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Presentation Transcript
Anxiety
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June 7, 2007

The title of this presentation is *Anxiety*. Some time ago I went to the Pierce Farm Annual Campout at Big Sandy, Texas. We spoke there on a topic, by request, *Depression*. And ever since then – I guess that’s been two years ago in the fall – I’ve wanted to talk about a number of mental health topics and include what the Bible says about them. So today we’re finally getting back to that concept. The first one in the series was *Depression*. And this second one is *Anxiety*.

What is *anxiety*? Well, anxiety is what Jeff felt when he realized that there was nobody that was going to do the Bible study. We all know that feeling, right? We forgot something, or something’s happening that we don’t like and we become anxious about it. Anxiety is one of the fundamental experiences of human life. Everybody experiences anxiety.

When we’re worrying, when we’re afraid, when we’re dreading something, when we’re nervous, when we’re unhappy, we’re anxious. You could call anxiety *brain pain*. It’s sort of the equivalent to the physical pain that we feel in our bodies when something isn’t right, or when we’ve been injured. That goes from just the tiniest little thing – little tiny paper cut – to big serious problems. That’s the same with anxiety, as well.

There’s lots of things we consider painful mentally – anger, fear, dread, guilt, shame, remorse, depression, discouragement – all of these things. All of these things have, at their root, anxiety. At least that’s what *some* psychologists believe. Anxiety is the thing, they think, that makes all of these things unpleasant – or, they are an attempt to get away from anxiety.

I was conducting a family therapy session Wednesday night, and there were eleven people in the room – two therapists, nine adults – who were all trying to figure out how best to help the daughter of one of the couples in the room. The rest of them were all related, or were related, in some way, to the ex-wife, who was the biological mother. So we were trying to help them come to an agreement on what this family could do to help this ten-year-old child. At one point, the mother and step-mother began to argue with one

another, dragging up the past, and blaming and accusing each other. When that started going, I was looking around the room, and everyone was starting to realize this was going to escalate out of control if something didn't happen. And you could just see the body language of the various people. They all started to fidget. They were crossing their legs and folding their arms – kind of looking away, you know. Mostly they were looking at me, begging me with their eyes to do something about it, because we all hate confrontation because it produces anxiety in us. That's why we don't like it. That's the feeling.

Had that argument escalated, the anxiety level would have risen so high that everybody in there would probably have done something to get away from it. They would have left. When we experience anxiety, we try, somehow, to reduce it some way. The reduction of anxiety is the goal of the defense mechanisms that people have – denial, rationalization, repression and all of those things.

A number of the pioneering psychotherapists characterized anxiety as the absence of trust and security – which ties right back into the attachment theory stuff about how children are either secure or insecure. And if they're insecure, they're anxious. So, if you think of anxiety as the absence of trust and security, then we understand a little bit more about how important this experience that we have is. Trust and security are fundamental to mental clarity. You just can't be a happy person unless you have a measure of trust and security – safety.

There was a guy named Billy Joel, who wrote a song called *The Down Easter Alexa*, and it's about the New England fishing industry and the situation that all the independent fishermen find themselves in. And that is, that they're running out of fish to catch. They have to keep going out further and further, and deeper and deeper to catch the fish that they need to maintain their living. And so it's becoming more and more dangerous and more and more expensive. It talks, in the song, about how everything's mortgaged to the hilt, and yet the kids still need clothes to wear and shoes, and yet he's less and less successful at fishing. You can just get the sense that everything's closing in on him – the captain of this fishing boat. It's not a pretty song, but it's really a powerful song, because the words and the music make us anxious as we listen to it. We can just *feel* the anxiety in the song. That's another example of how anxiety is such a part of life.

After I've said all that negative stuff about it, we should remember that God made us, and He made us to *be* anxious sometimes. So anxiety *can* serve a useful purpose. I'll give you an example – a personal example.

I work at a building that's in Corrales, New Mexico. Corrales is somewhat like living in the country. It used to be more that way than it is now, but it's where all the *horsey* people live – big lots, and steel fences, and horses, and all that. So I'm kind of out in the middle of all that. When I come out of our office at night, we have this porch light that's real low energy – and it shuts itself off in the morning and turns itself on in the evening – but it's burned out. So it's *never* on and it's *very* dark out there – and *very* quiet, because you're a long way from any highways or roads. And there's no street lights out there at

all. Well, I'm a city boy. I'm not used to it being that quiet and that dark. And there have been some break-ins in the building that we're in – in the last year – so I come out of there and I start wondering who's around me? I'm not used to that. So I get anxious about it – not a lot, but a little. I found out that I'm not alone in that, because everybody else has been complaining to the boss about getting that light fixed.

So what's causing us to do that? Well, our anxiety is. It's causing us to take action. And we're trying to reduce our anxiety. If we didn't feel bad when we walked out that door, who'd bother to take the time? I wouldn't. I don't like the way I feel when I come out of there in the dark, so.... So, in that case, while anxiety is not pleasant, it does drive us to take care of ourselves sometimes, doesn't it?

There's another aspect to anxiety that we don't often think about. The human mind has the ability to hold contradictory ideas and feelings within it. Have you ever known people who are "Ford men" or "Chevy men"? You know, it just feels better to be on one side or the other, doesn't it? There's less anxiety when we're not ambivalent. Ambivalence – you know, strong feelings both ways – that creates anxiety in people. And so we usually try to find a solution – to find an answer. Sometimes we have to have an answer whether we know an answer or not. So, we just pick one – Chevys, Fords, Hondas, whatever. And that propensity is propelled by the desire to reduce anxiety – to get away from it.

God created pain as a warning to the body – or a warning to our minds to take care of our bodies – and the same is true of anxiety. He's given us *brain pain* to propel us to take care of our heart, our mind, our self. And how we choose to manage it is what makes it helpful or harmful to us. For example, some people experience chronic pain – back pain, for example – and some of them get treatment through helpful and healthful means – like better diet, exercise, stretching, acupuncture, judiciously monitoring pain medication (if they have to take that). And then there are other people who go the other route. They use alcohol or illegal drugs to self-medicate. In the same way, there are helpful and detrimental responses to anxiety, too.

When a person feels anxious, without a reason or an identifiable cause, and that feeling disrupts their everyday life, then we would probably try to diagnose that as some kind of an anxiety disorder. The key there is *disrupting everyday life*. When it's so bad that you're having trouble with your friendships, with your work – things like that – then it becomes a problem. Women are more likely than men to experience this kind of anxiety. Symptoms can vary in type and severity, but here's a list of common symptoms of what's called *generalized anxiety disorder*: restlessness, feeling of being keyed-up or on edge, feeling a lump in your throat, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, irritability, impatience, being easily distracted, muscle tension, trouble falling or staying asleep, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, dry mouth, stomach ache, diarrhea, headache. People who have a number of these symptoms usually realize they're anxious, but a lot of times they don't know why. And that's scary, isn't it – when you feel afraid and you have no reason that you can attach to it. That's probably one of the most disturbing things about it. It doesn't make sense to the person who has it.

The next one is *panic disorder*. I had this kid come in my office a while back. He's sixteen. He told me, "When I drive I feel weird and have to stop because I'm freaking out." (Those are not medical terms.) (Chuckles) Then he said, "I'm afraid to leave my house because I don't want to have one of those freakouts when I'm away from the house." "Well, how long do the freakouts last?" "Anywhere from five minutes to half an hour." And that's exactly what the book says about a panic attack – five minutes to thirty minutes.

So I read him the symptoms of a panic attack: feeling like your going to choke, chest pressure (while I'm reading these he's going...with his fingers – you know, he's ticking them off) pounding heart, racing pulse, dizziness or light headedness, shortness of breath or tightness in the throat, sweating, trembling or shaking, nausea, tingling or numbness in the hands or feet, hot flashes or chills, sense of unreality or dreamlike sensations, extreme fear of losing control, doing something embarrassing, going crazy or dying. That's a panic attack. So what would cause something like that with somebody? Well, the panic attack is caused by something – we'll talk more about that – but being afraid to leave because you're afraid you'll have a panic attack is called *agouraphobia*. People that have that are afraid to go out for fear that they'll lose it while they're driving, or in an elevator, or in a department store, or the grocery store, or something, and they'll have all those troubles.

So why does this young guy have this? I was talking to his psychiatrist...it's always so hard to figure out what's going on, because it's never just one thing. This kid has done every drug known to man. He has PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder – from all the terrible things he's seen, all the terrible things that have been done to him, and all the terrible things he's done to others when he was in a gang. He has *huge* shame, guilt and remorse for hurting people. And he has an illegitimate child, and his mother won't let him come near him or let him come near her, because he *hurt* her. He has traumatic brain injury from all the fights he was in and all the head-banging he's done. It's probably a little bit of all of that. He has *huge* anxiety about going outside, about meeting people from the old group. Plus, his brain may not be functioning very well. He tells me that he has trouble telling the difference between reality and dreams and fantasies. So his brain is not working too well. So that's a panic thing. You know, feeling like he's not fully functional, also, is scary.

Then there are *phobias*. That's a fear of specific things – like fear of flying. Now, a lot of people are afraid when they get *on* the plane, but it's not treatable until they *won't* get on the plane. It's treatable, but it's not diagnosed. Spiders – arachnophobia. That's always a big one. Social embarrassment. Some people have phobias about that.

Here's another one – *obsessive-compulsive behavior*. That's an anxiety reaction. I went in a gas station restroom a few months ago, and there was a guy in there – not a street person – he was relatively well-dressed – and he was washing up in the hand basin. He had a couple of towels out there, and he had his soap. While I was there, he washed his hands three times in a ritualistic fashion. That's characteristic of OCD. I don't know that he was, but if wasn't, he had some of the characteristics. These are rituals that are

performed compulsively and often around washing or ordering things. Have you ever seen people come in a restaurant and line everything up on.... I do that sometimes, but I don't *have* to. When everything's under control – all the way it should be – then we feel safe. So it's a way to reduce our anxiety, which is feeling *not* safe.

I was watching Dr. Phil this week. There was a woman on the show with her husband. She just couldn't stop trying to control his every move at home. What she did to control him was nag and belittle him a lot. What was Dr. Phil's suggestion? Well, it was that he would find her a really good therapist to help her resolve her anxiety.

What are the causes of anxiety? Now we can come back and talk about the guy that I was telling you about. Some of the causes they know are: first of all, there can be drug-induced anxiety. I was talking to – not just in the way that my sixteen-year-old guy is, where maybe he toasted his brain, and that causes it – I was talking to a nineteen-year-old girl once, who told me that she smoked some dope laced with green crystals. And she said that it totally altered her perceptions – her smells, tastes. Things she used to like to smell smelled bad to her and vice versa. Stuff like that. She said that for three days she was in her room with *huge* anxiety. She said, "I knew there was no reason for it, and *that* was scary, too."

Sometimes, coping with illness can cause anxiety. I'm working with a little boy who has spina bifida. Hydrocephalus, I guess, is a part of that condition. So the doctor told him that he needed a new shunt, because the one he has now – that runs from his brain down to his stomach to drain the brain fluid – was put in when he was an infant and it's too short. They had to put a new one in. Before the surgery, he was making steady progress in therapy. You could see his sand trays gradually becoming less chaotic, less violent, more benign, more peaceful, more social. But after his surgery, he built this tray in which there was a flood, a volcano and a nuclear bomb that killed everybody. He pointed out one particular person that was in the tray – a little figure of a guy wearing a cap and gown. He said, "He's getting married. And just when they told him, 'You may now kiss the bride,'" – he took his finger and knocked him down, and then he said – "the bomb went off." That morning he'd asked his mother if he would ever be able to have a girlfriend. So he's really worried about, is he going to live? That's what all the chaos is. He's an example of how much people are traumatized by illness. Of course, he's just nine years old, so he's wondering, "Am I going to be an adult? Will I live long enough to be an adult?"

We all know people that have been really sick – maybe we have ourselves – and when we face a health crisis, it can create a lot of anxiety in us.

There are also specific medical conditions that cause anxiety. When I was doing my schooling for my counseling degree, I worked in a clinic that was next door to a homeless shelter. One of my first clients was a semi-homeless, elderly woman, named Sarah. She was always into something. When she was younger, she'd been a prostitute. She'd been depressed a lot. She was mostly drunk when I knew her. She drank to reduce anxiety. She just lived a terrible, unhappy life. She was really spunky and had a good sense of humor,

in spite of everything. Over this weekened, she went on a bender and wound up in one of the local mental wards. I remember I went with my boss to visit her, and she said, “After all these years, they finally found out what’s wrong with me.” And Ken said, “Well Sarah, what is that?” And she said, “I’ve got multiple personality disorder. Oh, oh, I feel one coming on now!” Of course, that diagnosis is all about keeping her in there for a long time and getting a lot of Medicaid money. He said, “Sarah! You don’t have multiple personality disorder.” She said, “I don’t?” He said, “No, you’ve barely got *one* personality!” They used to tease each other a lot, I guess.

After that episode, and after she got out, the director had the clinic psychiatrist talk to her. This psychiatrist was also an elderly woman – and really, really sharp. She’d seen everything. One day she mentioned to Ken, in one of our meetings, that she thought Sarah had hyperthyroidism. And that causes anxiety. Ken asked her why she thought that. She said, “She smells like it.” And she didn’t mean that she smelled bad, but she’d just been around a lot of people that had hyperthyroidism, and she’d noticed that they give off a very distinct smell. I asked her if it smelled bad, and she said, “No, it’s just different than other things.” (I can’t smell anything anyway, so I wouldn’t know.) I thought that was really amazing. They put her on some medication for that, and she began to act normally for the first time since she was a teenager. Who know how many psychiatrists had seen her! And she’d gone undiagnosed all these years.

Stress is another thing that causes anxiety. Sometime the stresses of life just overcome our ability to cope with them. I noticed, for a time after I resigned from the United Church of God, that I was forgetting things. My wife says that’s completely on track with my normal way of doing things, but it was a lot worse there for awhile – while I was under a lot of stress. And I was also a lot more irritable. Notice I said, “*more* irritable” – more than usual.

What else can cause anxiety? Well, heredity can. They know that anxiety disorders tend to run in families – especially obsessive-compulsive disorder. They *know* that that has a genetic component to it. It’s kind of like, just because you have that genetic component, it doesn’t mean that you’re going to be obsessive-compulsive, but if you get put under enough stress, it might trigger it. You know, if you think about that, it’s helpful to understand that if somebody has a propensity towards strokes, if they take care of themselves – don’t smoke, keep their blood pressure down – they may never die of a stroke. But, they could. So it’s the same way with OCD and other anxiety-based things, too.

Personality. Personality can be a factor. Some personalities are more prone to anxiety. We know that personality is a combination of heredity and environmental factors, don’t we? How that baby is treated in the first two years of life gets wired into that baby’s brain, becomes the baby, and some of that gets passed on genetically. That’s how certain characteristics that people have in their personality show up downline. “He’s just like his grandpa.” And they’re not talking about how he looks. They’re talking about how he acts.

How else does environment affect a person? Well, let's say a person, for example, who was abused before he or she was old enough to recall it, may carry a feeling of insecurity, or fear, and not know why. You may recall that we did a series called *Spiritual Growth and Human Development*, and the first installment was about the first task of human development, which is attaching, or building trust with mother and father. If you'll remember from this sermon, or this presentation, that trust and security is the *opposite* of anxiety. So, when children don't have a secure attachment, they have *anxious*, or insecure attachment. That's where it comes from. And those things stay with us all the rest of our lives. We can manage it, but we're still going to have those propensities.

Let's talk a little bit more about how this works. Suppose a fire alarm goes off in your house, and you race around the house, frantically looking for the fire, but instead you find a broken alarm – a smoke sensor. Anxiety disorders work just like that. The body mistakenly triggers our alarm system, creating anxiety when there is no danger. And that can be caused, we said, by drugs, chemical imbalances in the brain – hereditarily, or from stress, or from other things – brain injury. It can be the side effects of medication. Or it can be unconscious memory.

Have we talked about explicit and implicit memory? *Explicit memory* is the stuff that you can remember – as far back as you can go. And you have stories that you tell about things that you remember when you were a little kid, right? Two, three, four. Some people can go back as far as two or three. Those are all stored in story form. There's a beginning, a middle and an end to those memories. But there is another kind of memory – at least, they're postulating this, based on all the brain scanning they're doing – that is *implicit*. That means it was formed in us before we could remember – before we had autobiographical, or *explicit* memory. So, those things that happened to us form memories. They're stored in our brain, but we're never going to be conscious of it. It *does* affect us, but we can't access it, and we can't process it.

That's pretty discouraging, sometimes, for some people to think about, but there are people, who have grown up that way, who find a way to be secure people as adults by learning to manage things and by working through the problem that they have. So, that, to me, is really encouraging – that there is a way to learn how to manage those things.

I was talking to a psychologist while I was in my program, and she was telling me about how her father treated her when she was a kid. She'd had a lot of psychotherapy herself, and she learned how to manage herself, but she said, "I know I'm always going to have that deep-seated belief, or fear, that I'm not good enough." She became the Person of the Year in Albuquerque one year. She has a successful psychotherapy practice. She has a doctor's degree. She's a successful, happily married person with kids that are well-adjusted. She's been a success. But something happened to her, in her early life, where she always has to battle that feeling. And she's done a really good job of it, I think. You know, bad stuff happens, but we can overcome it.

Let's talk about *managing* anxiety a little bit. If we're anxious, what can we do to take care of that? How can we manage it? Well, I'll just say right off, for some people, who

have deeply embedded anxiety, and really bad reactions to it, the only way they can get any relief is through medication. But that's extreme. There are other things that can be done to help. And if a person *can* do those things, and they work, you're much better off.

One of the things people can do is to *take action*. You can determine what's making you anxious and address it – like my friend that I was telling you about that I was talking to last night on the phone. She had this problem with her other friend, and she was feeling really anxious about it, so she went and talked to her to try to resolve the anxiety. So, she took action.

Another thing a person can do is just *let go* of it – to not dwell on past concerns. You change what you can, and let the rest take it's own course. *The Serenity Prayer* – it has to do with being able to tell the difference between what you can change and what you can't. And if you *can* let things go, then that's good.

Another thing to do is to *break the cycle* of anxiety. The latest studies tell us that exercise is one of the very most effective ways to reduce anxiety. If you go out and take a walk, where you walk up and down hills, and you make your heart rate go up and down – the kind of exercise that produces lactic acid – that will just about do as good as medication for most people. So, you've got to get out of that situation you're in, and just break it up. Go do something different. I've called my little four-wheeler my *sanity machine*, because I would go work on that when I was frustrated with the corporation. So there's things that we can do to manage the problems we have – the things that we're worried about.

Taking care of yourself. Get enough rest. Eat a balanced diet. Exercise. Take time to relax and do fun things. Avoid caffeine and nicotine, which worsen anxiety most of the time. Don't turn to alcohol or unprescribed drugs for relief.

And the last thing to think about would be to *talk to somebody*. Share your problems with a friend, or if you have to, a counselor who can help you gain some perspective. Being understood by another human being is one of the most helpful things that we can do to take care of ourselves and our anxiety.

What does the Bible say about it? Well, you know, all this management stuff we just talked about? I don't think that somebody that's been mistreated as a child, and can't access that stuff to work on it, I don't think that God is going to hold them accountable for that. But there are others of us, who have had things happen to us later in life – like leaving the organization would be my example – and we have to be responsible for our own anxiety in those cases – how we're going to manage it.

Let's go to Acts 5, and verse 1. Let's just look at a couple of scriptures here.

Acts 5:1 – *There was a certain man, named Ananias – Acts 5:1 – with Sapphira, his wife. They sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds – his wife also being aware of it. So they're sort of in collusion – you know, they sold their property.... Barnabas sold everything, I guess, and gave it to the church. And they sold this*

possession and they kept part of the money, but I think they kind of let everybody think that it was *everything*. And they were in collusion in that. *And they brought a part of that and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.*

Why did they do that? What were they afraid of? Were they afraid of being poor if they gave it all away? Were they afraid of not being seen as fully committed? Or not as spiritually strong as Barnabas? Or were they anxious about belonging? And so they wanted to keep some because they were afraid, but they wanted to be thought of as good? Did they have abandonment issues? Did they think that everybody was going to think they were no good rats if they kept part of the money? Can you not see how those kind of motives would be there to cause that to happen? And that all of those things carry anxiety with them, don't they? They're all fears that people might have. I don't know if any *one* of them is the one or two things that was going on with them, but they're certainly all believable enough.

So, the biblical approach is that there is a better way to deal with anxiety than that. And we're responsible to manage our anxiety so we don't hurt other people, so that we're honest, so that we can be good Christians.

The short answer to that question is in Philippians 4:6 and 7, where God tells us not to be anxious about anything.

Philp. 4:6-7 - *...but in everything 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 minds in Christ Jesus.*

I had a friend once, who is a drugist – he's a pharmacist – and he told me that most of the medication that he dispensed was stuff that helped people with their digestion and with their anxiety. And you know, digestion is one of the first things to go when we're really anxious. Right? We start having intestinal problems and we feel it in our abdomen a lot of times. And all these people are looking for peace – freedom from anxiety. They're trying to reduce it. And yet, God says that if we will just have faith in Him, and lay everything on Him – go talk to Him about the stuff that we're worried about – and be thankful for the things that we have – that's such an important part of reducing anxiety, isn't it? To be thankful for the things that God has given us – and then present our requests to God, He says that the peace of God, "which transcends *all understanding*" – you know, that's not explainable in human terms – "will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ."

Now, I want to take just a moment to mention that people who have chronic anxiety will look at that scripture, and they will say, "I must be a terrible person, because I can't have faith in God like He wants me to." That's *not* what this is talking about. Those are two whole different things. That anxiety that we have that just comes from our past – from the

things that have wounded us when we're little – that really doesn't have any connection, I don't think, with faith. God overlooks all of that. It's not held against us. I know a lot of people in the church that have that kind of thing going on with them. And they're some of the most faith-filled people that I know and who work the hardest for God. So, if that's the situation you're in, I don't want you to feel bad about that. And I think of the man who said, "Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief." Help my unbelief. And He will. That's His promise.

I also know Christian people who think that if they just follow all the rules, they won't have any problems. That sounds a bit obsessive. Even the thought produces anxiety, because it's tied to our performance. The greatest anxiety reducer that the world has ever seen is the grace of Jesus Christ. All the guilt, all the fear, all the doubt – they're really not relevant anymore. We can manage our fears by trusting in God. And, even if we can't get rid of all our anxiety, we can trust in God that He'll overlook that and that He'll take care of us.

You know, there's a scripture where Jesus said that He came to heal the brokenhearted. And I think that a lot of us have suffered wounds that have broken our hearts, so to speak – that have damaged us – and there is no way that we can get past it by our own efforts, and what it's going to take is a healing from God to do that. I think that that is a very calming, helpful thing to think about. Even if we can't, in this life, perfectly accomplish management of all of our fears because of things that have happened to us, we can still be healed of them in God's good time. And that, to me, helps reduce my anxiety.