

AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE SPIRITUAL PROBLEM

By Alfred H. Ells

Panic suddenly seized Bill one summer evening while he was driving home from work. Chest tight, hands shaking, he thought he was going to pass out at the wheel. "I'd never experienced such strange feelings," Bill said. "I was sure I was going crazy." Bill's family physician could find no physical cause of his symptoms and diagnosed him with an anxiety disorder.

Pam's racing mind jolts her out of sleep every night around 2:00 a.m. "[My husband] is always after me for worrying so much about the kids and our finances," she says, "but he won't, so someone has to!" Pam's visits with her equally anxious mother exacerbate the problem, making Pam feel depressed and stressed at the same time. Constant anxiety plagues Pam more than she wants to admit.

NOT JUST A MEDICAL PROBLEM

Bill and Pam are not alone. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are the number one mental health problem in the United States, affecting about 40 million adults. Anxiety is also the leading mental health problem in children ages nine to 17. The annual cost of this disorder to patients and their employers has reached \$42 billion, a number that has doubled over the past four decades.

Anxiety has become an epidemic seemingly overnight, but why? How? The cause must be much more deeply rooted than workplace stressors or family concerns – it is a spiritual disorder as well. So commonplace that it seems normal, even responsible, anxiety truly must be considered an enemy of faith. It minimizes the power of trusting in God and replaces it with the faulty image of our fleshly power, fostering doubt, disobedience and chaos in our lives.

Consider the Israelites who did not trust that God was powerful enough to protect them against the giants inhabiting Canaan, and were barred from entering because of their unbelief (Num. 13:26-33). Even with the pitfalls of the Israelites as our example, we still are not consistently facing life's complexities with complete trust in God, and anxiety's ever-tightening grip on our lives is a direct result.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

ANXIETY

Dread or uneasiness without cause or object. Sometimes called "psychic pain", and caused by issues left un-surrendered to God. Symptoms include sleeplessness, irritability, impatience, anger and depression, and it may be linked to certain immune and neurological problems like chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple sclerosis.

FEAR

Fright, terror or alarm at real or anticipated danger. It usually begins as an inner reaction to a specific event or object that gradually becomes a core belief. This is how irrational fears develop.

WORRY

A state of fretfulness or over-concern. The word itself is derived from the Old English for "choke". The desire for control makes it feel almost responsible, but it only undermines the ability to fully trust God.

COMPULSION

Uncontrollable repetition of thoughts or behaviors. The actions are done to relieve or prevent anxiety, not for pleasure or gratification.

OBSESSION

A persistent, troubling and usually inappropriate thought. Caused by brain chemistry imbalance and spiritual warfare, these thoughts and impulses are not typically based in reality.

PANIC ATTACK

A sudden, intense bout of apprehension. Symptoms include shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pain, choking or suffocating sensations, and a fear of "going crazy". The fear of the attack itself can bring on the symptoms, perpetuating the problem.

PHOBIA

Persistent, fearful reactions to concrete objects or situations. These reactions are learned behaviors to a previously threatening stimulus. Exposure to the stimulus usually provokes immediate fear. For example, ophidiophobes (fearful of snakes) feel anxious even when looking at a picture of snakes.

VERSES ON ANXIETY AND WORRY

Proverbs 29:25

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.

2 Timothy 1:7

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

Psalms 94:19

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.

Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Colossians 3:1-2

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Isaiah 41:10

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

STEPS TO FREEDOM

Recognition and Ownership. Many fail to clearly identify their anxiety as a stumbling block. Others blame it on their circumstances, unaware that this distances them from God and must be changed to become close to Him again.

Admit. Confess. Surrender. Give up your anxiety to God, and cast the burden of the outcome on Him. If this is difficult, pray for the renewal of your mind by determining the emotion's root cause, and eradicate it through thought-switching or thought-stopping techniques.

Identify Genetic or Environmental Triggers. Genetics may play a role in sensitivity to stress. If you think you might be predisposed to sensitivity, assess negative stimuli in your life. Possibilities could be worrywart relatives or frustrating tasks. Once identified, lessen or eliminate your exposure to the stimuli. Ask for help from your friends and family to tone down their fretfulness while around you. Who knows? Maybe everyone could benefit from your efforts.

Launch a Multifaceted Attack. Counseling sessions may help some, while others may need a prayer partner to wage spiritual warfare against their stumbling blocks. Still others may have a chemical imbalance requiring medication to reduce hypersensitive physical reactions to anxiety. Pray for God's will in these matters, and he will lead you to healing.

