

For broadcast 24th March 2019

Anxiety

Interview with Steve, Jenny and Julie

Richard: Anxiety is a term that covers many fearful conditions such as phobias and excessive compulsive disorders. A certain amount of nervous energy and fear is actually healthy and quite normal, but when these feelings take over and rule our life, they need to be explored. It's perhaps even more difficult to deal with when we have a belief in God. We may feel we don't trust God enough. My guests today are Jenny and Steve, who both suffer from anxiety, and Julie, who is a psychologist.

Well, thanks for joining us today. Jenny, you suffered from generalized anxiety since childhood. Could you start by describing your experience?

Jenny: Well, I have anxiety all the time, but usually it's at a lower level. Maybe once or twice a year, it will grow to an absolute extreme level. I might get a few days to a week where I can't think clearly. I get exhausted. I feel like everything's foreign around me. I feel like everyone's normal, and they can cope with life, and I can't. Physically, I find it really hard to eat. Sometimes I throw up and stuff like that. I've had it where it was so extreme before, I had to go on a drip, because I couldn't eat at all.

Sleeping is really hard as well. I have to wait until I'm so exhausted [inaudible 00:01:23] that I just drop off to sleep, otherwise I can't stop my mind, so I can't sleep. Teary, yeah, I basically want to cry a lot, and can't. It feels like every minute is an eternity. I just think, how can I possibly keep going, and how can I possibly work, or talk to people, or anything? I can't see an end to it. I usually just have to go, "Just get through the next minute. Just get through the next minute. Just get through the next minute," and keep talking myself into functioning.

Richard: What about you Steve?

Steve: I would go to work and have this irrational fear of people and having to actually interact with them. It got to the point where I was just shaking, and I had to get out, just had to get out of the workplace and get away. My heart was racing, palms sweaty, eyes darting. I felt like the world was closing in. It's an intensely frightening, horrifying ... At the same time, I'm thinking to myself, "How pathetic. This is ridiculous."

Richard: There are many things that can trigger anxiety. Jenny, what's the trigger for you?

Jenny: It's very much how I'm perceived by other people and performance at work, I guess, and socially as well, very much about what other people think.

That's, I guess, why it gets worse and worse and worse. As you're feeling anxious, you know you can't be normal and natural, and perform to your best, and all that thing, so then you get anxious about what that's going to mean. People won't like you. You're going to get in trouble in work or whatever. I can't do my work properly.

It can steamroll very, very quickly. One time when I was overseas, within a minute, I went from absolutely no anxiety to full-on, high-level anxiety. It can grow very fast that way. Usually, it doesn't go very fast back the other way.

Richard: What do you do to cope with it?

Jenny: I do work hard to cover it up. If I act as if I'm confident, if I act as if everything's fine, then it might help it to just go away a bit. I usually have to talk about it with someone. I usually have to get stuff out if I'm really worried about it. In the process of getting it out, I'll find it becomes less. I know that's a bit of a cliché, but it does. Things other people say will sometimes help me see it in a different light. I think, just then, with time, then it diminishes. Also, with work, if it's particularly stressful and we get through a really busy period. I manage to get it all done and everything like that, then it will go for awhile.

Richard: Steve, you've been living with a chronic back injury over several years, then about two years ago, began to struggle with acute anxiety leading to agoraphobia. How have you been able to deal with it?

Steve: I was lucky enough to already be seeing a counselor and my GP, who also has some psychology training. They kept me alive. Their words were words of validation that this is legitimate. The experience that you're having is a condition. It's not a weakness. You're not pathetic, and you're not lesser of a human being for having this. It just is. That sense of validation was enough to get me on a road to recovery, I think.

Richard: What are some of the elements involved in that recovery?

Steve: Drugs. They're good. What they made me aware of too, is because of my medical condition, my body's already under stress. It's constantly living in a state of stress. Therefore, everything is that much harder and that much more draining. I guess I understand that better now.

One of the things that they did, was set me on a path of graded exposure. That means that if your fear is, perhaps, maybe you've got a fear a snakes. If I wanted to overcome that fear, I would gradually introduce that idea. First of all, that this is not something necessarily dangerous, and would get to the point of me being able to look at a picture of one without having an attack, then come to a point, perhaps, of being in the same building as one, of being able to just gently overcome that next step up of fear, to get to a point over time, of being able to actually be in the same room or to even be able to touch one. It was a similar regimen that both my GP and psychologist worked me through.

Richard: When you feel anxiety coming on, what do you do?

Steve: The first thing I do is breath, and just control my breathing, and use some other techniques to control the way my body ... my body's natural instinct of fear. One is, I have a place that I go to, a place from my childhood where I feel safe. It's like a mental image of that place and of the memories and feelings, and safety and security that I feel at that place, that I can go to at the count of ten, or less even. Really just to get my mind away from the fear.

Richard: You're listening to Messages of Hope. Today I've been talking to Jenny and Steve about their experience of anxiety. Also with me today is Julie, a practicing psychologist. Julie, we've heard about some of the symptoms of anxiety and ways people can cope. How can friends and family support someone suffering from anxiety? What are some of the dos and don'ts?

Julie: Richard, I think there's a lot of things we can do. I would certainly say listen to the person, if they're going to share with you. A lot of people with anxiety, of course, keep it a hidden thing. They suffer in silence. If they do dare to mention it to you, and you're a friend or a relative, it's important to affirm them, to listen first of all, and of course encourage them, if you're not able to help them to, perhaps, take it up, at least, with their GP. That's the front line health professional. The GP will either help or refer on, often to a psychologist or to a counsellor.

Another thing is, I'd try to act quite normally around them. Just go about your daily life, compliment them, hug them, hold them, give them hope if you can. It is important not to tell them to "snap out of it." Even worse, that they're anxious because they're only thinking about themselves. That's not going to help the anxiety.

Richard: Obviously Christians aren't exempt from struggling with anxiety. In fact, it can make it worse, perhaps because of feeling guilty about not trusting God enough or feeling like we have a weak faith. What would you say to people in this situation?

Julie: I think it's very sad if we put that to people who love the Lord, may have walked with the Lord a short time or even many, many years. All I'd say is, we're in very good company. You will read of fear throughout the Scriptures, or anxiety, we call it today, perhaps more so. As a little girl growing up, I think I heard 366 times, "Fear not," one for every day of the year, including Leap Year. Indeed, it seems to me, that such an emphasis on "fear not" must mean the human condition is so prone to fear.

I'll put my hand up to feeling nervous or anxious, even having suffered anxiety myself for a period of 15 months at one stage of my life, waking with that churning stomach, feeling slightly better towards the evening, but I think, as Jenny said, a minute can seem like a lifetime. Getting through a day, and managing a day, can be exhausting and hard work if you suffer anxiety. It had nothing to do with me getting away from the Lord. Personally, I was actually leading the women's Bible studies at my church, writing the studies, and delivering them, and having a team under me every Wednesday morning at my church. It wasn't that I was aware of some major sin in my life. I had come to a stage in my life where there'd

been a lot of losses. I thought I was dealing with those on a conscious level, but at another level, I was really suffering anxiety condition.

I just want to give hope to people who suffer from this condition, it is a tough one to suffer from, that there are folk who can help you. Sometimes you'll even doubt yourself if, "Where is God in this? If God is there, and he's promised peace of heart and mind, then why can't we have it?" That can be difficult for the individual who suffers anxiety. I think if they know that Jesus is with us, in it, and is understanding how we feel and always encouraging us.

It may be that we'll go the way of medication or drugs, as Steve said. There's some good ones on the market that your doctor can prescribe. That can give you a base line, and when you're feeling a little stronger, using some of the techniques we can teach you in therapy. There'll come a time when they can possibly come off the medication. Let that be gradual, and let that be all in good time, when their health professionals feel that that's helpful.

Richard: Thank you Julie, Jenny, and Steve for sharing with us today. Steve, perhaps you could close today's program on anxiety with a summary of what we've talked about.

Steve: It's horrible what you experience with anxious fears, and anxiety attacks is horrible and strange, and just frightening in itself, and not know what's going on, but you can come to terms with it. It might take a long time. Many people experience different levels of anxiety, and some debilitating anxiety. You're not alone. You can seek help. In time, you can come to a point of accepting of it, and learning how to not let it drive your life or cripple you to the extent that it could.

Richard: This is Messages of Hope. You've been listening to interviews about anxiety. If you suffer from anxiety, I encourage you to seek help. There is hope for living a positive life. I'd also like to offer you a free booklet titled "Finding Peace." In it, you'll gain understanding about the cycle of anxiety. You'll also read true stories of people who've learned to manage their anxiety.

For a free copy of "Finding Peace," simply phone free call 1800 353 350 or go to www.messagesofhope.org.au where you can download programs, request booklets, and find other resources and information as well.

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