

# Faithful Conversations: Embracing Mental Health and Wellbeing

## Anxiety and Stress

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# Background

## **Wake Forest University**

- BA in Psychology, minor in Communications

## **University of Tennessee**

- Masters in Experimental Psychology
- Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology

## **University of Georgia**

- Predoctoral Internship in the Student Counseling and Testing Center

## **Duke University and Health System**

- Postdoc Fellowship in Employee Occupational Health and Wellness
- Therapist for Internal and External Employee Assistance Programs

**Private Practice** – 15 years

## **Relias**

- Subject Matter Expert, Writer for Behavioral Health Continuing Education

Trinity Baptist Church – 2007

# Difference between Anxiety and Stress

**Stress** is typically caused by an external trigger. The trigger can be short-term, such as a work deadline or a fight with a loved one or long-term, such as being unable to work, discrimination, or chronic illness.

People under stress experience mental and physical symptoms, such as irritability, anger, fatigue, muscle pain, digestive troubles, and difficulty sleeping.

**Anxiety**, on the other hand, is defined by persistent, excessive worries that don't go away even in the absence of a stressor. There are Anxiety Disorders.

Anxiety leads to a nearly identical set of symptoms as stress: insomnia, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension, and irritability.

# Acute vs Chronic stress

**Acute stress** usually occurs in response to a short-term stressor, like a car accident or an argument with your spouse. Acute stress can be very distressing, but it passes quickly and typically responds well to coping techniques like calming breathing or brisk physical activity.

**Chronic stress** occurs when stressors don't let up. The roots of chronic stress can vary widely, from situations people can control or avoid (such as having a toxic friendship) to difficulties that are hard to escape (poverty, racism or other discrimination).

***Because people respond differently to stressful circumstances, a situation that one person might find tolerable can become a source of chronic stress for another.***

# Health Problems due to Chronic Stress

Chronic stress can damage both mental and physical health.

Being chronically stressed may leave you feeling fatigued, sap your ability to concentrate and cause headaches and digestive difficulties. People prone to irritable bowel syndrome often find that their symptoms spike with psychological stress.

Though acute stress can heighten certain immune responses, the wear-and-tear of chronic stress is bad for the immune system.

Chronic stress can also affect cardiac health, with multiple studies finding a link between chronic stress and the development of coronary artery disease.

# Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

- Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations.  
It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness and involve excessive fear or anxiety.
- Anxiety Disorders are not a simple diagnosis. They cannot be detected with a blood test. They take many forms and can also accompany other medical conditions.
- Anxiety Disorders are the most common of mental disorders and affect nearly 30% of adults at some point in their lives.

# Exposure to Stress and Trauma can Change the Brain

Brain areas implicated in the stress response include the:

**Amygdala** - the emotional response center of the brain that helps people perceive and control their emotions. It also plays a role in emotional memories and fear response.

**Hippocampus** - associated primarily with memory and learning. Brain scans have shown that the hippocampus has decreased function in people with PTSD when they are exposed to something that reminds them of trauma.

**Prefrontal cortex** - responsible for executive functioning or higher-level thinking and reasoning. People with PTSD have been found to have decreased function and activation of the prefrontal cortex when exposed to traumatic reminders. This may account for any irrational fears that trauma victims have trouble overcoming.

# Trauma Specific

Trauma requires “**actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence.**” Stressful events not involving an immediate threat to life or physical injury such as psychosocial stressors (e.g., divorce or job loss) are not considered trauma in this definition

Traumatic stress can be associated with lasting changes in the brain areas just mentioned.

Trauma can cause your brain to remain in a state of hypervigilance, suppressing your memory and impulse control and trapping you in a constant state of strong emotional reactivity.

Trauma changes brain chemistry (cortisol and norepinephrine) as well as structure, and these effects can start to impact normal functioning.





# Recognize Signs of Struggle in Yourself and Others – Small Discussion



HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE FEELING STRESSED OR ANXIOUS? WHAT SIGNS OR SYMPTOMS CAN YOU NAME?



WHAT SIGNS DO YOU SEE IN YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS THAT INDICATES THEY MAY BE FEELING STRESSED OR ANXIOUS?



WHAT DO YOU DO TO HELP ALLEVIATE THOSE SYMPTOMS FOR YOURSELF?

# Signs and Symptoms of Struggle

Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration

Changes in appetite, energy, desires, and interests

Difficulty concentrating and making decisions

Difficulty sleeping or nightmares

Physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes

Worsening of chronic health problems

Worsening of mental health conditions

Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances

# Spirituality and Self Care

Learning to cope with stress in a healthy way will make you, the people you care about, and those around you become more resilient.

**Basic needs** – food, sleep, exercise, hygiene, etc.

**Spirituality** has many benefits for stress relief and overall mental health. It can help you:

**Feel a sense of purpose.** Cultivating your spirituality may help uncover what's most meaningful in your life. By clarifying what's most important, you can focus less on the unimportant things and eliminate stress.

**Connect to the world.** The more you feel you have a purpose in the world, the less solitary you may feel. This can lead to a valuable inner peace during difficult times.

**Release control.** When you feel part of a greater whole and part of a greater community you may realize that you aren't responsible for everything that happens in life. You can share the burden of tough times as well as the joys of life's blessings with those around you.

# Spirituality and Self Care Continued

**Expand your support network.** Sharing of can help build relationships.

**Lead a healthier life.** People who consider themselves spiritual may be better able to cope with stress and may experience health benefits.

**Self-reflection.** Try these tips:

- \* Try prayer, meditation, mindfulness and relaxation techniques to help focus your thoughts and find peace of mind
- \* Keep a journal to help you express your feelings and record your progress.
- \* Seek out a trusted adviser, friend, or counselor who can help you discover what's important to you in life. Others may have insights that you haven't yet discovered.
- \* Read inspirational stories or essays to help you evaluate different philosophies of life.
- \* Talk to others whose spiritual lives you admire. Ask questions to learn how they found their way to a fulfilling spiritual life.
- \* Seek a place of solitude.

# Scripture

John 41:13

For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear, I will help you.

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.



# How to Help Others

1. Active listening
2. Compassion
3. De-stigmatize
4. Empathy
5. Hope
6. Resources –  
See handout

# THANK YOU

Questions

Copy of handout and resources will be available in the church office

Local support, referrals, and consultation:  
Amanda Price - 919-741-9699