourselves from it. We are, perhaps, too clever for our own good. We can see so many potential threats, in every direction. Are we ever safe? My cat gets barked at, backs carefully away, then turns and runs helter skelter back home, when she sits down, has a little wash, and then all the fear and anxiety has completely gone. If only it was that easy for us!! It is not hard to get stressed, or distressed. The hard bit is de-stressing.

I have defined anxiety as being stuck in a state of potential threat. I have highlighted two aspects of anxiety: hyper vigilance (constantly alert for risk, leading to information overload), and inner conflict (as we wrestle between what we want and the risks involved). Which of these do you notice in yourself?

When you feel anxious, what does that do to your body? To your thinking? Can you describe the feeling?

When other people around you get anxious, what do you notice? How does this effect their actions?

When you are stressed, how do you react when someone tells you to "calm down"? So what actually does work? What does help you to calm down?

A basic problem is that the stress response makes you less intelligent. It literally sucks the life out of your brain.

It also sucks blood away from your digestive system. It powers up your muscles, and reduces the energy you have for important things like your immune system. Anxiety is bad for you. Or is it? What do you think?

What do you recognise as good stress in your life?

Do you need that deadline in order to push yourself to achieve?

Can you react to criticism with determination to learn?

Challenges are good. Threats are bad. How do we tell the difference?

Perhaps the question is – how do we grow in our capacity to respond constructively to challenges ... from a parking ticket, to a deadline, to the massive problems of our world? What is the alternative to chronic anxiety in 2022?

What, for you, is the alternative to anxiety?

How would you describe being non-anxious?

Strategies for Non-Anxious Living

We want to be intelligent and calm – I do, anyway, because I know that I am happiest and most effective and productive when I am in a place I'd call 'active peace'. Not a blank blob, but awake and aware and rested and alert.

To be in that place, the task is to unplug our stress response. To feel safe in ourselves no matter what.

To be less reactive ... to whether someone texts you back or says something you find offensive or a different mark than you were hoping for

How might we not get triggered? And when we are triggered, to recover quickly?

Non-Anxious Role Models

What would it look like to not react to stressful situations with the stress and anxiety response? Who shows us how to live free of anxiety?

My vote would be for Jesus. I make a decision way back when I was 12 to ask Jesus to be my friend. It sounds corny, but it was real for me and it has been real for me every since. I genuinely do know this person who lived so long ago – through what I read about him, but also through his wairua, his breath, which is in me. And I recognise Jesus as being a non-anxious presence. I get stressed. Jesus does not. He felt genuine human emotion, sadness, frustration, grief and anger, even fear as he faced his own death. But somehow not anxiety. He often found himself surrounded by a hostile crowd and somehow he would slip away quietly, when he was ready to leave. He would look people in the eye and see through their pretensions and bravado, and he was never afraid of anyone. I love that. It gave him complete freedom to be who he wanted to be, to respond fully to what he knew to be true, from his total foundation in the love of the Father. "Love your enemies" is surely Jesus's most famous and challenging one-liner (Matthew 5:44).

So that would be my first suggestion from a faith perspective: get to know Jesus. Let him form you. You will become a less anxious human being.

Who are role models for you in non-anxious living?

If you have a relationship with Jesus, what does he teach you about fear and worry?

Role models teach us how to de-escalate our perception of threat. Anxiety easily confuses us in 2022 (especially for young people) as our brains can't tell the difference between a trivial irritation, a minor set-back, or something genuinely terrifying. Anything we perceive as negative piles up and quickly becomes overwhelming. The skill of non-anxious living includes finding ways to de-escalate our perception of threat, training ourselves to tolerate the little things ... which is exactly the opposite to how social media trains us!

Jesus chose to respond with compassion in the face of fear or attack. We can also do that, and it is amazingly powerful. Choose to respond with compassion, no matter what.

Ways to De-Stress

Jesus got away on his own when he could. He needed recharge time. So that would be my second point – to figure out what recharges you and to do it.

We know that physical exercise is really important. Maybe for Jesus too – he did take off up hills when he had his rare alone times, or across the lake. We might not be able to walk on water, but walking beside water is proven to be an excellent stress-release strategy. Or the gym. I do yoga. Or relaxing with friends. Hugs. Massage.

What works for you? Make a list of things which release stress?

Which do you need to do more often?

How do you exercise?

Personally, I find attending worship to be the single best way to let go of my worries and be recharged. It is an amazing thing to enter into the presence of a massive spiritual reality who is overwhelmingly love! Being in that space enables me to de-clutter and re-orient and find that calm base again. Prayer is a way to access that in our everyday lives.

Sleep is really really good for anxiety, but anxiety is really really bad for sleep. So make a priority to unplug stress in the evenings. Personally I don't watch the news. Or check my emails before bedtime.

Our constant stream of input, pinging phone and web searching and game aps that lead you straight on into more and more ... it all feeds your stress response.

Hyper-vigilance is the brain stuck on 'on', constantly scanning for possible threats. I encourage you to take charge of that, and give yourself a break, on a regular basis, especially in the couple of hours before you would like to sleep. I'm a big fan of Aeroplane Mode. It's OK to be unavailable.

What helps you to get to sleep and stay asleep?

What would you recommend to others?

So my second suggestion is to figure out how to ground yourself and release stress and shut out distractions and let yourself relax. How do you recharge, de-stress, let it go? How do you communicate confidently to your defence system that, it's OK. I am OK. I can rest. I am grounded. I am safe. Do you do those things often enough?

Dig Into Anxiety

My third point is that most of us realise that our stress response gets triggered by stuff, and our reactions can sometimes be over the top. Why do we over-react? Why do some things really mess with us?

The answer may lie in your past. Psychology is learning more and more about how old hurts shape how we react in the present. Basically, the more traumatic things happened to you when you were a child, the more stressed you are likely to be as an adult. The good news is that we can heal past trauma. Counselling and therapy can be a great tool in living more free from anxiety. New techniques are proving effective at processing old pain so that life in the here and now is happier. I also find that prayer ministry is a wonderful thing.

Some work you can do yourself or with a friend, writing about old memories, or gently trying to dig underneath your stress response to what you are really afraid of. It is challenging but worth it.

Christian faith promises healing and wholeness. Jesus spoke of the truth that will set you free. These are gifts of God and worth going after.

*Are you aware of painful experiences from your past that keep fueling anxiety?
How might you address these and seek more healing and wholeness?*

Helping Others

My 4th suggestion for non-anxious living is service. Courageous action in the service of others is one of the best antidotes to anxiety. If you are anxious about climate change, do something about climate change. If you feel alone in your worries, go visit an old person who is probably even more lonely.

The key is figuring out what you're good at and what you enjoy doing. As a pastor I would say that is a clue to discerning your calling and following your unique path to discover who God has made you to be. Jesus called everyone to lives of service.

It is astonishing how much you can cope with when you know that you are in the right place doing what you are meant to be doing.

*Have you found this to be true? Does it reduce your own stress when you do something to help someone else?
If you are anxious about the future in a warming world, how might you get involved in climate action?*

Being Thankful

And my final point would have to be **gratitude**. Perhaps this is the best antidote to anxiety. I describe anxiety as internal conflict of competing motivations and risks. A vitally important way to move through our own internal conflicts is to look up and lift it all up and simply say 'Thank you for this'. Does that make any sense? Why would gratitude be so powerful?

From a theological point of view, saying “Thank you” works because it invites God into any situation. It is the most basic and profound prayer, especially when you don’t feel thankful; to give thanks is to say “this sucks right now but somehow it will be OK”. (Many of the Psalms say this, e.g. Psalm 28.) I trust that there is a giver who has my best interests at heart, even though it seems pretty bleak at the moment. I can thank God for all my emotions and motivations and fears, and trust that it is held in a bigger picture.

Write a ‘gratitude journal’. Find several things every day to be thankful for.

A Non-Anxious Plan

Remember that anxiety makes you less intelligent. It is very difficult to think straight when you are feeling overwhelmed. So we need a plan. Make a strategy, when you are not feeling highly anxious, for what to do when you do get anxious.

Thank you for delving into this challenging topic with me.

Ma te Atua koe e manaaki.

Kia tau ki a koe te rangimārie o te Atua.

God bless you, God protect you, God give you peace.

What points in this talk have connected with you?

What else have you learned about anxiety that has not been covered?

What questions has this sparked for you?

Write up a Non-Anxious Plan for yourself.

Discuss with someone else.

Compassion	I choose to respond to difficult situations with compassion
Rest	I do the things that help me to relax and recharge
Healing	I seek to understand and heal my old wounds
Service	I use my gifts to make a difference
Gratitude	I choose to be grateful no matter what

The Anxiety Beatitudes

Blessed are the kind, for they shall undermine anxiety.

Blessed are the overwhelmed, for they shall carve out quiet space.

Blessed are you when you stuff up, for thus you learn to be kind to yourself.

Blessed are you when other people crap on you, for thus you learn it is Not Your Problem.

Blessed are you whom Jesus loves, for you shall breathe deep of Wairua Tapu.

Night Prayers: <https://www.conversations.net.nz/night-prayer.html>