

Anxiety and Faith





Topics for Discussion

1. Defining Anxiety
2. Types of Anxiety
3. Reacting to Anxiety
 - Western vs. Eastern Thinking
4. How Anxiety Affects Faith
5. How Faith Affects Anxiety



Defining Anxiety

Defining “anxiety”.

Anxiety is “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes.

It can reach the level of disorder when the person experiences recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns.” Once anxiety reaches the stage of a disorder, it can interfere with daily function.

American Psychological Association (APA)

Anxiety versus Fear.

- Fear is an emotional response to a real or perceived *immediate* threat.
- Anxiety is an emotional response to a real or perceived *future* threat.
- Fear is a physiological and/or emotional warning system that alerts us to danger *right now*
- Anxiety is a warning system of *impending danger*.



Types of Anxiety

- TYPE 1. Immediate feeling of anxiety or fear may trigger a natural, God-given emotional response for survival.
- TYPE 2. Medical or clinical condition which is diagnosed as some type of anxiety disorder, panic disorder, or social anxiety.
- TYPE 3. Natural consequence of sinful behavior. Examples include drug or alcohol abuse, addictions such as drugs, alcohol or gambling or some other behavior that the person realizes is detrimental.
- TYPE 4. Improper response to God's promise of care and comfort.



Reacting to Anxiety

How we react to anxiety reflects a difference in the thinking and perception of the world.

From a faith perspective we'll examine the difference between:

Western Thought & Eastern Thought

This is key to our discussion of anxiety since the Christian Gospel (and for that matter so of the Hebrew Scripture) is written from an Eastern viewpoint.

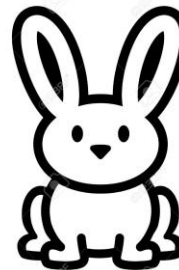
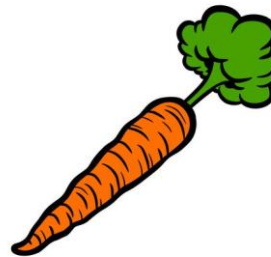
...and this thinking is foreign and difficult to a Western mind.

Reacting to Anxiety

Let's try a test.

You are presented with a dog, a rabbit, and a carrot.

Which two belong together?





Reacting to Anxiety

For those that chose DOG and RABBIT

The analytic thinker chooses the dog and rabbit because both satisfy the internally held rule of “animal category.”

For those that chose RABBIT and CARROT

The holistic thinker chooses the rabbit and carrot because of the interconnected and functional relationship between the two: A rabbit eats carrots.



Anxiety and Faith

Western Thinking

- “Rule-based reasoning” - every problem has a solution.
- When no immediate solution is offered a resolution hypothesis is created, often to our detriment.
- A purpose for our anxiety must be discovered.
- Tendency to overanalyze the situation, which heightens the level of anxiety.
- Platonic – Search to be free from suffering



Anxiety and Faith

Eastern Thinking

- Relational based reasoning.
- An acceptance that two things can be mutually opposed, and at the same time, mutually connected. (*good and evil*)
- Contradictions can be tolerated. (*suffering vs healing*)
- Acceptance of uncertainties that inevitably present themselves.
- The ability to “be like water.” *The mind is like the deep water that is calm and peaceful.*
- An understanding that some types of suffering have benefit.

Eastern Thinking

道德經;

Taoism (Daoism) - China's oldest religion is translated as "*The Way*" which is described in the Tao Te Ching:

Tao (The Way) that can be spoken of is not the Constant Tao
The name that can be named is not a Constant Name.
Nameless, is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The named is the Mother of all things.

The Old Testament also does not name "The Way".

And Moses said; "and if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

Exodus 3:13-14

The New Testament gives us the name.

Jesus said to him, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."

John 14:6

Eastern Thinking

道德經；

Tao Te Ching – *The Book of the Way and the Virtue*

Author – Lao Tzu – 6th Century philosopher

*The everlasting Tao acts according to the natural Way.
Therefore there is nothing that It will not accomplish.
With the simplicity of true nature, there shall be no desire.
Without desire, one's original nature will be at peace.*

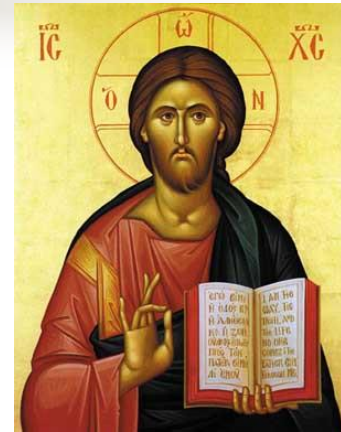
verse 37 of Tao Te Ching

Origin of All Teachings is Christ

The everlasting Tao acts according to the natural Way.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

John 6:38



Therefore there is nothing that It will not accomplish.

But Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Luke 18:27

With the simplicity of true nature, there shall be no desire.

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.

Luke 10:41-42

Without desire, one's original nature will be at peace.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 14:27

History's Impact on Anxiety

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

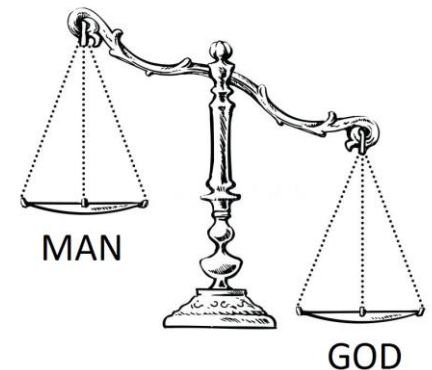
John 6:38

But Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

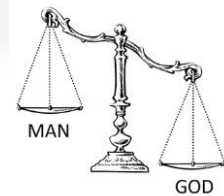
Luke 18:27

Much of our current day anxiety stems from our inability to accept these two Scriptural statements. This *"inability"* stems from two important events which presupposed the opposite of Jesus' words in the Gospels:

- The Heresy of Pelagianism (5th century)
- The Age of Enlightenment (18th)



History's Impact on Anxiety



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John 6:38

But Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Luke 18:27

Pelagianism is a revived heresy which was condemned by the Church in the 5th century. A British monk named Pelagius, improperly appropriated St. Augustine's teachings to claim that;

Man's salvation must, after all, depend on something in man; God commands us to do good works, he reasoned, therefore we must have the ability to perform them.

The **Age of Enlightenment** expanded on this focusing on understanding and using science rather than religion to explain natural phenomena led to a belief which is opposite of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Luke.



History's Impact on Anxiety

The impact of these two historical events have shaped our Western understanding of how to approach the problem of suffering and anxiety.

Referring back to the Types of Anxiety, this has caused us to see most anxiety as Type 2.

Medical or clinical condition which is diagnosed as some type of disorder, panic disorder, or social anxiety.

Thus anxiety is seen as something which can be addressed or “cured” solely through Man’s efforts.

As Orthodox this conflicts with our innate sense of the Divine within us.

This tension multiplies our level of anxiety since we realize that science and man-made efforts have limitations.



Our Reaction to Anxiety

We become like Martha of the Gospels busily distracting ourselves with all forms of worry, fear, and anxiety.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

Luke 10:40

The Greek word for “distracted” used here is περιεσπατο which translates to being drawn away from, to be overburdened with thoughts.

A commentary on this verse offers an interesting perspective:

Whatever cares the providence of God casts upon us we must not be over-burdened with them, nor be disquieted and perplexed by them. Care is good and duty; but over-burdening is sin and folly.



Our Reaction to Anxiety

Jesus' answer to Martha offers us several important details about anxiety.

Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.

Luke 10:41-42

First, Jesus repeated her name, *Martha, Martha*. Here we are shown that those that are *entangled* in worldly cares and solutions are not easily *disentangled*. Disentangling from the web of anxiety is a slow and constant process.

Second, He tells here that the many things she is troubled about are needless, while the one thing she neglected was needful. This is to show the *faith in God unites the heart, which the world had divided*.

Here Jesus is reminding here of TYPE 4 Anxiety - Failure to appreciate God's promise of care and comfort.



How Anxiety Affects Faith

1. Diminished Faith
2. Non-Action
3. Seeing Worry and Anxiety as Sin

Mark 9:21-24



How Anxiety Affects Faith

Diminished Faith – The Problem

Anxiety, when left uncontrolled allows us to doubt that God is active. People can mistakenly aggravate the situation by telling the person that they simply do *not have enough faith*.

The person sees this as a judgment against oneself in terms of a deficiency of faith which is vocalized as *“I lack the faith to believe”* and *“I worry instead of believing.”*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer an example of this when they relate this situation of how a father brings his son to be healed by Jesus saying, *however* we have important details in Mark with respect to dealing with anxiety. Mark recounts that the father asked Jesus;

“IF you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

Mark 9:21-24



How Faith Affects Anxiety

Diminished Faith – The Response

Mark goes on to tell us Jesus' answers to him;

“If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

And the father's response, which is a recognition of the source of his anxiety when he cries out;

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

Notice the contradiction in his statement which seems confusing to the Western ear.



How Faith Affects Anxiety

Diminished Faith – The Solution

In 1 Peter 5 he warns us about the danger of succumbing to fear and anxiety,

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

He then offers the Eastern (relational) approach as advice,

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And finally he rejects the Pelagian solution by saying,

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you ...



How **Anxiety** Affects Faith

Non-Action – The Problem

- Another outcome of anxiety can be passivity, discouragement and fear which leads to hopelessness and despair and doing nothing.
- An example of this discouragement and anxiety was demonstrated by Jesus Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane;

*“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying,
“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”*

- The Western solution to this is to treat the symptom but not the root cause. (Notice the large number of ads for depression medication)
- A diagnosis of anxiety disorder is then often treated with simple solutions such as drugs which serves most often to mask the root cause that still exists.



How Faith Affects Anxiety

Non-Action - The Response

However, Jesus continued and took action by saying;

“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Taking action, even one small step at a time builds our faith.

This is also been the response of most of the Medical personnel who, in the face of sicknesses and death did not allow anxiety and fear to paralyze them into non-action.



How Anxiety Affects Faith

Is Anxiety Sinful – The Problem

The Orthodox answer – It depends.

Most times anxiety is not sinful:

- Proverbs (9:10) says that,
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.
- St. Paul speaks of the anxiety he has for the churches
“Besides everything else, I face daily the anxiety of my concern for all the churches.” (2 Cor 11:28)
- He also speaks of the anxieties that a married persons feel
“...a married man is anxious about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife.” (1 Cor 7:33)

TYPE 3 Anxiety we would say is sinful in that the Divine within us alerts us (thru anxiety) of the natural consequence of sinful behavior.



How Faith Affects Anxiety

Is Anxiety Sinful – The Solution – Cultivate Response-ability

First, we must recognize that we cannot avoid anxiety.

Next, we can cultivate our *ability to respond* to our initial emotional reactions in thoughtful, graceful and productive ways that work to foster a more holistic (Eastern) approach to anxiety.

This means working towards a balanced relationship that combines worldly healing with God's Grace.

St. Paul experienced anxiety about his own inability to overcome certain flaws, however God reassured him saying,

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).