

Westminster Counseling Center Counselor's Corner

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Anxiety—Healthy or Unhealthy?

We all face experiences of fear or worry in our lives. We face job stress or loss of employment. We deal with significant life transitions – moving to a new city, marrying or dealing with divorce, experiencing aging or illness. We are concerned about our children's choices as they enter adolescence and adulthood. Every day we see the cultural, economic, political and spiritual challenges confronting our neighborhoods, country and world.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stresses such as these. Some tension, worry and concern can help us stay focused on the real problems that need our attention. Anxiety that serves this purpose is really adaptive. To not experience this kind of anxiety might indicate we are distancing ourselves from or avoiding the very real problems we all face. But when anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations, when we find that we can't stop worrying, or feel that our efforts at solving problems don't alleviate our fears – then our anxiety may have become a disabling and overwhelming condition requiring special attention.

Of course, this article can only briefly explore some general ideas about excessive anxiety. Consultation with a mental health professional can help you to determine whether or not your anxiety is adaptive and points you toward situations in your life requiring your attention or is of a more disabling nature – really a problem in and of itself.

Mental health professionals recognize five basic types of anxiety disorder: panic disorder, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder. (The following quotes and statistics are taken from the National Institute of Mental Health website, cited below.)

People struggling with panic disorder experience “unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress.” Panic attacks can occur at anytime and often cause people to wonder if they are experiencing a heart attack. Some people develop intense anxiety between attacks, wondering when the next one will strike, and worrying about being embarrassed or caught by the attack somewhere when they cannot get away to a safe spot. Panic disorder affects approximately 2.4 million Americans.

Social anxiety disorder involves “a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and being embarrassed or humiliated by [one's] own actions...While many people with social phobia recognize that their fear of being around people may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. They often worry for days or weeks in advance of a dreaded situation.” Physical symptoms, such as blushing, sweating pro-

fusely, or trembling in social situations, are common as well. Social anxiety disorder is experienced by as many as 5.3 million Americans.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) “is a debilitating condition that can develop following a terrifying event...Whatever the source of the problem, some people with PTSD repeatedly relive the trauma in the form of nightmares and disturbing recollections during the day. They may also experience other sleep problems, feel detached or numb, or be easily startled. They may lose interest in things they used to enjoy and have trouble feeling affectionate. They may feel irritable, more aggressive than before, or even violent. Things that remind them of the trauma may be very distressing, which could lead them to avoid certain places or situations that bring back those memories. PTSD affects about 5.2 million adult Americans.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, involves intrusive thoughts (obsessions) that create intense anxiety which is often only relieved by performing specific actions (compulsions). “You may be obsessed with germs or dirt, so you wash your hands over and over. You may be filled with doubt and feel the need to check things repeatedly. You may have frequent thoughts of violence, and fear that you will harm people close to you. You may spend long periods touching things or counting; you may be pre-occupied by order or symmetry; you may have persistent thoughts of performing sexual acts that are repugnant to you; or you may be troubled by thoughts that are against your religious beliefs. For people with OCD, such activities consume at least an hour a day, are very distressing, and interfere with daily life.” OCD afflicts about 3.3 million adult Americans.

Generalized anxiety disorder “is much more than the normal anxiety people experience day to day. It's chronic and fills one's day with exaggerated worry and tension, even though there is little or nothing to provoke it. Having this disorder means always anticipating disaster, often worrying excessively about health, money, family, or work. Sometimes, though, the source of the worry is hard to pinpoint. Simply the thought of getting through the day provokes anxiety.” GAD affects about 4 million adult Americans.

Several therapeutic approaches have proven to be of great value to people struggling with these conditions. Medication and psychotherapy, sometimes alone and sometimes in combination, have been shown to be extremely helpful.

Jonathan Davidson, MD, director of the Anxiety Program and Traumatic Stress Program at Duke University Medical Center, identifies five areas that require attention in helping people find relief from anxiety. These are often most productively pursued in therapy, but

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The Birth of Freedom Sculpture by Paul T. Granlund

By Rodney Allen Schwartz, Director, The Westminster Gallery

The Birth of Freedom, one of sculptor Paul T. Granlund's largest pieces, has stood as a jewel on the Nicollet Mall since its dedication in October 1977. The Upper Midwest Conservation Association (UMCA - housed at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts) will be cleaning and restoring the bronze of the sculpture at about the same time as this newsletter arrives in your mailbox.

The Birth of Freedom was given by the Thomas Crosby family "in thankfulness to God, in tribute to the human spirit, and with affection for the City of Minneapolis." It is based on Galatians 5:1 "Stand fast, therefore, in liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." *The Birth of Freedom* announces this promise of freedom to all who pass by.

On Saturday, September 10, an exhibition of Paul Granlund's large sculptures and smaller models from the collections of fifteen Westminster members and from the Granlund family will open in The Westminster Gallery. This exhibition will develop the theme of freedom and demonstrate the process of designing and producing bronze sculpture with raw materials and tools from his workshop, his sketches, and photographs of him creating and installing *The Birth of Freedom*. On September 11, Coming Together Sunday, the choir and trumpets will lead the congregation as we process from the sanctuary onto the Nicollet Mall for a brief service of re-dedication of this monumental piece.



The Birth of Freedom
during its installation in 1977. (Archive photo)

See page 4 for more information
about Granlund exhibition events.

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are also indicate the ways we can become pro-active about our own anti-anxiety work. They are: **1.** Changing fearful beliefs (challenging the automatic thoughts that lead to exaggerated anxiety), **2.** Exposure therapy (learning how to peacefully survive, and even thrive, in the situations that normally cause great anxiety), **3.** Developing serenity skills (building competence at relaxation), **4.** Exploring appropriate medication, and **5.** Diet and exercise concerns (being careful about caffeine intake, for example).

People can and do conquer these kinds of debilitating anxiety. Seeking professional evaluation and assistance is highly recommended if you suspect you or someone you love may be dealing with an anxiety disorder. Becoming active in your own healing can contribute. Peace is possible.

Resources

• Davidson, J. (2003) *The Anxiety Book: Developing Strength in the Face of*

Church School Open House, Sunday Sept. 11

by Mary Alette Davis, Director of Children's Ministries

Teachers are gearing up for another great program year beginning at 9:15AM, Sunday, September 11. All students will go directly to their classes (Gathering Time in the Great Hall begins September 18) where they may be picked up at 10:15AM or remain with teachers through the beginning of the 10:30AM service processional to commission teachers and students in their faith journey this year! Parents of young children are welcome to join us as we process. Following the opening of worship, children will return to their families in the pews for the remainder of the service, or go to Children's Church.

All children ages three through high school are welcome in our Church School classes. If you have questions about registration, please call Jane Corbin, 612.332.3421, or ask your child's teacher for a registration card. Additional information about class locations and registration will be at the information desk on Sunday, September 11.

This year parents of all church school children and youth are invited to join Byron Thompson, Mary Alette Davis, Nikki Goulet, and Barb Harvey, as well as members of our Children, Youth & Families Council in the Great Hall for an Open House from 9:30am-10am. This is an informal time to ask questions and find out about the many wonderful programs at Westminster! We'll have some samples of your child's curriculum for you to look at as well as coffee and treats. Please join us after your child gets to her/his class!

Fear. New York: Riverhead Books.

• NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health) website:

www.nimh.nih.gov/

healthinformation/anxiety/menu.cfm