

Do You Ever Feel Anxious?

Part 4: Excessive Need for Control

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Based on *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook* by Bourne

Dr. Edmund Bourne says that the need for control in your life makes you want to have everything be predictable. You want to be sure that all bases are covered, which is in effect the opposite of letting go and trusting things to work out (or trusting in God to work things out). Many times, the need for control can come from a traumatic personal history where you felt frightened, violated or powerless. As a result, you feel defensive and you are vigilant to prevent that kind of experience reoccurring. Another response is to feel depressed and discouraged about maintaining control of your life, so you give up. But in this essay, we are focusing on the former, those people who feel life is OK if they have control over it and how this need for control can perpetuate anxiety in our lives.

I can see this need for control evidenced in the people I have counseled as well as myself. One client I worked with had an alcoholic father and emotionally distant mother and she has struggled for years with bulimia—a behavior that is in its essence, a need to control something in our lives. Maintaining this habit, keeping it hidden, controlling her food and her weight, were causing more and more anxiety in her. She then needed to manage the anxiety from this controlling behavior with other things, like controlling people around her or self-injury. It was a never-ending cycle.

For myself, I can relate to this idea as it pertains to the birth of Simon and now as I am facing a second birth. The first one had quite a bit of trauma to it, and I felt powerless, frightened and violated. My reaction now, as I prepare for the second one, is to try to control as much of it as I can. I am making a birth plan, I have a friend and Josef lined up to be with me, I have the best doctor, a better hospital, plans for if this happens or if that happens. And even beyond the birth, I am trying to bring control and change to my home. I have a long list of things to change, to buy, to paint, to remove, to make, etc. and I am continually talking about it. (Of course a large part of this is the nesting urge associated with pregnancy!) I know that there is a strong desire in me to control this birth, to make it better this time. But guess what? Am I in control of the birth? Probably not. I can bring some change, but I can't control it. And no, I am not resolved to that yet!

Bourne suggests four strategies for overcoming this need for control, but all require time and persistence. The first one is **acceptance**. Acceptance means learning to live with the unpredictability of life and the changes that occur daily. There will always be something that comes your way that you didn't plan on: an illness, another person's behavior, weather and you cannot always be prepared for them. Developing acceptance means learning to take life as it comes, like the phrase, "go with the flow." How can you do this? One way is to work on letting go of perfectionism, the first trait we looked at together (see Europe mission google website if you need a refresher). But letting go of unrealistic expectations will save you a lot of disappointment. Relaxation is another technique and can be a great way to cope when something unexpected comes your way (deep breathing, muscle relaxation, picturing a calming scene). And another way to cultivate acceptance is to cultivate your sense of humor! Yes, you should laugh! Acceptance means adjusting your reaction from "Oh no! It can't be!" into, "Oh well, that's the way it goes sometimes!" Acceptance ensures that we will be able to cope better and sooner with these difficult life situations.

Helpful statements:

- ◆ “I’m learning to take life as it comes.”
- ◆ “It’s OK to let go and trust that things will work out.”
- ◆ “I can relax and tolerate a little disorder and ambiguity.”
- ◆ “I’m learning not to take myself or life so seriously.”

Another strategy to help you with your need for control is to work on developing **patience**. When you want control, you usually want it immediately. However, many of life’s difficult situations cannot be worked out that fast! Have you ever noticed, though, that the pieces of a solution for these problems come together over time? Patience is not giving up, but it is waiting for the best answer, waiting for the resources and the answers you need, to come in their time.

Thirdly, developing **trust** is very helpful as you are developing patience. You may not see the solution to a particular difficulty at first, but it is not realistic to expect that you will see how things work out in advance. Basically, trust means believing that eventually everything does work itself out. Either you find a solution or you change your attitude about it and learn to cope with it. Can you look back at your life and see that most problems have worked themselves out?

And finally, according to Bourne, developing a **spiritual approach to life** can reduce your excessive need for control. As Christians, we are ahead on this one! It means believing that there is Someone who transcends us and to whom we can turn over those things which are insoluble, overwhelming or just worrisome. It doesn’t mean you give up responsibility for your life, but that Someone, and we will proclaim that to be God, can help you, support you, guide you through these difficulties. You don’t have to be fully in control. You can also nurture your belief that there is a larger purpose in life beyond the day to day things you see. If you don’t believe this, then life seems to be random, unpredictable, unjust and even cruel.

I was helped recently by our pastor here, Daniel Pastircak, in his explanation of suffering. He looked at the book of Job and said that in the beginning it seemed to be more like a court room, set up in a two-dimensional world, where Job and his friends were trying to understand Job’s suffering by finding in the present, the sin or the cause of it. But by the end of the book, it is more like a glimpse of eternity, where God says, “Look at me.” This book shows us that the events of our lives which do not have explanation in the present, are part of a journey towards eternity and the hope that someday it will make sense. We do not live in a two-dimensional world, where x causes y and it’s obvious. I find this comforting and frustrating! In the present, we may see benefits of enduring difficulties and we can hope that in the larger scheme of life and God’s plan for us, it has a purpose. I encourage you to read James 1:1-16 and take some time to reflect on this need for control in your life.