

Faithwalking 201.07 | Learning To See and Manage Anxiety

Big Idea!

Anxiety is the emotional energy that gets triggered by a sense of threat. Left unchecked, it drives our autopilot behaviors and prevents us from living into our true self. As we learn to see and manage our anxiety, we can more fully embody God's love in our everyday relationships.

The Invisible Force of Anxiety

In previous weeks, we've talked about our subconscious, autopilot ways of showing up in the world. We have certain ideas and beliefs about how we want to "be" in the world, but in the moment we get stopped and find ourselves falling into patterned, predictable behaviors that don't reflect our true self. We want to propose that lurking underneath all of these consternating surface behaviors is the invisible, yet 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 in this session, we are referring to the **emotional energy** that is **triggered by a real or imagined threat**. This energy is biochemical in nature and operates without consulting 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. This emotional energy can take many different forms – e.g. anger, depression, elation, terror, etc. — and is not limited to feelings of worry or nervousness.

Anxiety is the emotional energy that is triggered by a real or imagined threat.

In the same way that you are beginning to see *behavioral patterns* that were previously invisible to you, it is possible to learn to see the *anxiety* that lies beneath those patterns.

Two Kinds of Anxiety

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

Acute anxiety occurs when there is a *real* threat and is of a *limited* duration. Your child is in the street or your house is on fire. Your brain processes the threat in a nanosecond; you leap into action and solve the problem. Your brain eventually returns to a more normal state.

Chronic anxiety is ordinarily a response to an *imagined* threat and *persists* over time. It is more like background noise. You carry it around with you and it can be triggered by any number of 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 well-being 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. But now that you are an adult, you may find many benign situations triggering that same vow response. Psychiatrist Roberta Gilbert explains chronic anxiety this way:

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 Relationship, p. 38-39)

Just about anything - a person, a smell, a song, a place - can act as a trigger that takes us back to the wounded place within. When that happens, our brains react as though the past threat is real in the present. The difference is that the threat is not real. It feels real - your heart races, your palms sweat, your muscles tighten - but no actual threat exists.

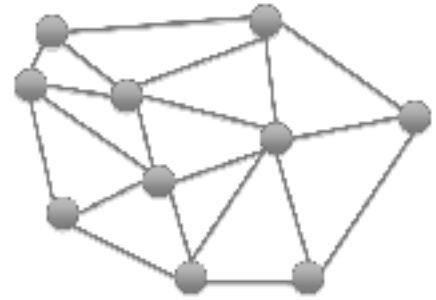
When anxiety is present, whether it is acute or chronic, the brain reacts in predictable ways. The part of your brain that allows you to make a *reasoned, thoughtful response* begins to shut down. Then, the part of your brain that empowers you to *react without thinking* kicks into overdrive. That is a good thing when the anxiety is acute. Imagine if you saw your child in the street and you had to stop and think, "What's happening here? Is there danger? How should I respond?" In that case, you need to be able to respond quickly and automatically.

However, when chronic anxiety is triggered, we are *not* in immediate danger. In these cases we need to be able to think through the situation and make well-reasoned choices. If we react instinctively instead of thoughtfully, we can make a lot of messes and hurt people we care about.

Anxiety in Systems

In any collection of people (a family, a church, a work place, etc.) both kinds of anxiety occur. Depending on the emotional maturity of the group, the acute anxiety is more or less easily dealt with as group members solve the problems that they face. But chronic anxiety is also at work. The challenge is that, though its power is real, it can't normally be "seen" the way acute anxiety can.

This gets even more complicated because, in any collection of people, we are emotionally hardwired together. Consider this diagram. It illustrates how *everyone is connected in a system*. Imagine anxiety flowing through the lines connecting various individuals - one person's anxiety impacts the next person. Eventually, the anxiety of one person will be passed through the entire group.



The presence of anxiety is like gravity. It's not a good thing or a bad thing. Like gravity, it just is. Many leaders work to eliminate anxiety. That is not what we are suggesting because it is as futile as trying to eliminate gravity. As we've said, anxiety is a normal reaction that is hardwired into our brains and can even work to our advantage. But left unexamined, unchecked chronic anxiety can undermine our desire to live into God's design and embody love to those around us.

So, while you can't *eliminate anxiety*, you can *manage yourself in the midst of anxiety*. Take your pen or pencil and draw an outer circle around one of the circles in the diagram. Imagine that the outer circle serves to insulate the inner circle from the flow of anxiety. Now imagine that, through the practice of the spiritual disciplines and with the help of a coach, you can effectively manage yourself when anxiety ripples through the system. Rather than simply passing it along to others in your community, you can contain the anxiety in a way that allows you to thoughtfully respond. Now imagine that a growing number of people in the system also learn to manage their anxiety instead of passing it along. What would the impact be?

What does it mean to be emotionally hardwired together? Give an illustration of where you've seen this at work in your life.

Can you imagine how different your life would be if you were able to see and manage anxiety in yourself rather than letting it control you? What if others joined you in this process? What would the impact be on your family, your workplace, your church, etc.?

Learning to See Anxiety

How do you learn to see anxiety? How do you learn to recognize when a group of people (e.g. family, workplace) 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 both sides seek to aggressively change the other person's position to match their own. They can't bear to be wrong or to lose, but are unwilling to change themselves, so they instead bully or dominate others in the system. Conflict is the most visible of the patterns, often surfacing as a heated argument and, if things escalate, physical violence. (Note: Persuasion is a mild form of conflict.)
2. **Distance** occurs when people cannot tolerate conflict in relationships. As anxiety rises, they create distance between themselves and others. They may physically disconnect by leaving the room, or they may avoid phone calls and 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. Extreme expressions of distancing are called cut-off.

3. **Over-functioning/under-functioning** happens 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 over-functioning. Likewise, when people take on less responsibility than is reasonably theirs, they are under-functioning. When over-functioning is present, under-functioning must also be present. It is a relational reciprocity. People may over-function or under-function around tasks—when 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work, for example. People also over-function and under-function around emotion. Over-functioners manage anxiety by taking responsibility for the feelings of others while under-functioners refuse to take responsibility even for their own feelings.
4. **Triangling** occurs when anxiety arises between two people and one (or both) of them “triangle in” a third person to off-load some of the anxiety. This pattern takes many different forms and is so common that it is generally at work alongside 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 over-focus 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.

These postures arise as a response to anxiety and actually represent, subconsciously, the attempt to alleviate anxiety in a system. For example, when a husband and wife disagree on an important issue, this will often introduce anxiety into the system. The unspoken, autopilot goal then becomes to eliminate the anxiety at all costs. Some couples will go into conflict mode, each spouse trying to win the other over to his/her side under the assumption that the anxiety will disappear when they come into agreement. Other couples will distance, hoping that by not talking about the issue the anxiety will go away. And still others will fall into the over/under-functioning reciprocity, with one spouse making all the decisions and the other just going along with it. Most relationships will default to one of these three postures, with triangling being present in nearly every case.

Think about your most significant relationships. What postures do you see at play? Describe a recent experience with anxiety in one of these relationships. What do you notice about yourself? About the other person?

Making Meaning

Regardless of how our anxiety is expressed—conflict, distancing, over/under functioning, or triangling—one thing that almost always happens when we get anxious is that **we make up a story** to help us manage our anxiety. **We interpret our experiences to try to make sense of the world** and the meaning that we make will determine what actions we take moving forward.

You’ll remember this conversation about “making meaning” from the Faithwalking 101 retreat, when we talked about the way vows are formed. You have an experience or a series of experiences and you make a meaning of the experience(s). That meaning becomes the reality that drives your life, even if the meaning doesn’t reflect reality. For example, a young girl is abused by her father and she makes the meaning that she is unlovable. This meaning will influence how she interacts with the world around her—what she expects from people, how she lets others treat her, etc. As an adult, she is able to see that this meaning was disempowering and not even true, so she makes a new meaning: My dad was deeply wounded and unable to manage his anger, so he took it out on me. It was not my fault and it means nothing about me being unlovable.

As we continue to go about our daily lives, even into adulthood, we continue to tell stories about the experiences we have. Listen to how you report your experience to others—you are telling a story. (“My neighbor gave me a weird look the other day, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t like me.”) You may firmly believe that the story you’re telling is an accurate reflection of reality, but the truth is, it’s just your interpretation of reality. The stories we tell have great impact on our lives because they shape the way we see the world and, consequently, how we respond.

Here is an example of what we are talking about:

Event: I'm moving to a different apartment across town. I send an email to my small group asking if they'll help me pack up my stuff and move. It's been a week and no one has responded.

Possible meanings:

- That was too big of a request. I shouldn't have asked them to help me, I should just hire movers instead.
- They must be annoyed with me about something. Maybe they are frustrated that I haven't been very consistent in attending our meetings.
- I bet they're all busy that day and they feel bad telling me they can't help. This must be their way of telling me "no".
- We must not be as close as I thought we were. I guess "doing life together" means something different to me than it does to them.
- I guess they've all been really busy. They probably meant to respond and just forgot.
- I wonder if the email addresses I used aren't the ones they check regularly. They must not have seen the email yet, because I know they care about me so if they'd seen it they would've responded.

As you can see, identical circumstances can be interpreted in any number of different ways. The important thing to see here is that none of these meanings is inherently more correct than the others. Each of the stories in the above illustration represent certain **judgments** and **assumptions** being made about other people's thoughts, motives, and intentions—things that cannot be known apart from directly asking the people involved.

And yet we do this constantly! We assume we know these unknowable truths and respond from within our invented reality. We personalize other people's behaviors and react to what we imagine they are doing to us, and they react to us in the same way. And so these stories, which we invented to help us cope with the anxiety triggered by the original event, actually create more anxiety within the system. And the more anxious we become, the more our field of vision diminishes so that we only see the few things around us that reinforce the meaning we previously made. And round and round it goes.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that it is wrong to interpret your experiences. **Making meaning isn't good or bad, it just is.** It's how we make sense out of our lives. What we are suggesting is that you can begin to *pay attention* to the meanings you make, to consider that they might not reflect reality, and to hold them loosely. Consider this transformational truth: **you are in charge of the meaning you make.** For

every event that happens, there are a wide range of meanings that can be made—some *empowering*, some *disempowering*. It is worth asking, “If the meaning I make disempowers me, why do I keep making that meaning?” Our stories can help us live more fully into God’s design, or they can keep us from being the people God designed us to be.

In what circumstances/relationships do you find yourself frequently making disempowering meanings? What meanings do you tend to make?

Some Examples of Empowering Meaning

- *This is an opportunity to grow as a friend. I can choose communication over distance. Whatever happens, I can learn something that I can carry into future relationships.*
- *I can be a voice for justice in the midst of an unjust situation.*
- *I have something positive and powerful to contribute to this situation.*
- *One person can change the system.*
- *God delights in me and wants good things for me. I am deeply loved and can share that love with others, no matter how they treat me.*

If we want to learn to manage our anxiety in a more healthy way, **we must grow in our ability to be calm observers.** Rather than reacting to what we “think or feel” is happening, we should watch what is actually going on. Who is doing what, when, where and how? In other words, we need to stick to the facts. Sometimes we know the facts and at other times we don’t. There will be times, like in the story above, where we will need to gather the facts to more fully understand a situation. This will require clear, direct, honest communication.

We must also learn to be attentive in observing what’s going on inside of us. As you start to feel anxious, notice yourself starting to make up a story. Why do you think you are telling that particular story? Rather than accepting it as reality, manage your own anxiety and stick to the facts. With discipline and practice, you can learn to see the

stories you're telling and to determine for yourself whether they empower or disempower you.

Empowered meaning flows out of our experience as God's beloved

- God loves me → I am loved
- Jesus came and lived among us → God wants to be with me
- God calls me His child → I belong and have a family
- Created in God's image → I have value and unique gifts to offer

How to Manage the Impact of Anxiety

As stated earlier, *anxiety is*. Sometimes it works to our advantage—like when we are in physical danger and can react quickly, or when it gives us the energy to complete a task. However, left unchecked, it is a miserable companion and can have a devastating effect on our health and well-being.

As we learn to see anxiety in ourselves and others, we want to learn to manage anxiety as it comes rather than to prevent or eliminate it. We can begin to take steps that diminish its intensity so that clear, thoughtful, value-driven responses can be given. This minimizes the negative impact of anxiety on ourselves and our systems. This requires a lifetime of learning, but here are a few steps that can help get you started:

1. **Notice:** Learn to see your own anxiety. Pay attention to what's happening in your body. Heart racing? Palms sweating? What's going on in your head and heart? Slow down. Step back and observe.
2. **Name It:** Try to identify what's stirring within. Spend some time in solitude or journaling. Consider questions like: Has your vow gotten triggered? Are you experiencing shame? What meanings am I making? What are you feeling – mad, sad, glad or scared?
3. **Speak Out:** Be authentic. Share your thoughts and feelings with a “safe” person. Release your anxiety by venting with someone *outside* of the system. Say what there is to say. And don't judge yourself in the process.

When we practice these steps and learn to better manage our anxiety, we will experience greater freedom from our vows and will grow to more fully embody God's love in our everyday relationships. Over time, we will increasingly be able to experience the peace that Jesus extends to us.

Week of _____

(1) Begin practicing your *revised Spiritual Workout* (see 201.06, Week 2, #1). (□)

(2) Write a journal entry that describes an encounter in which you experienced anxiety. (□)

- Who was involved? What happened? Write it down in narrative form.
- What was your internal dialogue? (i.e. What did you think but not say?)
- Describe your feelings *during* and *after* the experience.
- In what way did your vow get triggered?

Once the entry is done, set aside 30 minutes to be still in the presence of God.

- What do you hear? What Scripture passages come to mind? What memories get triggered?
- Where did you see symptoms of anxiety in the encounter? In you? In others?

201 Homework Track: Vows #7

(3) Consider the same anxious experience you reflected on in exercise #2 and journal around these questions: (□)

- What meaning did you make in the incident? What story did you tell yourself? (Your internal dialogue will give you some helpful clues.)
- Did that meaning empower or disempower you?
- What were the actual facts of the situation? What can you know for sure?
- Looking back, what alternative meanings could you have made? Try to make an empowering meaning. (Ask you coach for help if you get stuck.)
- What connections do you see between the meaning you made in this situation and the meaning associated with your vow?

(4) Seek to have Transformation Conversations *every day this week* about what you are learning about anxiety. Share what you are seeing about yourself and what you seek to grow into. (*If the thought of having TCs every day feels overwhelming to you, consider two things: First, we experience anxiety daily, so simply notice where it shows up and share what you see with someone. Voila! A daily Transformation Conversation. Second, this is a topic that just about everybody can relate to, so most people will be interested in what you have to share.*) (□)

Week of _____

- (1) **Continue your Spiritual Workout.** In what ways does your SW help alleviate anxiety in your life? In what ways does it contribute anxiety? (□)
- (2) Review the four patterns of anxiety that were taught in this session (under “Learning to See Anxiety” on p. 85).
- a. **Write a journal entry** that describes what patterns you experienced in your family of origin. (□)
- Describe what you can see about how anxiety flowed through the system, including the roles everyone played and the patterns employed.
 - How did these patterns of anxiety impact you? How did they impact others in your family? Think about immediate and long-term impact.
- b. **Share with two people** what came up for you during the journaling time. Be as authentic as you can. Ask them to pray for you after you have shared. (□)
(The journaling part of this exercise is reflective. By meeting with others you are being connected, and asking for prayer is an act of surrender.)

201 Homework Track: “Breathe Out” #7

(3) God invites us to embody love in the world. This can look like a lot of different things, but at some point it involves stepping out of our comfort zone and risking rejection. It involves making ourselves vulnerable by extending love to people who disagree with us and people who have hurt us. It could involve making radical changes in your life to follow where God is leading you.

Write a journal entry that addresses the following questions: (□)

- When you think about this call on your life, what gets stirred up in you? Do you experience any anxiety when you think about responding to God’s leading or learning to love people in the everyday?
- What can you see about how your anxiety blocks you from embodying love in your everyday life? How does it block you from taking steps in response to God’s call?
- Which of the four patterns of anxiety do you see showing up in your relationship with God?

(4) **Continue having Transformation Conversations every day this week.** (□)