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Anxiety: Benefits and Drawbacks

by Maria Kereshi, Psy.D

Anxiety is a natural response that evolved to help individuals manage potential threats and challenges. While it is usually associated with negative experiences, anxiety can also have some benefits and serve a useful purpose in certain situations. Mild to moderate levels of anxiety can enhance performance, provide an energy boost, and increase motivation to accomplish tasks. By acting as an internal alarm system, anxiety serves as a signal that something may be wrong or needs attention. It can help us identify potential dangers or problems, which prompts us to engage in proactive problem-solving or contingency planning. Anxiety can increase our alertness and focus, allowing us to be more attuned to our surroundings. Anxiety can sometimes be accompanied by a “gut feeling” or intuition about a particular situation. While it is essential to balance these intuitions with rational thinking, anxiety-driven intuition can help us make decisions based on subtle cues and past experiences.

Anxiety can appear in relationships and may even benefit them. Individuals with interpersonal anxiety often possess a higher degree of empathy and sensitivity towards others. They are attuned to the emotions and experiences of those around them as their own anxiety heightens their awareness of social cues and nonverbal communication. This awareness can make them more compassionate



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and understanding in their interactions with others.

Interpersonal anxiety may also make individuals hyper-aware of their surroundings and the behaviors of others. Such heightened observation can enable them to understand people’s needs, perspectives, and intentions more accurately, fostering deeper connections and

insights in their relationships.

People with interpersonal anxiety often value and cherish their close relationships. Due to their fear of judgment or rejection, they may be selective in choosing their friends and communities. Once they establish trust and feel secure in a relationship, they can exhibit a strong sense of loyalty, commitment, and dedication, making them reliable and dependable community members.

Individuals with interpersonal anxiety often excel in active listening. Their anxiety-driven focus on others can make them attentive listeners who are genuinely interested in understanding and supporting the people with whom they engage. This careful listening can create *continued on page 3*

Case Study | Father Brian

Father Brian recently moved to a new assignment in his diocese, which was an hour away from his former parish, where he had been for six years. While he loved his former parish, he was looking forward to a quieter, smaller community. Overall, he was successful in his past assignments; his administrative work was complete and timely, he demonstrated good pastoral awareness, had a supportive social network, and he was physically active in a tennis club.

His new parish was in a rural area where he did not know many people. The parish was thriving with a stable staff and active ministry life. Father Brian's anxiety began when he started moving his belongings to the new rectory. He was also trying to decide if he should keep his primary care physician or try to find someone local. Where would he go for a haircut? He had his favorite restaurants back home, but now he didn't even know where to go for a good cup of coffee. The changes started to feel overwhelming.

His new staff was friendly, helpful and competent. They had been working together for so long that they knew each other's families and had inside jokes. He knew it was silly, but he felt like a new kid in second grade who was walking into the cafeteria and did not know where to sit.

Father Brian got right to work. He started to get frustrated with himself if he didn't know the answer to a question or forgot someone's name. It felt like his mind would just go blank sometimes. At night, he felt so tired from the day, but would have trouble falling asleep. He noticed people yawning or looking at their watches during homilies, and his gut told him that he was boring them. He worried that he was too friendly, or maybe not friendly enough. After an interaction with someone, he would

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replay the conversation in his mind, second guessing his responses. His gut was feeling like the interaction was "off." He had always felt confident, but this change seemed to bring about insecurities he hadn't experienced in a long time. As time went on, he became familiar with his new assignment, but the anxiety seemed to stay.

He kept his distance from people, worried they didn't like him. Others were interpreting Father Brian's behavior as standoffish. If he socialized, he felt very self-conscious, nervous, and just wanted to leave. As he turned down social invitations, people assumed he did not want to spend time with them and eventually stopped asking. He had not met new tennis partners and his exercise decreased.

He was caught in a cycle of working, busying himself with administrative tasks, then going home and watching television until he was tired enough to go to bed. When he went to bed, his worries would keep him awake. When he went to see his physician, the doctor noted that his weight and blood pressure had increased. As he told his doctor about all the life changes he had experienced in the last year, his doctor asked if he had considered therapy to help with the transition. Father Brian thought he should have been able to manage something as routine as an assignment change without help, but he was willing to try it.

Father Brian's Vicar for Clergy had a list of therapists that the diocese had used in the past. He was restless the night before his first session, unsure of what to expect and what the therapist would think of him. Their first meeting included a lot of questions regarding Father Brian's background and his current issues. Father Brian felt like he told this stranger more in an hour than many people knew about him his whole life, and he noticed feeling relief at sharing some of his struggles. The therapist told him that his symptoms *continued on page 3*



Anxiety *continued*

a safe and validating space for others to share their thoughts and feelings, leading to positive experiences in ministry and more meaningful and fulfilling relationships.

The benefits of anxiety are most prominent when experienced at mild to moderate levels. When anxiety reaches higher levels, it can cause negative emotional, social, and health consequences.

In relationships, anxiety can also lead to communication difficulties and make it challenging for individuals to express themselves openly and effectively. People with high anxiety may struggle with articulating thoughts and feelings, fear judgment or rejection, or constantly worry about saying the wrong thing. There are also times when anxiety can trick us into thinking something is wrong when it is not. If rejection is anticipated, a neutral comment can be misinterpreted as a negative one. These errors can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunication, or a lack of emotional connection.

High anxiety in relationships can also lead to overdependence or enmeshment. An individual may seek constant reassurance or validation from colleagues, community, parishioners, or friends. They may rely heavily on others for emotional support, leading to an imbalanced dynamic. Excessive dependence can

strain relationships and create feelings of resentment. On the other hand, some people will avoid or withdraw from social situations, which can make it difficult to maintain regular and meaningful interactions. The result can be a sense of emotional distance or isolation within these relationships.

those responsible to leaders. Anxiety can also occur when hearing feedback, especially if the feedback is critical.

Once a person notices the appearance of anxiety, they can put measures into place to help reduce the anxiety when the situation reoccurs. A therapist can help figure out the patterns of anxiety based on

There are also skills and practices that can be learned to calm anxiety in the moment, such as prayer, mindfulness, and positive self-talk, among others.

Supporting someone with high anxiety can be challenging and emotionally demanding. The constant need for reassurance, accommodating avoidance behaviors, and managing the impact of anxiety on the relationship can feel overwhelming or irritating. Supporting those with high anxiety can sometimes lead to feelings of stress and frustration.

Anxiety can appear at different times throughout a person's lifespan, and in specific situations. With time and observation, certain patterns may emerge that are more likely to trigger anxiety. Anxiety may appear during times of transition or when a person is trying something new and feeling inadequate. Anxiety can be present among persons in leadership or

an individual's history and help develop reduction strategies. For some people medication can help lessen the impact of anxiety so that they are able to use therapy more effectively. There are also skills and practices that can be learned to calm anxiety in the moment, such as prayer, mindfulness, and positive self-talk, among others. While it may take time and trial-and-error to figure out what works best for each person, such skillful guidance can be invaluable in responding to anxiety in a comprehensive way.

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Case Study *continued*

suggested a struggle with anxiety and since his anxiety, had been present for more than six months, it was considered a Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

Father Brian and the therapist decided that they would meet weekly until the symptoms reduced. He learned about

sleep hygiene to address nighttime worries. He began new social relationships and learned ways to improve his communication with others. They also set goals for each week, such as spending 40 minutes exercising, or leaving administrative tasks for the hours between 8 am and 4 pm.

Having someone take a nonjudgmental look at where things were going off-track helped Father Brian begin to feel like his old self again. By speaking about his struggles and goals with a therapist, Father Brian was able to manage the change with this added support.



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