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Anxiety and the Body

by Dana Dowd PT, MS

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental illness in the United States, affecting 19% of our population, which is about 40 million adults. Anxiety affects men, women, and children in all age groups. There are a variety of possible causes: genetics, loneliness, learned coping patterns, social inequities, traumatic events, and health issues.

Anxiety is “a feeling of worry, dread, unease or panic, typically about an upcoming event or something with an undetermined outcome.” Anxiety is a normal response for many important life moments, like taking a test, giving a performance, traveling, as well as experiences like getting married, childbirth, or loss. It is usually of short duration and does not cause lasting harm. In fact, a short period of anxiety increases our energy, awareness, and focus so we can tend to the difficulty or excitement that we are facing. However, if the symptoms are excessive when compared to the actual problem, if the stressors are non-specific, or if the symptoms are interfering with normal life, a specific clinical diagnosis might be made, such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

Common treatments for anxiety disorders are medication, individual therapy, and/or group therapy. However, anxiety is more than our worried

thoughts and feelings. It affects every system in our body, including muscles and joints, blood pressure, breathing, skin, and digestion. Each of us will have our own personal “anxiety fingerprint” based on our genes and our personalities. Much of the time we are not aware of how our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations are all part of anxiety.

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When someone goes to physical therapy, they will describe physical symptoms of pain and discomfort. They often add their mental complaints as well, but rarely realize that they are connected. Common complaints include: “I’ve been really stressed at work lately” or “I’ve had some family issues to deal with and haven’t gotten much sleep.” The physical symptoms they are feeling are rooted in their sympathetic nervous system or fight-or-flight response, which is responding to their stress and directing the body to get ready for action. Heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension all increase. Our digestive system and certain immune responses slow down to save body energy. When the sympathetic fight-or-flight response is in a state of high arousal, it can cause sleep

disruption and inflammation, which can increase muscle and joint pain.

This is the acute phase of a stress response, and hopefully it only lasts for a few days. Unfortunately, some people are in situations of constant stress that keeps their fight-or-flight response on high alert and/or they are self-soothing with unhealthy coping behaviors like

isolation, poor sleep, alcohol use, or poor diet. This can cause the fight-or-flight response to stay activated. If this cycle is not broken, the stress response can become chronic and begin to affect the health of the body.

Most people will have one or two areas of recurring physical stress. The most common complaints include the amount and quality of sleep, muscle or joint tension, and pain (headaches, neck, and lower back pain), digestive issues (constipation, diarrhea, increased food sensitivity, indigestion, gas, and bloating) and cardiopulmonary issues (chest tightness or pain, racing heart, breathing issues like sleep apnea, asthma, and allergy symptoms).

Other physical symptoms relate to how we are attempting to make
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Case Study | Father Joe

Father Joe got right to the point and described his back pain as “going on for years” and rated it an 8 out of 10 on the pain scale. He had tried different doctors and pain specialists as well as medications, but nothing seemed to work. He described his work hours as 24/7, 365 days of the year and felt burned out. “At the end of the day, I don’t have the energy to shop or cook healthy food, or exercise or even do things I love like seeing friends or hiking.” When asked to describe the behavior of his pain, he gave a blank look and said, “It just hurts.”

The behavior of pain is the “when, where, how long, intensity, irritability, recovery, and personal feelings about the pain” that helps a therapist categorize it: muscular, nerve, visceral, acute, or chronic, and/or emotional. This information guides the treatment. For example, when someone has a burning or numb feeling down the back of the leg, it is likely a nerve is getting “pinched” in the spine. Treatment would be for the back, not the leg, even though the leg is where the pain is being felt.

Father Joe was able to tease out some details of his pain, “It is in the center of my lower back; it feels like I am locked up. Sometimes I’ll get a sharp pain out of nowhere that makes me tense up and not want to move. It is the worst in the morning and at the end of the day. It is better while standing and worse when sitting, and awful in car rides. The pain is 6 out of 10 most of the time. It scares me. I can’t stop thinking about it. I feel like I will have to live like this for the rest of my life.” When asked if he had tried any treatments he said, “No, I’m too scared. I’m just resting and trying not to do anything to aggravate it.”

It is not uncommon for pain to cause fear, but unfortunately, fear will activate

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the fight-or-flight response. Father Joe thought he was helping his body heal by resting, but he was prolonging the misery. In physical therapy, the mantra is: “Motion is Lotion.” However, if someone is fearful of movement, they will not move normally. Father Joe’s first goal was to learn to let his muscles relax safely.

There are many methods for relaxing the body: massage, yoga, stretching, and hot tub or hot shower. For Father Joe, guided muscle relaxation using a hold-relax technique gave him a sense of control that helped to decrease his fear. Lying in a recliner, Father Joe listened to a guided relaxation that helped him focus on different muscles, hold each muscle in a gentle contraction for a few seconds, and then fully relax the muscle. He did this for all the major muscle groups for thirty minutes. Afterward,

Father Joe reported his pain was a 1 out of 10. He couldn’t believe that something so simple could have made such a difference. He also realized that he had a tool to help his body heal.

After a week of practicing the guided relaxation, Father Joe started practicing light mobilizations and gentle rocking movements for all the actions of the spine and pelvis: forward and backward rocking, side-to-side, and rotation to help keep those muscles relaxed. He started in a hands and knees position and moved to lying on his back and then standing. The routine of gentle repetitive movement, like a swing or a rocking chair, helps relax tight muscles and eases the fear of movement that causes pain. It also increases the Relaxation Response, decreases systemic inflammation, and increases endorphins. Once Father Joe was able to see that he could move in many ways without pain, he was able to let go of guarding his back and breathed more slowly and deeply, which helped lower his fear and his fight-or-flight response. Once the fear was gone, Father Joe began to move into the Relaxation Response and thus began the healing process.



Bidding Farewell to Beth Davis

Nearly twelve years ago, Beth Davis joined Saint Luke Institute as the Director of Education. During her tenure, she created our online education platform, SLIconnect.org, which provides over 170 hours of skills-based classes for the initial and ongoing formation of priests and religious. This innovative platform enabled Saint Luke Institute to continue to fulfill its

mission of providing outreach, education, and support to the Church worldwide.

Beth served as the coordinator for the quarterly LukeNotes publication, which forms a library of over 100 in-depth articles and case studies on spiritual and psychological topics. In addition, Beth spearheaded numerous workshops and conferences for dioceses and

communities, including the Conference on Human Formation held at St. Meinrad's Archabbey.

Each day, Beth brought intelligence, dedication, integrity, warmth, and a giving spirit to her work and community. We sincerely thank Beth for her innumerable contributions and wish her the very best in her next endeavors.

Bidding Welcome to Marc DelMonico, Ph.D.

Saint Luke Institute is proud to welcome Marc DelMonico, Ph.D. to the position of Director of Education and Communications. Marc is a national Catholic ministry leader, strategist, and digital communications consultant who has worked for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM). He has led national efforts with multiple organizations to develop trainings and

standards for chaplains, prison ministers, campus ministers, and parish ministers.

Marc holds a Ph.D. in Historic and Systematic Theology from The Catholic University of America and an M.Div. and M.A. in Systematic Theology from the Washington Theological Union. He has been an adjunct professor of undergraduate theology at Loyola University in Baltimore, MD and at Marymount University in Arlington, VA.

Through his many years as a team member and project manager with Perisphere Media, Marc cultivated his skills in digital media strategy and communication while working with an array of nonprofit and small business clients.

Originally from Central New York, Marc has lived and worked in the Greater Washington, D.C. area for many years. He now resides in Baltimore, MD, where you can find him rooting for the Orioles.

Anxiety *continued*

ourselves feel better. Soothing with alcohol, sugar, and fatty foods, and poor motivation to socialize or exercise are all detrimental to good health. A downward spiral of increased systemic inflammation is created, which can lead to someone feeling less healthy and less in control, causing an increase in anxiety. However, there is an antidote. The sympathetic fight-or-flight response can be turned off and the parasympathetic system turned on. This is also known as the "Relaxation Response."

Our relaxation response occurs when we are rested, happy, and feel in control

of our body and our lives. A contended state of mind tells the nervous system that all is well. An example of this would be when someone has a health problem and goes to the doctor's office, and suddenly all the symptoms are gone. The mere act of having a plan and letting go of the burden to a professional allowed the body to come out of the stress response and into the relaxation response. This is also thought to be why placebos or unproven treatments are sometimes just as successful as real treatment. If people believe something will help, they start to relax, and their body starts to heal. This was named "Remembered Wellness" by

Dr. Herbert Benson, the father of the relaxation response.

Our ability to tap into the relaxation response may be one of the best ways to stay healthy and anxiety-free. By purposefully engaging in activities, behaviors, places, people, food, and rituals that bring peace, joy, and happiness, we are consistently keeping our nervous system in balance. We are alert yet relaxed, also referred to by athletes to as being in "The Zone."

Dana Dowd PT, M.S., has been the coordinator of physical therapy and fitness at Saint Luke Institute since 1999.

Together We Strengthen the Church

26th Annual Benefit

Saint Luke Institute wishes to thank the 2023 Annual Benefit Sponsors, Benefit Chairs, and Benefit Committee for their contributions in honoring Rev. Quinn Connors, O.Carm., PhD, and Sr. Peggy Crowley, SHCJ, LCSW, recipients of the 2023 Saint Luke Award. The Annual Benefit was a spirit-filled evening of celebration and joy for all who participated.



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