

A Proven Method
for Dealing with
Worry, Stress, and
Panic Attacks

THE
ANXIETY
CURE

YOU CAN FIND
EMOTIONAL
TRANQUILLITY
AND WHOLENESS

DR. ARCHIBALD D. HART

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*Author of **Adrenaline and Stress***



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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PREFACE

Anxiety is now the number one emotional problem of our day. Panic anxiety is the number one mental-health problem for women in the United States, and it is second in men only to substance abuse. Many anxious people also suffer from other emotional problems, notably depression. Anxiety and depression go together like Jack and Jill. Clinically, the two are sometimes very difficult to separate.

If you suffer from anxiety or know of someone who is suffering from anxiety, this book is for you. If you are in a high-pressure job and want to prevent anxiety problems from developing, this book is also for you. Prevention is always better than the cure.

I have one fundamental message in this book: *Tranquilizers alone will not cure your anxiety problems.* Is this important? It certainly is.

Why is this important? First, some amazing discoveries have taken place over the last few years that have revolutionized our understanding of what causes anxiety. I don't just mean the rejection of the archaic idea that all anxiety is just in your head. This has been obsolete for some time now. The modern scientific understanding of anxiety has gone beyond this. While a few die-hard psychologists still cling to the idea that all anxiety is purely a mental phenomenon (and therefore anxiety sufferers must spend the rest of their lives in some form of therapy), we now know that a lot of anxiety is biologically based. Notice, I didn't say *all* anxiety is biologically based. For example, the sort of anxiety that the Bible talks about, which is more akin to "worry," is probably a learned behavior that goes back to the earliest part of life. But the anxiety that is rampant in our society today does not necessarily come from excessive worry or bad childhood experiences. In fact, most of the patients I see report a perfectly normal childhood. They are usually extremely competent people.

In recent years, researchers have discovered just how much of our modern-day anxiety is being caused by stress. Stress not only causes headaches, ulcers, and heart disease, it also sets the stage for anxiety by wreaking havoc with the brain's biochemistry. This is why the most frightening increase in anxiety problems has occurred in highly functioning executives, women, pastors, and leaders, the very group who are the most overstressed.

The reason we are seeing such a dramatic rise in stress disease, anxiety, and clinical depression in modern times is not too difficult to discern. Humans were designed for camel travel, but most people are now acting like supersonic jets. In a nutshell, most of us are living at too fast a pace. Our adrenaline is a continuous stream of supercharged, high-octane energy. And, as with any vehicle running on high-octane fuel, we usually burn out quickly. If you really want to know why you are so stressed-out, consider the fact that you, like many others, are too hurried, hassled, and overextended. The pace of modern life is stretching all of us beyond our limits. And we are paying for this abuse in the hard and painful currency of stress and anxiety—plain and simple.

So the formula for understanding this book is simple: *High adrenaline, caused by overextension and stress, depletes the brain's natural tranquilizers and sets the stage for high anxiety.*

The connection between stress and anxiety disorders has been grossly overlooked, which has made it almost impossible for anyone to totally cure their anxiety. Without a proper understanding of the adrenaline-anxiety connection, many people simply rely on medication to control their anxiety. But let me be clear: Overdependence on artificial tranquilizers does not cure anxiety. Medication only temporarily relieves the symptoms of anxiety; it does not address the cause.

Perhaps the most important aspect of our recent discoveries is the fact that the brain has its own system of natural tranquilizers. But only one of these natural tranquilizers is similar to the benzodiazepines, the most commonly prescribed form of antianxiety medications available to us today. This means we cannot rely solely on artificial tranquilizers to fix our anxiety problems. We have to address the problem at its source, the disruption to these delicate hormones that is caused by roller-coaster, fast-track living.

Although artificial tranquilizers are effective in ameliorating anxiety symptoms in the short term, they don't cure the anxiety permanently. Further, modern tranquilizers are highly addictive. Your brain becomes dependent on them; before you can break this dependency, you have to restore the natural production of your brain's own tranquilizers, else all hell will break loose in your brain. Your brain can be as rebellious as any incorrigible child.

Something else has to change if you are going to cure your anxiety and not depend on artificial tranquilizers the rest of your life. It is this "something else" that you learn all about in the following pages. In fact, from my experience in treating anxiety problems, I am convinced that if you suffer from high anxiety, there is only one long-term answer to your problem: *You have to make some significant life changes.* This is not to say that antianxiety medications don't have their place. They do. I recommend them often. But they are only interim solutions that must be followed by long-term changes if you want to be free of troubling anxiety. So, we have a lot of work to do together in this book.

By the way, lest you think I only know about anxiety secondhand through my patients, think again. I hasten to confess that I am the chief of sinners in this area. That's why I know all about this subject. I was an adrenaline junkie for a long time, and I can easily backslide. I love challenges and thrive on crises. There is never enough time in any day for me to do all I want to. Life is too short, too precious and full of too many opportunities to be lived halfheartedly, so I pull out all the stops. I have little tolerance for anything that blocks my progress. I know this problem personally, but I also have discovered the answers to overcome anxiety. I have effectively put into practice the advice I offer you in the following pages.

So read on. This book may save your life. At the very least, it may preserve your sanity.

CHAPTER 1

THE ANXIETY REVOLUTION

An anxious heart weighs a man down.

PROVERBS 12:25 (NIV)

Samantha is a vice president for a large bank group. I must confess some ignorance about the complexities of banking, but as best I can decipher, Samantha “sells” money. Surprised? I sure was. I always thought you bought things with money. Apparently, she shifts money around so as to get the best return on it. Her work entails quite a bit of travel and takes Samantha away from home regularly.

She wrote the following entry in her diary a month before she consulted me:

A strange thing happened to me on a recent plane trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles. It had been a long, hectic week, and I couldn't wait to get home to my family. I was restless and irritable at the slowness of everything. Finally the plane took off. We had no sooner left the ground when I started to sweat. My heart sped up and felt that it was going to pop out of my mouth. Then my head felt dizzy and I couldn't get enough air. It was as if someone had shut off the air supply in the plane. I became frightened. *What if the plane has no air supply?* I thought. I looked around to see if others were struggling to breathe too. No such luck. It was me. I didn't know whether to be relieved or scared.

Then the pilot announced we were on our way to L.A. and gave the usual piffle about how high we were going to fly, etc. Now I couldn't swallow, let alone breathe. A tight band around my chest seemed to be getting tighter. *What is going on here?* I thought. My brain was frozen, and my body felt like it had floated off and now belonged to somebody else. I had never, ever felt this weird before. Was I going crazy? Since I couldn't go anywhere, not even leave my seat because of the stupid seatbelt warning, I closed my eyes and tried to relax. But my breathing became even more difficult as I relaxed.

Then just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I felt a wave of terror sweep over me. *Something terrible is going to happen to me*, I thought. I had to muster up all my courage not to jump up and try to leave the plane. I took a deep breath, shuddered, and discovered that if I slowed down my breathing I felt a little better. Strange. Here I was, feeling that I wasn't getting enough air, yet I felt better if I slowed down my breathing. Later, of course, I discovered that this was a classic sign of panic attack, but at that moment I had no idea what was happening to me.

Because this all happened on an airplane, I intuitively knew that if I didn't get to the bottom of my problem and bring it under control, it could develop into a full-blown fear of flying. This could spell disaster for my job. I finally made it home but felt so fearful that I was quite incoherent and nonfunctional for several days. I stayed home and tried to rest. My husband kept pushing me for an explanation. Finally I told him about the whole episode, and it was then that he insisted I get some help.

THE PERILS OF PURSUING EXCELLENCE

Samantha is not alone in such an experience of panic. Approximately 10 percent of the population, more women than men, have had such a panic attack. Many have had repeated attacks.

But perhaps the most alarming aspect of panic attacks is that they mostly strike the strong. Yes, you read that correctly. Panic anxiety strikes those who seem to be the *strongest* among us.

The common stereotype is that only “weak” or anxiety-riddled people succumb to anxiety, particularly panic anxiety. This is just not true. Because this notion is so widely believed, many who acquire panic anxiety disorder are totally taken by surprise. They say things like:

“Others, yes, but not to me.”

“I have always been the one who leads, the one who gets things done.”

“In high school and college I was the ‘star.’ Everyone looked up to me.”

“This couldn’t possibly be happening to me.”

But anxiety is not a disorder that afflicts the weak, the fragile, and the delicate. Often there is not the slightest hint of previous anxiety. This is the disorder of presidents, CEOs, VPs, ladder-climbers, powerhouses, dynamos, live wires, and go-getters. Those in leadership positions are more likely to be candidates for panic anxiety. Reason? *Anxiety is a disease of stress*. High-pressure jobs take their toll more than low-key jobs. People who are caught up in the pursuit of excellence are particularly vulnerable because they can’t see the danger signs early enough.

To put it in a nutshell, if the combination of your personality and work makes you an adrenaline junkie, you are at risk for developing panic anxiety disorder. Anxiety is clearly the consequence of too much stress acting on your highly vulnerable brain chemistry. And if you have inherited a weakness in your brain’s chemistry, you will have a much lower threshold for tolerating anxiety than others.

CAN WE ESCAPE BEING CAUGHT UP IN A HIGH-STRESS WORLD?

It is unlikely that you can ever escape totally from this high-stress world. We are all on the same train. How can you possibly get off without forfeiting the opportunity to achieve anything meaningful with your life? So the question really becomes: Is a high-pressure life admirable and necessary? To some extent I must say yes. It’s the American way. How else can you achieve the American Dream? Success demands that you pay the price of committing yourself to pursuing excellence. I wouldn’t really want to live any other way.

But this approach to life has its penalties and pitfalls. So if you want to preserve your sanity and achieve a healthy life, *you have to make some choices and resolve to live a balanced life*. By “balanced” life, I mean that, like a marathon runner, you must learn how to pace yourself. You give all you’ve got going uphill and rest as much as you can going downhill. You try to balance the drain on your energy so that you can “go the distance.”

You can’t escape the realities of our high-stress world. You certainly can’t turn back the clock to simpler times—although, I must confess, this is a wonderful fantasy that I occasionally indulge as a form of escape. I frequently reflect on the many happy childhood times I had with my grandparents. They lived a simple, country life. They were totally self-sufficient, tilling a small piece of land and raising their own food. They saved wisely for their retirement and spent little money during the bleak years of the Second World War. With only a shortwave radio to connect them to the rest of the world, life seemed simple yet luxurious to me as a child. There was a sense of unhurriedness and simple pleasures. All the money in the world couldn’t buy such luxury in today’s world. It is not for sale; you have to create it.

But we can’t go backward, only forward. We must make the most of the present realities of our lives. Frankly, though, seeking to live a balanced life is like trying to find your way through a dangerous minefield. The way to survival is narrow and must be charted with care if you are going

come out the other end intact. You need to understand *all* the dangers and have clearly worked out strategies for avoiding disaster. Likewise, many are falling into stress disease, particularly panic anxiety disorder, because they do not have a clear strategy to develop the antidotes for the fallout from the pursuit of excellence.

CREATING YOUR OWN TRANQUILLITY

My message in this book is quite unique and, hopefully, simple and easy to apply. It is about creating a tranquil life in the midst of an anxious world. It is about how you can enhance your brain's natural tranquilizers and push back the inroads of stress.

What is revolutionary in this book is understanding the connection between anxiety and the stress hormones produced by the adrenal glands. Anxiety is *not* the presence of some phenomenon in the brain, but the *absence* of something else.

So what is missing when we are anxious? Important brain chemicals called "neurotransmitters." I call them our "happy messengers," and this is an extremely accurate label for them. Our brain is full of these messengers. They help us remember, keep us awake, and in the final analysis, keep us sane. When our brain is robbed of happy messengers, as when our stress is too high and prolonged, it cannot function properly. Anxiety is then the "smoke alarm" alerting us to the chaos. This process is all a very intelligent design of a Master Creator.

Anxiety, therefore, is not the presence of something toxic in the brain; it is the absence of the happy messengers that keep us tranquil. Tranquillity is, after all, the goal your brain is trying to achieve. This book will show you how to restore the tranquillity that has been destroyed by overstress.

The role of stress in producing anxiety, therefore, is foundational to all I have to say. I first explored the connection between stress and anxiety thirteen years ago in my book *Adrenaline and Stress*. Since then, the evidence for a link between the overproduction of adrenaline and emergence disorders like panic anxiety has expanded immensely.

Indisputably, there is a strong connection between the overuse of our adrenal system and stress disease. But just as living high on adrenaline causes stress disease, it also causes anxiety problems. The mechanism is very simple. To put it simply, *stress depletes our natural brain tranquilizers*. Panic is the main product of this heightened anxiety. In its milder form, this anxiety is simply called "panic attack." In its more severe form, it becomes an affliction called "panic anxiety disorder," one of the most frightening and debilitating of all the anxiety disorders.

WE ARE ALL ANXIETY PRONE

Before you jump to the conclusion that you don't have a problem with anxiety, let me ask you to continue reading. Many hardworking, driven people (like you and me) don't realize just how close they walk to the precipice of anxiety until one day, out of the blue, a panic attack strikes. Herein lies our greatest danger: Because adrenaline overuse feels so exhilarating and invigorating, we don't consider some of the things that give us an adrenaline rush to be stressful. The purpose of adrenaline

is to make us feel excited during a state of emergency, so it is easy to misread that excitement as safe. We don't realize how close we are to the edge of anxiety until we lose our footing and tumble down into the dark abyss of panic.

In this sense, one's first panic attack is really a blessing in disguise. It warns the sufferer that he or she is living too fast, too hassled, and too stressed-out. Losing tranquillity happens because a person's happy messengers are being invaded and destroyed by stress hormones. While they are normally allies, these hormones become enemies in the face of danger and stress.

The early stages of a panic anxiety disorder, then, are really warning signals. If you heed these warning signals and change your ways, as Samantha did, you will be able to overcome your anxiety. But if you ignore these warning signals, you run the risk of creating more suffering than you are bargaining for. Worse yet, you could well end up with an anxiety problem for the rest of your life.

ANXIETY SYMPTOM CHECKLIST

Anxiety symptoms fall into three categories: physiological symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and emotional symptoms. Count the following symptoms that apply to you:

PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

Do you feel:

- Weak all over?
- Rapid, pounding heartbeat or palpitations?
- Tightness around your chest?
- Hyperventilation (a feeling that you cannot get enough air)?
- Periodic dizziness and sweating?
- Muscle tension, aches, or tremors?
- Chronic fatigue?

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS

Do you think to yourself:

- I can't carry on. I've got to get out of here.
- What if I make a fool of myself?
- People are looking at me all the time.
- I'm having a heart attack.
- I'm going to faint.
- I'm going crazy.
- I can't go on alone; no one will help.
- I can't go out; I will lose control.
- I feel confused and can't remember things.

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

Do you think to yourself:

- I'm full of fears that I can't get out of my mind.
- I feel like something terrible is going to happen.
- I worry excessively.
- I feel uneasy and alone a lot of the time.
- I often feel isolated, lonely, down in the dumps, and depressed.
- I feel I have no control over what happens to me.

- I feel embarrassed, rejected, and criticized.
 - I often feel like screaming with anger.
-

SCORING

This checklist is not designed to be a diagnostic tool so much as it is intended to communicate the variety of symptoms experienced by people with high anxiety.

However, if you are experiencing *at least three symptoms* in each category, then your anxiety level is starting to be a problem, especially if you experience the symptoms often.

If you are experiencing *more than three symptoms* in each category and are not in treatment for an anxiety-related problem, then I would suggest that you consult a professional right away. It is better to be safe than regret your failure to take action at a later point.

If taking this inventory causes you anxiety, you probably need to get some help.

HOW COMMON ARE ANXIETY PROBLEMS?

Since overstress is so common today, you can pretty well predict that anxiety problems are also common. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), more than twenty-three million Americans suffer from some form of anxiety disorder, including panic anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, phobias, and generalized anxiety disorder. To quote NIMH's Web site on this matter:

[Anxiety sufferers] suffer from symptoms that are chronic, unremitting, and usually grow progressively worse if left untreated. Tormented by panic attacks, irrational thoughts and fears, compulsive behaviors or rituals, flashbacks, nightmares, or countless frightening physical symptoms, people with anxiety disorders are heavy utilizers of emergency rooms and other medical services.

Because of widespread lack of understanding and the stigma associated with such disorders, many people with anxiety problems are not diagnosed and do not receive the treatments that have been proven effective through research. They continue to suffer unnecessarily, and their work, family, and social lives are disrupted. Many become imprisoned in their homes.

And let me emphasize that the stigma I have just alluded to is significantly greater in our Christian subculture. And the lack of understanding, or more accurately, the gross misunderstanding of what causes anxiety is having devastating effects on many Christians and their families. Almost everywhere I travel in the world, I encounter deeply troubled Christians who feel guilty and hopeless just because they do not understand how widespread anxiety problems are in our overstressed lives. I hear it from them in seminars, in letters, and in email messages, pleading for a Christian-based understanding of anxiety.

Many anxiety sufferers believe that God is somehow punishing them or that their anxiety is a sign that they lack adequate faith. At times, I feel like sobbing when I read their pathetic pleas for help.

Their indignity is made even more painful by the condemnation they feel for their so-called failures. Those around them, including spouses, family members, and Christian friends, judge them more cruelly. And this judgment is born of ignorance, even sheer unadulterated stupidity. Believe me, just a little bit of knowledge on this subject could work miracles of recovery. God is not wreaking havoc upon His people like a plague. His own people are condemning helpless sufferers, and their misguided judgments are causing a lot of the misery I see.

DOESN'T EVERYONE HAVE SOME ANXIETY?

Some anxiety goes with being human. It has always been with us and will remain until the end of time. Anxiety can be normal and even necessary in certain instances. Normal anxiety keeps us busy, reminds us to pay our bills, and pushes us forward to succeed. Its presence in human experience throughout history would suggest that in its pure form it serves some useful purpose. And for a long time, psychologists, and philosophers before them saw anxiety as a necessary and normal aspect of life. It was, they thought, the mental equivalent of physical pain that served as a “warning” system to alert us to danger.

But like so many good ideas, they can be taken too far. Anxiety is only normal up to a point. Our happy messengers are designed to fluctuate. We cannot expect to stay in a perpetual state of tranquillity. We all need some anxiety to make our lives meaningful and productive. My concern in this book is the anxiety that is beyond the bounds of normality.

TYPES OF ANXIETY PROBLEMS

Let’s look at a brief overview of anxiety problems. Following are the most common types of anxiety

PANIC ANXIETY DISORDER: This is probably the best studied and understood of all the anxiety disorders. Panic anxiety disorder is characterized by repeated, unprovoked attacks of terror accompanied by physical symptoms, including chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, weakness, and sweating. A panic attack can resemble a heart attack, and often the first indication of the disorder is when you are rushed to the emergency room with chest pains. It is called “disorder” when the problem persists for more than a month.

GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD): This is a free-floating, pervasive anxiety or a constant unrealistic worry. It impacts your ability to complete your daily activities. GAD is often associated with physical anxiety symptoms such as muscle aches, fatigue, sleep disturbances, sweating, dizziness, and nausea.

SPECIFIC PHOBIA: This is a persistent, marked irrational fear of an object or situation that leads to avoidance of the object or situation. Exposure to the stimulus provokes an immediate and extreme response, even a panic attack. To be considered a phobia, the fear has to be excessive and incapacitating.

SOCIAL PHOBIA: Also called “social anxiety disorder,” this is a persistent fear of one or more social situations in which you are exposed to possible scrutiny by others and fear that you may do something or act in a way that will be humiliating. Social phobias can also include extreme shyness.

AGORAPHOBIA: This can occur with or without panic attacks and literally means “fear of the marketplace.” It is a fear of public places where your panic or anxiety might bring embarrassment. You come to fear leaving home or being trapped in a room or church pew because you could lose control.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD): This disorder is characterized by repeated, intrusive, and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) that cause anxiety, often accompanied by ritualized behaviors (compulsions) that relieve this anxiety. Common obsessions include fear of contamination or fear of

harming someone. Persistent worries, like worrying about whether you turned off the stove or making repeated trips back to check, are also obsessions. Common compulsions are excessive cleaning, counting, double-checking, and hoarding.

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD): This is a very special form of anxiety caused when someone experiences a severely distressing or traumatic event; individuals become so preoccupied with the experience that they are unable to lead a normal life. PTSD must involve extreme fear. Generally, it takes repeated traumatic events, not just a single event, to cause this disorder.

ACUTE STRESS DISORDER: This is less serious than PTSD and occurs when severe anxiety symptoms follow exposure to a specific, extreme trauma such as experiencing or observing an accident in which someone was killed. The symptoms of acute stress disorder include detachment, numbing, repeated dreams, and marked symptoms of anxiety including inability to sleep, poor concentration, and an exaggerated startle response. The problem usually doesn't last longer than a month.

SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER: Usually associated with childhood or adolescence (although some cases occur in adulthood), this is the feeling of extreme anxiety when you are separated from home or loved ones. In its severe forms, separation anxiety can be quite incapacitating.

HOW ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS TREATED?

The most common stereotype in most people's minds is that tranquilizers are the only treatment for anxiety disorders. Since many people fear that tranquilizers are addictive and can "control" your mind, they intentionally fail to get treatment that could help them.

While it is true that artificial tranquilizers are *sometimes* used in anxiety treatment, they play a temporary and minor role overall. Other medications that are not addictive play a more important role in the long term. Furthermore, artificial tranquilizers only work because your brain has its own tranquilizers. Since your brain's tranquilizers, or "happy messengers," are being systematically destroyed by stress, it only stands to reason that the artificial equivalent must be supplied in treatment under some conditions.

Seldom, however, are medications used on their own. Usually, professional treatment of anxiety disorders requires a combination of medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Treatment is usually individualized for each patient, depending on the severity of the symptoms and level of functioning. I will discuss these treatments in more detail in chapter 4.

IS MEDICATION ALWAYS NECESSARY?

One of the difficult tasks I have in this book is to present the right balance between when to use anti-anxiety medication and when to avoid it. Obviously, some medications must be taken to provide an effective result. But anxiety sufferers have many questions about these medications. Here are just a few short answers to the more important questions I get asked by patients whom I recommend for medication treatment. (More detailed answers will come later.)

ARE ANTI-ANXIETY MEDICATIONS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY? Is it possible, for instance, to cure repeated anxiety attacks

without them?

ANSWER: If you are determined and self-reliant and the attacks are in their early stages, you may be able to overcome them without medication. Some anxiety problems definitely need medication; others don't. However, you will need to make some urgent and lifelong changes. In the long term, curing your anxiety is a matter of changing your susceptibility to stress. Without medication, it will take longer for you to achieve a cure, and you will run a greater risk of relapsing.

ARE SOME MEDICATIONS SAFER THAN OTHERS? Many are rightly concerned about the safety of medications. And this should be so for all medications, not just those used to treat anxiety.

ANSWER: If you avoid alcohol and stick closely to the recommended dosages, all antianxiety medications are safe. Your doctor will see to it.

ARE SOME MEDICATIONS LESS ADDICTIVE THAN OTHERS? The matter of addiction should always be a concern.

ANSWER: Absolutely. Not all medications are equally addictive, and sometimes it is the person who is prone to addiction, not the medication that causes addiction. In any event, not everyone is susceptible to developing a dependence on a tranquilizer. (I prefer to call it "dependence" rather than addiction because the word *dependence* more accurately describes what happens.) Furthermore, if your clinician is competent, you will have no trouble coming off your medication when you are ready to do so. I will tell you how to do this in chapter 6.

DO ANTIANXIETY MEDICATIONS HAVE TO BE TAKEN FOREVER? Many are concerned about how long they have to take the medication, especially if it has to be for the rest of their lives.

ANSWER: Absolutely not. They are taken for a limited period of time only. Provided you are addressing the other changes that must also be made, notably learning stress management, a time will come when you can taper off all medications. It may take longer than you would like, but that is up to you and the diligence with which you follow the larger treatment plan. But you are not the best judge of how and when to stop. Your clinician will know how long you will need the medication for your particular problem.

The bottom line boils down to deciding which forms of anxiety should be treated with medication and which should only be treated with good counseling. In any case, you should always be getting some form of counseling, even when you are taking antianxiety medication.

A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO CHRISTIAN READERS

My message is important whatever your faith—or lack of it. However, many of my readers consider themselves to be Christians so I want to address some of my remarks in this first chapter to the readers.

For Christians, my message in this book is particularly important. Primarily, because many of you have such a strong antidrug mind-set, you may be doing yourself a lot of harm by *not* considering a short-term trial on an appropriate antianxiety medication. Not all medications are addictive. Antidepressants are frequently the preferred medication for anxiety disorders, and they are absolutely *not addictive*.

Why should you consider getting professional treatment? Because serious anxiety problems only get worse if you don't treat them early enough. A lot of evidence now indicates that untreated anxiety becomes "encoded" in the brain. In other words, it becomes a permanent problem.

But there is a second important reason why my message here is important to Christians. We Christians are probably *more* prone to developing a high level of stress, and we need to pay particular attention to the connection between adrenaline and stress. Just as we are ignorant of how the "good" stress in our lives can produce "bad" stress disease, so we are also ignorant about how the pressure we feel trying to live good lives can cause severe anxiety problems. Being good by relying on our own resources is a lost cause. The harder we try in our own strength, the more our lives become stressful.

THE TEN MOST RIDICULOUS THINGS YOU CAN SAY TO A PERSON WITH ANXIETY (or to yourself, for that matter)

1. “We all get anxious, so just pull yourself together.”
2. “If you would just relax more, your anxiety will go away.”
3. “Have you committed some sin that God is punishing you for?”
4. “You worry too much, and worry never changes anything.”
5. “If you just try harder you wouldn’t feel so stressed-out.”
6. “Just ignore your problems and they will go away.”
7. “Anxiety can’t kill you, so just snap out of it.”
8. “If you had more faith, you would stop worrying.”
9. “Take a holiday and all your problems will go away.”
10. “If I can cope with my life, you should be able to cope with yours.”

DOES SCRIPTURE CONDEMN ANXIETY?

Before doing anything constructive about their anxiety, many Christians must resolve the issue of whether Scripture condemns anxiety, and by implication, those who suffer from it.

There is no doubt in my mind that Scripture clearly condemns a particular form of anxiety. Jesus said: “Let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:1). But as we have already established, there are many different *forms* of anxiety. Are they all condemned? Before we rush in to condemn *all* anxiety as bad, therefore, we should first examine each of these forms and determine *which* of them Scripture condemns.

It is unfortunate that we have only one word for anxiety in English. Often this restricts our understanding of the many facets of anxiety. A good analogy would be the concept of love. In English we only have one word for love. We refer to the “love of a mother for a child,” “the love of a brother for a brother,” and “the love of a lover for a lover” in almost the same breath. But each use of the word *love* means something quite different. This is the same for the word *anxiety*.

Furthermore, many of the anxiety problems we suffer from today were not common in biblical times. Take panic attacks, for instance. I doubt whether the pace of life in New Testament times was hectic enough to cause the conditions needed for panic anxiety disorder. I see no such evidence for its existence in biblical times. In fact, a hundred years ago, panic anxiety disorder was very rare. But with industrialization and urbanization, it has become increasingly common. Remember, there were no jet airplanes, electric lights, or concrete jungles until recent times. The pace of life was slow. Camel speed was about as fast as you could travel for long distances. Lots of recovery time was built into the natural cycle of life. No late-night TV or football games could eat up your leisure time. Why, I can vaguely remember times of such boredom even in my own lifetime.

Not only were there likely no panic attacks in New Testament times, there were probably no phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or even posttraumatic stress disorders. These are the

products of urbanization, industrialization, and depersonalization. But there is one form of anxiety that transcends time and culture—the form of anxiety we call “worry.” And I believe that whenever Scripture refers to anxiety, it means primarily “worrying” or “fretting.” *Worry anxiety*, therefore, that form of anxiety uniformly condemned in Scripture—and it is the *only* condemned form of anxiety.

Jesus sometimes used the expression “taking thought” to refer to this form of anxiety. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus clearly draws attention to the destructiveness of taking thought for the future or for what will happen (see Matt. 6:25–34 NIV). And His teaching here is startlingly clear: Worrying doesn’t help birds get their food nor does it help lilies grow. And worrying about tomorrow is about as useless as trying to increase your height just by thinking about it. There are plenty of things to be concerned about *right now*, and worrying about tomorrow will not keep tomorrow’s evils away.

The apostle Paul, obviously a very intense person who at times experienced “fear” and “trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3), also had a lot to say about worrying. In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells us to “be anxious for nothing,” reminding us to pray “with thanksgiving” (NKJV). The apostle Peter also tells us to cast “a [our] care upon him; for he careth for [us]” (1 Pet. 5:7).

Worry anxiety is also portrayed in Scripture as an evil that chokes God’s Word: “He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22). The “care of this world” in this verse could also be translated as “the worry of the world” (NASB). This clearly implies that excessive preoccupation with life’s uncertainties is like a bed of thorns that chokes God’s Word and constricts the development of faith.

Worry anxiety is also seen as a hindrance that keeps us from doing God’s work. Second Timothy 2:4 suggests that soldiers of Jesus Christ should not get overly entangled in or become worried about the affairs of everyday life. Worrying about daily problems distracts and detracts from the battles we must fight spiritually.

Finally, Luke 21:34 proposes that worry anxiety is a problem that gluts our souls and weighs us down so that we cannot be alert to impending real perils.

Worry anxiety, therefore, is rightly characterized in Scripture as a lack of trust in God and a failure to fully understand His plan and provision for us. It is clearly harmful to us and, therefore, *displeasing to God*.

But this does not mean we should not be concerned about our lives, neither does it mean that we have committed the unpardonable sin just because we spent a sleepless night worrying about a wayward child or an unhappy friend. Paul clarifies this distinction when he tells us to stop *perpetually* worrying about even one thing (Phil. 4:6; emphasis mine). That word *perpetually* is the key word. Worry anxiety is only a problem if it is perpetual—if it goes on and on and on. And then he gives us the prescription for curing our worry: We are to bring our requests to God, with an attitude of thanksgiving, expecting that what awaits us is the “peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension” (Phil. 4:7 NASB).

Worry anxiety, then, is what happens when God’s people try to live their lives independently from God. When we refuse to be joined to our Creator, even when He has provided a way back to Himself through Jesus Christ, we settle down into the bog of our own anxiety.

Intimacy with Jesus, furthermore, must inevitably lead to an inner quietness that is foundational

tranquillity. Still, it is hard for believers to stop perpetually worrying and to reach out for the resources God makes available. I have met very few Christian believers who are so perfect in the walk with God that they are free of worry anxiety. Because of our human weaknesses, the Great Physician has prescribed scriptural antidotes for anxiety. These include reliance upon God's Spirit (see Mark 13:11), appropriating God's provisions (see Luke 12:22–30), and resting in God's care (see 1 Pet. 5:6–7). What medicine could be more complete?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECTING GOD'S PROVISIONS

The problem, of course, is not with the medicine but with the patients—you and me. We are rebellious children by nature and gag at God's "medicine." We are disobedient, and we love to run away when God calls. So we shouldn't be surprised if, while wallowing in the pigpen like true prodigals, we also suffer from incapacitating anxiety. The responsibility for getting up and leaving the pigpen of disobedience lies with us, as we will see shortly.

Every day of my professional life, I encounter exceptionally fine Christian people who are experiencing incapacitating anxiety that robs them of peace and tranquillity. They have aggravating sleep disturbances, aching ulcers, throbbing headaches, persistent high blood pressure, intractable pain, overwhelming tiredness, and worry that drives them into early graves. The problem is that anxiety itself doesn't kill you; it just makes you wish you were dead. And such suffering is totally unnecessary. It *can* be prevented.

Tranquillity. How do you get it, and how do you keep it? These two questions sum up our quest in this book. There is no doubt in my mind that God intends us to be calm, serene, peaceful, composed, and good-natured—all qualities of tranquillity. According to Oswald Chambers, author of the best-selling devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*, a life of intimacy with Christ leads to a "strong, calm serenity"—as good a definition of *tranquillity* as I could possibly come up with.

As Jesus says in John 16:33: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace."

CHAPTER 2

THE GABA-ANXIETY CONNECTION

*Master, carest thou not that we perish?
... And [Jesus] said unto the sea, Peace, be still.
And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.*

MARK 4:38–39

Before we can talk of answers, we need to have a basic understanding of the physical causes of anxiety. Let me walk you through the essentials you should know.

A new era dawned for brain research in the spring of 1977, when scientists discovered tools that would enable them to penetrate the very interior of single nerve cells. Since then, new discoveries have been made almost daily about the inner workings of God’s greatest miracle of creation—the human brain. These tools, and many that have been added since, help unlock the mystery and intricacies of how tiny cells in the brain go about their business in a world all their own. Most importantly, scientists have discovered how these cells communicate with each other.

Knowing how brain cells “talk” to each other is crucial to your understanding of anxiety. You need to understand a little of this mystery if you are going to formulate a “natural” way to cure yourself of an anxiety problem. The reason so many people feel helpless in the face of emotional turmoil is that they don’t know enough about what is going on in their brains; to them, the process seems so mysterious, too enigmatic.

But it’s not all that complicated. You will feel more in control of your destiny if you know what is going on in your brain. This understanding, at the very least, will help you to choose the treatment you should pursue as well as help you to avoid those mistakes that are likely to aggravate your anxiety problem. Knowing the basics of what causes anxiety is crucial to becoming the master of your emotions.

Conversations are going on between your brain cells all the time. The vital group of chemicals mentioned earlier called “neurotransmitters” are the messengers, and their language consists of minute reactions that “fire” nerve cells. Neurotransmitters carry messages between different parts of the brain. Not only do they transport information, but they spur some nerve cells to be more activated and responsive while calming and forcing others to slow down and remain quiet.

These chemical messengers pick up, transport, and then deposit their instructions all over the brain like the pony-express riders of early western times. As a child, I remember being quite enthralled by movies showing these riders as they leaped from one tired horse to a fresh pony at the pony-express stations spread across the country. I actually considered becoming a pony-express rider when I grew up, but in far-off South Africa, where I lived. Imagine my disappointment when my father told me they no longer existed.

But pony-express riders are a good analogy for the messengers that travel through our brain. Nerve cells are their pathways, and synapses are the pony-express stations that refresh them. Messages carried by neurotransmitters are often life-giving. They tell different parts of the brain whether to be happy or sad, anxious or tranquil. They help the brain decide whether there is a state of emergency or a danger to be avoided. Likewise, they also tell the brain when to relax because all is safe.

I am truly amazed by this process. Proper communication between our brain cells is all wonderful, complex and vitally essential to our sanity. Normal human emotions are determined by whether the neurotransmitters are successful in communicating their messages to your brain cells. On a typical day in the life of your brain, literally trillions of messages are sent and received by the neurotransmitters.

Some of these messages are upbeat and happy and carried by that group of messengers called “happy messengers.” Technically, these neurotransmitters are known as “biogenic amines.” They don’t just help us to be happy, they also help us to cope with pain and remain tranquil. They energize us and make us feel vital and optimistic. Some examples of these happy messengers include serotonin, noradrenaline (produced in the brain, not by the adrenals), dopamine, and a group of natural tranquilizers that are found in abundance in the brain.

Other messages are communicated around the brain by “sad messengers.” These neurotransmitters carry bleak and somber messages. They tell the brain to be downhearted, cautious, and dispirited. An excess of sad messengers makes us depressed, anxious, sleepless, and fatigued. They are the messengers that dominate when we feel overwhelmed by life’s demands. Examples of sad messengers are cortisol and a group of enzymes that rob us of happy messengers.

Now let’s be realistic here. We are never totally without happy or sad messengers. Both are always present in our brains. *What determines our mood is the balance between the two.* As long as the neurotransmitters are in balance, we are tranquil and happy. But when something happens that upsets the balance and causes the sad messengers to dominate, our sea of tranquillity can become a raging ocean of turmoil. Happiness gives way to misery and emotional pain. Tranquillity (the natural state of the human brain) gives way to anxiety.

WHAT UPSETS THE BALANCE OF HAPPY AND SAD MESSENGERS?

What upsets this balance? Serious illness, for starters. It stands to reason that when your body is fighting a serious illness, it must focus on this battle. Everything else, therefore, must take a back seat. Sad messengers are essential to fighting disease. For instance, have you noticed that when you have the flu you also feel a little depressed? That mild depression occurs because your body needs you to slow down and even disengage from normal activities so it can reserve its strength to fight the invading bacteria or viruses. If you cooperate with these sad messengers, you will recover sooner.

Substances such as alcohol, recreational drugs, and even some prescription drugs also upset the balance between happy and sad messengers. These “substances of abuse” upset your brain’s biochemistry by falsely elevating happy messengers for a short period of time, promising tranquillity and bliss, and then letting the system down. You pay for this temporary bliss with more unhappiness afterward.

Also, your brain system can become unbalanced when something goes wrong with your genes. Examples of this type of imbalance include genetically determined mental disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar depression. Under the influence of certain genes, a very profound unbalancing of the happy and sad messengers can occur. Fortunately, however, we now have

medications that can correct these genetic problems. In fact, these apparently more serious emotional problems are a lot easier to cure than some of the psychologically determined neurotic conditions. Brain chemistry is a lot easier to put right than a lifetime of bad influences.

And finally, but most importantly, the balance between the happy and sad messengers is determined by *stress*.

IT'S THE STRESS, DUMMY!

Did I get your attention? No disrespect intended—it's just that this message is so hard to get across to highly intelligent, highly driven, triple-Type A people. So let me say it again: *Too much stress is bad for everything.*

Stress makes you feel thunderstruck by life. The battle of the chemical messengers swings in favor of the sad messengers, overwhelming the happy messengers and causing them to struggle to keep up with the battle. When you begin to run out of happy messengers, you experience negative consequences, such as sleep disturbances, lack of enjoyment about life (called “anhedonia”), and, of course, panic attacks.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS “GOOD” STRESS?

Stress upsets the balance of every hormone in your body and brain, which is why the only form of “good” stress is “short-lived” stress.

I need to emphasize this point here because Hans Selye (the grandfather of all stress research) is often misunderstood. Selye introduced the concept of “eustress,” that form of good stress that we all need for a rich and fulfilling life. Unfortunately, many have latched on to this concept as a way of rationalizing their overstressed lives. I hear it all the time: “I don't feel stressed-out. This just feels too good to be stress.”

Of course, we all need a bit of stress to keep us going. But overstress is *never* eustress. Prolonged stress, whether it is good or bad, will kill you as surely as stepping in front of a fast-moving train. Stop kidding yourself into believing that your stress is “good” stress.

All stress causes problems with the brain's happy messengers. When the brain senses stress, it assumes that there is an emergency. It also assumes that there is danger of some sort and activates the fight-or-flight response. This is hardly a friendly or welcoming condition for keeping happy messengers at home. So in its intelligent way, our brain's sad messengers kick in and take control because they have to ensure survival, not bliss. They mobilize the body's resources to deal with the emergency. And this gives the sad messengers a role to play that they readily jump to. This is the moment they live for. Like fighter pilots who train all their lives for battle, sad messengers relish the moment they are finally called into action.

THE BATTLE OF THE MESSENGERS

As the level of stress escalates, the upper hand in the battle of the messengers shifts from the tranquil and happy to the anxious and unhappy side. You will have noticed this shift in your own emotions from time to time. Soon the whole brain is in a state of chemical unbalance.

Why is this important to know? First, you should learn to read the signs of this shift of balance as a warning signal. If you intervene quickly, you can stop the shift of power, assuming, of course, that it is not a matter of life or death. (If it is, don't interfere. Let the sad messengers do what they are designed to do.)

Second, you need to learn the limits of your own brain chemistry. By paying attention to this shift of power, you will discover just how much stress you can tolerate. You then set up a stress-tolerance boundary and do everything in your power not to trespass this boundary. This means setting limits and telling everyone, even loved ones, to back off when they try to push you past your limits.

So, overstress, not ordinary short-lived stress, is bad for everything. It results in your whole brain being in a state of distress and unbalance. How does this make you feel? Terrible. Your brain's normal state of tranquillity is vanquished. Anxiety dominates. In severe cases a period of panic anxiety sets in. And panic anxiety is itself a stressor, so it feeds more stress into your already weakened system, creating more unbalance. This state of unhappiness can become self-perpetuating and cause a "spiraling down" effect, in which you feel totally overwhelmed by unhappiness and misery. Extreme fatigue, sleep disturbances, deep depression, aches and pains, and an inability to cope with even the simplest demands of life ensue.

RESTORING THE BALANCE OF THE MESSENGERS

"My first thought was *I'm going crazy*. Everyone I've ever talked to about anxiety has referred to it as a form of 'craziness.' It scared the heck out of me. I thought I was losing my mind."

This quotation comes from a letter I received from a reader of my book *Adrenaline and Stress* describing her first experience of a severe anxiety attack. Her fear that she was going crazy is a very common one, based mainly on the erroneous but widely held belief that all anxiety is purely psychological—"in the mind." Most people still think that anxiety, the absence of tranquillity, is just "in your head." What they mean, of course, is that they believe anxiety is an imbalance of some sort of your mind, your thinking, and your feelings. This is why some people resist taking medication for severe anxiety disturbances. They believe that they are only compounding their "failure" or that they are "emotionally weak."

Nothing is further from the truth. Anxiety is *not* just in the mind. It is in the *brain*, and the brain is more than the mind with its thoughts.

The distinction between the *mind* (what makes you think) and the *brain* (the vast array of ongoing chemical reactions) is very important: The more serious anxiety problems are not just thoughts that have gone wrong, but biochemical events out of control. True, thoughts can trigger stress and hence anxiety, but the thoughts themselves do not constitute the anxiety. For anxiety to exist, a biochemical change must occur in the brain. And sometimes, perhaps more often than we realize, the change

biochemistry can result in anxiety *without* any “mind” component. You can go crazy with anxiety just because your brain is missing an important happy messenger. It can have nothing to do with whether you are mentally troubled. In fact, most sufferers of panic attacks are perfectly normal, high-functioning individuals.

So how can we restore the dominance of the happy messengers? That is what the rest of this book is about.

The first way to restore your happy messengers is to restore a measure of balance to your brain messengers, which may mean taking some antianxiety medication temporarily. Then you have to address the stress in your life and discover what life changes you need to make. (I will offer some important strategies for relieving stress in chapter 10.) Then you need to develop ways for increasing your brain’s natural happy messengers—those tranquilizers that are naturally produced in the brain to serve their own receptors.

But before I can jump to discussing practical ways for you to cure your anxiety, there are two messengers I want you to know. These two hormones perform a fascinating but complex dance that creates anxiety. You should memorize them because you will be hearing a lot more about them in the future.

THE DANCE OF THE HORMONES

An understanding of these two messengers is central to understanding how stress creates many of our anxiety problems.

The first messenger I want you to become acquainted with is *GABA* (gamma-aminobutyric acid). GABA is a neurotransmitter found in abundance in the brain. The presence or absence of this “happy messenger” can make or break your peace of mind. It is the essential messenger that calms your overzealous nerves. It also plays a role in helping you remember. GABA is important because it is the key that unlocks the stress-anxiety connection.

The second messenger you need to know is *cortisol*, a close cousin to adrenaline. Cortisol and adrenaline are partners—they always go together when there is stress. Cortisol is a “sad messenger” that releases sugar from fats to help you in the fight-or-flight response. It gives you the energy for survival. For example, have you ever noticed that when you have an emergency to cope with or a deadline you have to meet, food becomes less important? Your appetite decreases because cortisol kicks in to take care of your needs as it retrieves stored energy. When the crisis is over, however, you become ravishingly hungry because your level of cortisol drops and your appetite returns. You crave carbohydrates as your body demands that you redeposit what you have overdrawn at the energy bank.

You need cortisol for life; you can’t live without it. But excessive and prolonged stress depletes your GABA, and this makes you unhappy. More specifically, the stress-activated cortisol disrupts the happy messengers and prevents them from communicating their message to your brain. The result is severe anxiety, especially panic attacks.

Cortisol, like adrenaline, is good for you when you are stressed—up to a point. In normal stress conditions cortisol helps to make you more efficient and feel good. You feel energized and productive. But during overstress conditions it turns, intentionally, to making stress uncomfortable for you. If it didn’t, you would self-destruct.

Think about this for a moment: If we were designed so that the more stress we were under, the better we would feel, we would seek out more and more stress. Stress would reinforce your feelings of good, and the happy messengers in your brain would have a field day. Only without anything to stop at their limits, you would eventually mushroom like an atomic bomb. So, a better plan is to allow your stress response system to help you initially but to work against you if it gets out of hand. This is how God created you.

WHAT IS YOUR STRESS TOLERANCE?

We each have a unique capacity to tolerate a certain amount of the sad messengers before our happy messengers are depleted. This capacity is called your “stress tolerance.”

What determines your stress tolerance? First, your *genetic inheritance*. Low tolerance for stress often runs in families. In particular, the tendency to overproduce adrenaline and cortisol in response to stress (the Type A personality) is common among family members. I know because I come from such a family. My grandmother had it (it’s not always males), my father and my uncle had it, and my brother has it. I can also see it in some of my grandchildren. Not that low stress tolerance is all bad. But you have to control stress, not let it control you.

Fortunately, we all start out life with a pretty high stress tolerance. When your happy messengers are dominated, you found life to be fun, exciting, enjoyable, and challenging. This is how it should be. But then that big test at school came, or you were chosen to participate in some school activity. That night you couldn’t get to sleep. You tossed and turned, your body raging with adrenaline, telling you to go on going. Welcome to the real world. Then some years later came your first interview, maybe for a job or admission to graduate school. Chest pains or headaches, depending on your personality, come first. Migraines. Acid stomach. The list is long.

We have all experienced brief periods of happy messenger malfunction. But more than 10 percent will go on to feel this way *all the time*. They will either have a low tolerance for stress or the stressors will appear so big that they overwhelm their normal tolerance. Either way, unhappiness will come out, and these people are at greater risk either to become addicted to substances that will temporarily relieve their physical and emotional pain or to become lifelong anxiety sufferers. The majority of people suffer more from overstress than from a low stress tolerance.

This is why our understanding of adrenaline and its impact on stress is so important to our understanding anxiety. The biochemical change that starts an anxiety attack is set up by prolonged stress.

ENDOGENOUS ANXIETY

The form of anxiety I am discussing in this book can best be described as “endogenous anxiety,” meaning that it is “from within” the brain. This form of anxiety is essentially biological and not psychological, at least in its symptoms. Worry anxiety, on the other hand, is purely psychological. There is nothing wrong with our GABAs. We learn to worry if life dishes up a lot for us to worry

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