

# Do You Ever Feel Anxious?

## *Part 1: Perfectionism*

By Lynette Sykora

Hi there fellow missionaries and European FMers! It's almost springtime! I hope that you are beginning to see signs of it around you, wherever you are. As we think about springtime, I wanted to think with you about how to breathe in peace and joy and to breathe out worry and negative thinking. I battle negative thinking a lot, as I am often thinking of what I haven't done yet, or worrying about if people approve of me. As a missionary, I am often wondering if I am doing things well, if I will be able to communicate my ideas in a foreign language, if I am doing enough, and it is hard to measure these things! Do you ever feel worried? Do you ever feel "anxious?"

Anxiety is a difficult thing to define, actually. We say it a lot, "I feel anxious," but sometimes we confuse it with our fears. Fear is when we know of what we are afraid; it has a concrete object or situation. For example, I am afraid of drowning and I can't put my head underwater! It is a fear of something external, or outside of us.

Anxiety is a fear of something *not* easily named and it is more internally focused. You usually notice it in your body, like your neck muscles tightening or your stomach feeling upset, but you may not know why you are feeling that way. Other symptoms are: rapid heart beat, dry mouth and sweating. If you are feeling anxious, you might behave differently too, like you might not be able to express yourself or you may feel like you can't cope with your daily routine. In your mind, you might feel apprehensive or begin to detach yourself from life or situations and you could start to have a fear of dying or of losing your sanity. I experienced this myself a couple of years ago, with an anxiety attack (or panic attack) as a result of lots of change in my life and some specific events one day. I felt short of breath, cold and tense. I felt like I was going to lose my mind for a while and all I could do that day was sit on the couch and wait for it to pass. It was horrible!

Wow, this sounds serious, doesn't it? Maybe you just have a little bit of nerves once in a while, and this sounds like way more than that. I hope you don't have all of these symptoms! But just in case any of you do, or if you know someone who does, I'd invite you to take a look at anxiety with me. I wanted to talk about what it is, and what causes it, but mostly, I wanted to discuss with you the things that maintain anxiety and what we can do about it. There are four primary tendencies that lead to anxiety and they are: *perfectionism, excessive need for approval, ignoring physical and psychological signs of stress and excessive need for control*. In this essay, I just wanted to discuss the first one, perfectionism. (yeah, that was on purpose).

### **What Causes Anxiety?**

The basic reason you are anxious is that your body is engaged in the primary "fight or flight" instinct. Something has appeared to your body as a threat, even if it is a psychological one (like you are afraid of looking stupid when you speak a foreign language) and your body is pumping adrenaline through your body to enable you to fight this threat or flee from it. When your body is dealing with this kind of heightened response for a long period of time, it begins to show in signs like muscle tension, headaches, digestive difficulties and more. Tension build up is not healthy.

Other causes of anxiety include medical problems. For example, if you struggle with hypoglycemia or asthma, your body may feel there is a physical threat to its survival and anxiety

results. Long-term causes such as heredity or childhood environment may also be at play. And last but not least, living in a stressful situation for a long time can cause anxiety. But I'm sure none of you are in stressful situations!

### **How Perfectionism Plays a Role in Anxiety**

OK all you perfectionists listen up! You know who you are! And don't think you're off the hook, you people pleasers, because we're the next issue! (And be sure I'll be worrying about whether you approve of this essay until then!) It is acceptable and even commendable in our world to be a perfectionist. So it is quite rare, I think, to hear anyone say that maybe you don't have to be perfect. So here it is: **You don't have to be perfect!** Perfectionism is characterized by having high expectations of yourself, others and life and if someone misses the mark, you are disappointed and critical. You are over-concerned with small flaws in yourself. You cannot fully accept your accomplishments or what you did right, but instead focus on what you did wrong. It can also cause low self-esteem because you keep telling yourself you are not good enough. Favorite phrases of perfectionists are "I have to," and "I should." Perfectionism can lead to chronic stress and to burnout! Whoa! That's a big deal!

**Talk to Someone** So, what can a perfectionist do about this? Well, I'm glad you asked! At a more fundamental level, perhaps it would be good to take some time to look at yourself and talk about your sense of identity or worth with someone you trust. You might find that you're basing that on your accomplishments or on being right all the time.

**No More Stinkin' Thinkin'** Secondly, I would like to help you work on the "stinkin' thinkin'" as my psych professor called it. If your thinking style often includes "should" or "have to," or you live in the world of over-generalizations like "I always mess things up" or "I'll never be able to do this right," then perhaps it is time to re-think. Try taking a week to notice all the times you use this kind of thinking and write it down when it happens. What are the messages you are telling yourself? When you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious, what thoughts are running through your mind? Once you have these statements written down, you can begin to work on counter-statements for each of them. You can use logic or Scripture to do this. Here are some examples:

#### **Perfectionist Thinking**

I should be able to do this right.

I must not mistakes

I just can't do it all.

I messed it up again.

#### **Counterstatement**

I'll do my best and need to learn to be content with that.

It's OK to make mistakes.

I'll break it into smaller steps, and then I can do it.

I got most of it right and that's pretty good!

**"Accentuate the Positives"** Thirdly, take time to notice the positive things you have accomplished each day. What are the things, even if they are small, that you did get done, or kindnesses you offered to others? And pay attention to whether you disqualify these positives with a "but." For example, "I was able to talk to the store clerk (in Ukrainian) but I probably

looked like an idiot because I forgot the word for pork roast.” Instead, try, “I was able to talk to the store clerk in Ukrainian!! And she understood me!!”

### **A Look at Scripture**

Philippians 4:6 is where Paul is telling the Christians of Philippi to not be anxious about anything. Of course, it is not so easy just to stop being anxious, so he goes on to offer practical suggestions on how to do this. First he tells them to pray about the anxiety, and to give thanks. These two actions are in direct opposition to anxiety and worry. If you pray to God, you can give those worries to Him and you are in the presence of the Almighty God who is over all things.

Perhaps you are anxious because of your limitations, but God has no limitations! If you give thanks, it is very difficult to be anxious at the same time and it helps you to focus on the positives in life. For me, it is hard to be logical when I am anxious, so instead of looking for rationality, I'd rather hear loving words of truth spoken to me to soothe my anxious heart. That's where Scripture can help! (and a piece of chocolate)

To go even further, Paul encourages them to think instead: whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about those things. I doubt that whatever you are worried about would qualify in that list. Is it excellent to think about how you make mistakes? Is it praiseworthy to worry about being humiliated at the grocery store? I think God and his truths are the things that would fit this description. I think nature and its beauty fit that description. I think love and the other fruit of the Spirit fit that description. I think our blessings fit that description. And when we turn our hearts and minds to God himself, He is able to guard our hearts and minds with His peace.

So, to close, a prayer of thanksgiving as an example:

Dear Lord, Thank you so much for your abundant love that covers over a multitude of sins. Thank you for the white snow today and for the hope of spring to come. Even though there are some things that could overwhelm me today, I am choosing to focus on the positives. Thank you that I have a kind husband and a cute son! Thank you that I am making progress in Slovak and could understand the lady at church for the first time. Thank you for accepting me, as I am, and for dying on the cross for me. Amen!

*Thanks for reading this and I look forward to your reactions or feedback. The next issue is anxiety caused by need for approval, so stay tuned.*