

## **ANXIETY: Transforming Fear to Faith and Panic to Peace**

### **Lesson One: Our Anxious Culture**

More than 19 million Americans suffer from some form of anxiety dysfunction, making it the most prevalent mental disorder in the US. Starting in the 1980's, normal children experienced higher anxiety levels than adult psychiatric patients in the 1950's!

Although anxiety occurs in all cultures, there are a variety of factors which affect Western society, and particularly Americans more than other cultures.

#### **Media is the greatest contributor to fear in our society.**

"No danger is too small to magnify into a national nightmare," says sociologist Barry Glassner as he discusses the media and their guiding principle in his book, *The Culture of Fear*.

Turning on the news for a quick 15 minute survey, I hear terms like Joint Terrorism Task Force, homegrown violent extremists, sleeper cells, attacks, threats, etc. As my mind is trying to absorb it all, the newscaster quickly switches to the risk of a war in space and then flashes on horrible images of the disaster caused by hurricanes of the past, as huge portions of the population along the coastline of the mid-Atlantic states are evacuating their homes due to the impending catastrophe of Hurricane Florence.

The news is so overwhelmingly stressful that I'm glad I stopped watching it. The interruption of a commercial is a relief. It's a commercial for some new wonder drug for weight loss. They are explaining how the drug works on two areas of the brain, one which controls hunger and the reward system which causes cravings. As the young woman works out on the treadmill the narrator says, "*one ingredient in Contrave may increase suicidal thought or actions in children, teens or young adults. Serious side effects are mood changes, like depression or mania, seizures, increased blood pressure, glaucoma, liver damage*", yada, yada, yada. They show the young woman sitting at an outdoor cafe with some friends, enjoying a meal as the narrator continues: "*may cause nausea, constipation, headache and vomiting.*"

As I picture the young woman refunding her lunch at the outdoor cafe the narrator quickly adds, "*now you can talk to a doctor online and get free shipping.*" I ask myself, have people gone insane? Suicidal thoughts are one thing, but suicidal ACTIONS ... that's an entirely different ballgame. Now I am not only glad that I don't watch TV news, but I am thankful for the DVR so I don't have to watch these stupid commercials!

Fifteen minutes of television has exposed me to terrorism threats, catastrophic natural disasters and the idea that losing weight just may be worth the risk of organ damage and possibly even death. Killer asteroids, worldwide influenza epidemic, global warming and even theoretical risks such as subatomic particles destroying the earth from the inside out have blurred the lines between reality and science fiction. We are being warned that for the human race, time is running out.

## **Fear Appeal: The Commercial Value of Anxiety**

Complex psychological techniques are being used to manipulate people into changing a behavior or purchasing a product. Just as sex sells, fear sells too. Fear appeal is one of the manipulative strategies used by marketing professionals to persuade people to buy a product, pay for a service, or donate to a cause. Its aim is to make people feel that they are assuming a risk if they don't purchase a certain product (except those drug commercials, which, thanks to FDA regulations, let us know that we are assuming the risk if we DO use their product!) These scare tactics play on our fear of the unknown or fear that something is going to kill us. The fear sensation causes us to respond by changing the way we think or act.

These ads use images and phrasing designed specifically to evoke fear or concern. The famous ads for the anti-tobacco campaign show images of people with holes in their throats, missing teeth, ruined vocal cords, and lung cancer to make people fear smoking. The same has been done with crash test dummies in the effort to get people to use their seat belts.

The strategy has been successful because fear sells. It sells ideas and it sells products. Another commercial begins with a mom at the park with her two kids, a little boy named Kevin and a baby in a stroller. The mother turns her head a few seconds to tend to the baby, then turns back to find Kevin has disappeared. The woman is in a state of panic and starts shouting "*Kevin*" as she frantically searches for her son. She then grabs her bag and finds her child locator device that guides her to Kevin. The boy is just strolling in a field, holding a red balloon.

This scene, which is actually a battery commercial, conjures up extreme parental anxiety with thoughts of a child abduction and creates a desire for the security which comes from owning a child locator device and, of course, the batteries which make it work!

The shock value of these ads create a sense of urgency, and are especially effective when they are directed towards young people. Ads alerting teens to the dangers of drunk driving or drug abuse can be a beneficial use of fear appeal.

While these scare tactics have been used for decades, today we are bombarded with ads offering us products, services or prescription remedies which will save us from the dreadful effects of everything from total annihilation to offensive body odor. Insurance companies are quick to inform us that death and destruction is lurking behind every corner. At any second our homes could go up in flames, our cars can be T-boned at the next intersection, our identities can be stolen. One commercial shows a pastor performing a wedding. The next scene is the same pastor, but where the bride and groom stood is now a coffin, as the calming voice of the Allstate guy says, "you need life insurance for the unthinkable." He uses that term unthinkable as he tells us that this is what we should be thinking about and planning for. As he says in another ad about people burning their houses down while deep frying their Thanksgiving dinner, "Trouble Never Takes a Holiday!"

Besides the fear factor of commercials there are other tactics used which cause anxiety. Beauty product ads are designed to make us feel ugly and eco-friendly ads to make us feel guilty.

## **Television Programming**

Besides commercials, television in general has become a source of anxiety, and it's not just horror movies. Reality shows, with lots of shouting and yelling, cop shows and even documentaries are using shock value to attract their audiences. The website *Digital Spy* has an article titled, "*9 of the most horrifying and gripping true-crime TV series you can watch right now. Get ready to go dark.*"

The show *Criminal Minds* shows us how easy it is for serial killers to choose their random victims and the episodes with brutal home invasions are the perfect spot for the home security companies to place their commercials. Sexual predators are all around us as we see on *Law and Order SVU*, and international terrorism is a common occurrence on *NCIS*. These shows don't do much to help us sleep at night. In fact, they make it harder to sleep, and a lack of sleep can lead to the development of further anxiety or an anxiety disorder.

## **Social Comparison Anxieties**

Being in debt can cause anxiety, but some people have overridden that with their social status anxiety. The saying from the 1913 comic strip, "keeping up with the Jonses" is alive and well and thriving in today's media. We are now *Keeping Up With the Kardisians*. Did you know that Kim Kardashian has more than 100 million followers on Instagram alone?

Those of us who are much older and wiser are no longer in danger of such peer pressure. Or are we? How about all those shows on HGTV, which harmlessly seep into our minds? If you watch too many of those shows where the ugly diamond-in-the-rough homes are so easily transformed into shining gems in the span of 30 or 60 minutes, you may look around at your not so shining gem of a home and feel that you deserve better.

## **Fear Mongering in Politics**

In politics, the creation and maintenance of anxiety is a regular part of foreign and domestic policy. We have threats of nuclear war, race riots, gangs, illegal drugs, AIDS, hepatitis, other infectious disease and most notably, terrorism to be anxious about.

In the 1960s, political ad makers began to embrace fear in their campaigns. A 1964 campaign ad for Lyndon Johnson known as "Daisy" shows a young freckle-faced girl plucking the petals off a flower as she counts. As she's reciting her numbers out of order you begin to hear in the background a countdown, followed by the image of an atomic bomb exploding. The campaign promoted the fear that Barry Goldwater would lead the country to nuclear holocaust.

Richard Nixon once said, "People react to fear, not love; they don't teach that in Sunday School, but it's true." And the use of fear tactics in politics has grown with each passing year. Today, political candidates compete to see who can out-terrify constituents, using menacing images in ads meant to exploit and manipulate our fears.

## **TMI**

The increase in knowledge through technology has created an increased fear of unseen hazards. Our lives are filled with the possibility of dangerous situations happening, and when something happens somewhere in the world, reports quickly escalate from news flashes to

around-the-clock coverage, with commentary which always puts the worst possible interpretation on the event. If there's no disaster happening nearby, don't worry, they will find one for you!

In his book, *Poe's Heart and the Mountain Climber*, Richard Restak, M. D., a neurologist, neuropsychiatrist and best selling author explains how sometimes our brains do a poor job of estimating the probability of disaster.

## **Fear of Flying**

Fear of flying is a good example. Statistics on air travel show that you would have to get on a commercial flight every day for more than eight thousand years before being the victim of a multiple-fatality airplane crash. You are much more likely to die in the car on the trips to and from the airport. But you can not solve this problem by confining yourself to the perceived safety of your home. On the list of the world's most dangerous places, the home ranks second, after the highways, which get top billing.

## **A Day at the Beach**

If you fear shark attacks, you can be comforted to know that your risk of being killed by a shark is only 1 in about 95 million. If you plan to skip that risk and hop on a boat instead, fatal boating accidents occur at a rate of 1 in 402,000, with death by drowning at 1 in 225,000 and death from skin cancer from prolonged unprotected sun exposure 1 in 37,900.

## **Perception vs. Reality**

It's certainly wise to take heed of warnings, and to do what you can to stay safe in all situations, but it's important to know the real risks as opposed to our perception of risk. In 2002, Wendy Perrin asked 13,857 subscribers to a tourism magazine, "If you won a free trip to one of the following places, which trip would you most likely pass up because of anxiety about personal safety: Israel, Istanbul, Bali, or New York City?" Eighty five percent felt Israel was too risky; 29% would avoid Istanbul; 56% wouldn't go to Bali; but only 1% said they would pass on a free trip to New York.

Israel is clearly perceived as the most dangerous, yet New York has seen more casualties from terrorism and most experts place New York at the top of the list for potential terrorist attacks, with Washington, DC as the second. Israel's terrorism death toll, measured in fatalities per hundred thousand residents is much lower than the annual homicide rates in New York and dozens of other US cities.

The same people in this survey were asked the following question: "How high a risk of a terrorist attack would you be willing to accept before canceling a pleasure trip?" More than half (53%) said that they would cancel if the odds were 1 in 100,000, or greater. Acting on those numbers, they would also have to avoid the risks involved in driving, walking on the streets, or holding a job! The human brain is not a very good calculator of odds!

Perception is just a guess or an estimate of what we think is "out there" and our perceptions are often unreliable. While taking the position of "better safe than sorry," anxious people deprive themselves of a great many of life's pleasures.

Much of the fear invoked through the media has us seeing ourselves as out of control of our lives. We feel powerless to do anything. Dr. Restak offers this sound advice for controlling the media's impact on your anxiety levels:

- “Resist the tendency to become obsessed with disturbing news events. Learn the facts and move on. Stay away from all the commentary. The information age has changed our lives. The result of the news are like a roller coaster ride; exciting, scary, disorienting, and all rather different than the view from more solid ground.
- Avoid news and programs aimed at arousing your anxiety about subjects you can do little about. The reports use words like showdown or crisis and show graphic images to arouse anxiety. They even use background music marked by a mounting sense of tension and threat.
- Find ways to learn the facts and keep abreast of what's happening without the emotional roller coaster ride. The goal is to learn more, not become more anxious.”

Media is out to manipulate us in one way or another; their goal is to make us want something. As you begin to look at what the media is doing with a more critical eye, and asking questions about their underlying goal, you will be able to analyze the message and avoid the manipulation and the anxious thoughts which they are trying to use to their advantage.

Panic is defined as “*A sudden or excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety.*” Trying to guarantee an unrealistic sense of security in an insecure world leads to many of the anxiety-driven behaviors we will be looking at in the next few weeks; phobias, obsessions, compulsions, panic attacks and generalized anxiety disorder.

## **Take Every Thought Captive**

In 2 Corinthians 10: 5, the apostle Paul says that we are to take every thought captive. The goal of this study is to get a better understanding of what causes or triggers our anxious thoughts and learn how to take those thoughts captive.

Next week's lesson will look at some of the fascinating findings of the past few decades, through the use of brain scans and other scientific technology. It is possible to see which areas of the brain are associated with anxiety and learn how the science of anxiety can help us understand our anxious thoughts rather than becoming paralyzed by them.