

Anxiety No Substitute for Action, Experts Say

In the News

Julie Beck, who covers health and psychology for *The Atlantic*, wrote this month about an article that appeared in *New York Magazine* that seemed to advocate responding to climate change with alarm and anxiety.

Beck's concern was not with atmospheric physics but with the futility of prescribing anxiety as an adequate response to any perceived problem.

"Anxiety is not a necessary prerequisite for action," Beck wrote, adding that worry turns "people's attention inward to their own emotional states, rather than outward onto the problem."

Beck noted that many people use social media not only to raise awareness about matters that concern them, but to suggest that we should respond to those issues with anger, fear and outrage.

Many suggest that these feelings are easily spread, because we don't want to go through whatever crisis we fear alone. "People try to frighten others because they're frightened themselves," adds psychotherapist Rosemary Randall.

Some psychologists believe that people find anxiety appealing because worrying about things their friends care about can help them feel like they are part of the group. Anxiety can also provide us with an illusion of control by developing the belief: 'If I worry about this, that's going to keep us safe.'

Even when people realize that worrying about a potential disaster won't prevent it from happening, they find it very difficult to keep from worrying. Mentally, they may recognize that worry won't prevent a terrorist attack or a pandemic, but emotionally, they feel obligated to worry.

While "anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations," according to *psychiatry.org*, anxiety disorders are debilitating, affecting 40 million Americans. Nearly four in ten teenaged girls and one in four teenaged boys suffer from an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

According to Scott Woodruff, the director of the anxiety and obsessive-compulsive treatment program at the American Institute for Cognitive Therapy, the ability to make good decisions, to rest, and to concentrate declines when people obsess over things that cause them stress. Chronic anxiety or constant vigilance can actually paralyze people, so that they are unable to take action that could solve the

problems that concern them. Constant worry can cause burnout, depression and physical ailments that lead to decreased productivity and effectiveness.

One subject of a George Mason University study on activist burnout indicated that the need for constant vigilance about matters of concern led to loss of the ability to think clearly and creatively and to visualize effective response strategies: "I felt immobilized in terms of being able to produce any sort of work or take any sort of action."

The sheer number of people calling for panic about every imaginable worrisome potential hazard or scenario can create a kind of fog that dulls the senses to real dangers. It's something like the anxiety fatigue created by the fabled shepherd boy who cried wolf too many times when there was no wolf, only to find that the townspeople ignored him when a wolf really did appear.

Even though excessive fear can immobilize people, research shows that people can be motivated by fear to change their beliefs and behavior, particularly when the appeal to fear is accompanied by recommendations on how to respond to threats.

Concrete calls to action are more effective than calls to emotion. "You're not going to get behavior if you don't tell people what to do," said Dolores Albarracin, a University of Illinois psychology professor who studied fear-based appeals. She discovered that fear appeals work better when calling for one short-term action rather than for a longer commitment or more complex action.

So how should we respond to the constant barrage of all those posts and tweets calling for panic?

When we learn about a matter of concern, we don't need to research every detail, click every link leading to a related story, or read and respond to every comment on the subject. "Whatever the issue is, once you've found out about it, stop," Randall says. "That's enough. You know about it. Then you need to decide what you're going to do."

As Episcopalians, we are called to “strive for justice and peace among all people...,” and thus, we often spend time worrying about social causes. In these anxious times, how can we put aside our worries and step into action?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 12:25

Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up. (No context needed.)

Author Brenè Brown speaks of the difference between empathy and sympathy by using the metaphor of someone stuck in a dark hole. Empathy, Brown says, is climbing down into the hole to say “hey, I know what it’s like down here, and you’re not alone,” whereas, sympathy is looking into the hole and saying, “yeah, it sucks down there, want a sandwich?”

Questions: What "good word" can we give those who are experiencing high anxiety and worry? Is it empathetic or sympathetic or neither to join in with another’s outrage on social media?

Matthew 6:31-34

[Jesus said,] "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (For context, read 6:25-34.)

In this passage, Jesus counsels his followers about the futility of worry saying that, if the birds can trust God for food and the flowers can trust God for raiment, we should likewise trust God for the basic necessities of life, because we are more valuable to God.

In addition, worry is ineffective as a strategy. Worry can't extend our lifespan; if anything, the added stress caused by anxiety could do the opposite! Rather than fret about tomorrow and what may or may not happen in the future, we should focus on the present.

Rather than running to and fro, trying to solve our own problems, bowing to our stomachs as if they are our masters, we are to remember that the Lord is God, and we serve God alone. If that is so, we are to trust God to meet our daily needs.

Questions: What is the difference between working hard to provide for your family and “striving for all of these things?” What is the difference between doing an honest day's work and striving for the “all these things" that Jesus mentions? What does "striving first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" look like? What wisdom do you hear in Jesus' words, "Today's trouble is enough for today"?

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (For context, read 4:4-9.)

When reflecting on this passage it is easy to miss the words “with thanksgiving.” Paul writes that, by putting our requests before God in a thankful way, we allow God’s peace to enter into our lives.

Studies show that people who show gratitude are more open to empathy, have better physical and emotional health, and sleep better. People who show empathy, are physically and emotionally healthy, and get good sleep are also less likely to experience anxiety.

Questions: Within the anxiety of current social injustices, are there things we can be grateful for? What peace “which surpasses all understanding” can we identify within our community?

Prayer for Quiet Confidence (BCP p.832)

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*