

## **Use Positive Self-Talk to Overcome Anxiety**

On a blustery Sunday afternoon in December 2017, I headed to Seattle with my two teenage sons, Matthew (age 19) and Timothy (age 15). Our mission was simple: hand Matthew off to the Air Force at Seattle.

We left on our journey shortly after Matthew said goodbye to everyone at church. When we arrived in Seattle later that evening, Timothy and I planned to drop Matthew off at the Air Force processing station and then go to stay overnight with my brother, Gregory. The next morning, Timothy and I would watch Matthew take his final oath before he flew out with the Air Force to San Antonio for Basic Training.

As I drove the long stretch of highway from Coeur d'Alene Idaho to Seattle Washington, I reflected on the events leading up to this journey.

It began during Matthew's senior year of high school when he came home one afternoon and gave me a shock. He announced that he was considering joining the Air Force after graduating. I hardly had time to get used to that idea when Matthew informed me that he would try to get into a particularly demanding and competitive field of the Air Force that required more than normal endurance.

In the fall of 2017, as Matthew was getting ready for the Air Force, he would often show up at my office at random times and ask me to give him training in mental and emotional resiliency. He also began taking an interest in some of the professional work I was doing with mindfulness.

To help Matthew, I began reviewing some of the mental tools psychologists have been developing to reduce the attrition rate for candidates going through the Navy SEAL's selection process. We also began watching videos of people performing tasks in high-stress situations. Gradually, Matthew and I began to build up a picture of the psychological traits necessary for achieving resilience in high-stress situations.

A few hours into the journey to Seattle, I looked over at Matthew, who was listening to music on his iPhone. I told him to put the iPhone down, because we were going to do a final review of what we had learned in the preceding months.

We reflected that probably the most important lessons we had learned was also the most simple: the importance of positive self-talk.

Military psychologists found that negative thoughts regarding our ability to cope can be predictive of failure. This is especially true when a candidate is required to execute emergency procedures under water for extended periods while undergoing harassment. If a candidate is able to think positively about his ability and task, he can override fear signals that might otherwise lead to a fight/flight/freeze response.

I reminded Matthew that positive self-talk does not involve mind-over-matter optimism; rather, it involves identifying real aspects of the stressful situation that can serve as a basis of objective optimism. In an article on Navy SEAL training, science journalist Eric Barker gave some examples to contrast pessimism with objective optimism. Here's what Barker wrote:

Pessimists tell themselves that bad events:

1. Will last a long time, or forever. ('I'll *never* get this done.')
2. Are universal. ('You can't trust *any* of those people.')
3. Are their own fault. ('I'm terrible at this.')

Optimists look at setbacks in the exact opposite way:

1. Bad things are temporary. ('That happens *occasionally* but it's no big deal.')
2. Bad things have a specific cause and aren't universal. ('When the *weather* is better that won't be a problem.')
3. It's not their fault. ('I'm good at this but *today wasn't my lucky day.*')

Sometimes positive self-talk can be as simple as simply thinking “I can do this” rather than “I’m probably going to fail.” When special ops candidates find themselves unable to breathe during the dreaded pool comp test (a battery of rigorous tests performed under water), this type of positive self-talk can help them remain focused as they implement the procedures they were taught. In such cases, they need constantly to remind themselves, “I am capable of completing this task because I have been prepared with the necessary skills.”

Positive self-talk is not a substitute for expertise. Without competency, positive self-talk is just delusion. But even the most competent person—including professional athletes and musicians—can fail at a task she’s prepared for if a negative narrative about herself and her ability sends the brain into a fight/flight/freeze response.

Matthew and I reflected on all this as we drove the long stretch to the Air Force processing station in Seattle. That evening, after Timothy and I were settled comfortably at my brother’s condominium, I had a chance to think further about the importance of positive self-talk. Up until then, my focus had been on helping Matthew use positive self-talk to achieve his goals. But suddenly, I was struck by an interesting thought: might it be possible for me to also apply these techniques to my own life?

Let me give some background. I have a low tolerance for stress. As an academic, I like intellectual debate and argumentation, but I cannot stand dissention and quarrelling. If I am in a group of people and one of them begins shouting, or if the emotional temperature begins to rise even a little, I quickly become very uncomfortable—my heart rate speeds up, I begin to experience high levels of anxiety and my brain sends me the message “danger.” Because of my low tolerance for stress, over the years I developed a habit of suddenly leaving our home if the stress in the family became too much. We might be sitting around as a family with an activity planned, and suddenly I would get up and say, “I’m sorry, I have to go and have some alone time.” As one might expect, this often simply made the situation worse, since I would be leaving at precisely those times my family needed me most.

In the weeks that followed our trip to Seattle, I began observing what went on in my mind every time I abandoned a scene of conflict. I saw that, without exception, my flight responses were always preceded by thoughts like, “I’m not able to cope with this” or “I’m not strong enough to deal with this.” Invariably, I would overestimate the impact a potential threat might have on me or my loved ones (rushing ahead in my mind to worse case scenarios that may not actually materialize) while underestimating my ability to handle it. Interestingly, as soon as I told myself, “I can’t cope,” this became self-fulfilling. But what might happen, I wondered, if I reverse-engineered this and began saying to myself, “I *will* be able to cope with this”? It couldn’t hurt to try.

So I began experimenting. To my astonishment, I found myself becoming incredibly resilient to stressful situations I had previously thought I could never face. I even found myself welcoming moderate stress as an opportunity to practice becoming even more resilient through positive self-talk. Of course, I still had to make responsible decisions, to observe boundaries and practice self-care, but I realized that those decisions did not need to be driven by threat responses.

The chances are that most people reading this article are not planning a career in a highly competitive part of the military. Many readers may also not relate to my intense aversion to conflict. But there is a good chance that many of my readers—maybe even a majority—struggle with some form of anxiety, perhaps even chronic anxiety.

A little anxiety can be a good thing, since it creates stress that spurs us into action. The problem occurs when anxiety becomes so intense that interferes with proper functioning. We call this type of anxiety “chronic anxiety” or an “anxiety disorder.” The best way to distinguish moderate-stress-anxiety with disordered or chronic anxiety is that the former is problem-solving while the later is problem-forming. Telltale signs of chronic anxiety might include such things as the following:

- the tendency to react to problems with a fight, flight or freeze response instead of rational problem-solving;
- continuing to worry about something even after you have taken appropriate action;
- inability to relax or fall asleep;
- the tendency to feel worry or dread without provocation;
- having inordinate attention focused on the future, constantly anticipating what might happen;
- physical symptoms like adrenalin rushes, muscle tension, frequent headaches, inability to breathe properly, sweating, feeling like there is a lump in the throat, more than normal fatigue;
- frequent rumination, usually dwelling on what if's or worst case scenarios;
- the tendency towards inflexibility, agitation, control and over-intensity.

These are just some of the symptoms of chronic anxiety. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America reports that every year 18.1% percent of America's population suffer from anxiety disorders, which is now more common than depression or any other form of mental illness. Anxiety lowers a person's immune system, slowing down the body's natural healing mechanism. Accordingly, anxiety makes a person three to five times more likely to require a doctor visit.<sup>1</sup> Worst of all, anxiety leeches the joy out of the present, including present-moment experiences that might otherwise be a source of great joy.

If you are struggling with anxiety, there is hope for you, and it goes back to the importance of positive self-talk. This should become more apparent if we take a little detour to explore the neuroscience behind anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> "Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)," *Facts and Statistics* (blog), accessed March 2, 2018, <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>.

## Your Brain on Anxiety

Chronic anxiety results from the nervous system being hijacked by the subcortical regions of the brain, which is the part of the brain that includes the amygdala and regulates our threat avoidant responses such as fight flight and freeze. When we experience chronic fear, stress, panic or anxiety, the subcortical regions of the brain (which includes the powerful amygdala) cause us to go into survival mode, disrupting our prefrontal cortex from engaging in healthy habits of mind like problem solving and goal-directed behaviors. When the subcortical regions of the brain activates a fight/flight/freeze response, we immediately overestimate the threat and underestimate our ability to properly handle it; we also experience certain bodily processes being partly shut down, including digestion and the immune system, in order to allow the body to focus all its energy on survival.<sup>2</sup> In a healthy person, all this is a normal response to threatening stimuli, allowing the agent to act quickly either to disable the threat or remove himself from it. However, for a person suffering from chronic anxiety, fear or phobias, these normal reactions begin misfiring, like an overactive smoke detector. If not addressed, this can lead to a toxic feedback loop. The toxic feedback loop works like this: when a person responds in a reactive way to an anxiety-producing stimulus, he reinforces neuro-pathways in his brain that, over time, further erode his ability to cope; as a consequence, the next time he faces a similar anxiety-producing stimulus, the brain already knows, “I can’t cope with this”, thus initiating a response that further subsidizes the initial anxiety. Through these types of toxic spirals, anxieties that might have been addressed in the early stages becomes progressively more overwhelming and self-perpetuating. This is exactly what happened to me every time I left the family as soon as I told myself I couldn’t cope with the stress.

In my own case, chronic anxiety led me to run away physically from all conflict. Other people might be tempted to run away emotionally from painful memories they need

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the physiological correlates of anxiety can be delayed. Someone who suffers chronic anxiety may store up tension in the body, causing physical symptoms that surface days after the anxiety-producing incident has passed.

to work through, or from a difficult conversation they need to have with their spouse. Some people run away from pursuing the therapy they need for achieving healing in themselves or their relationships. Still other people may experience social anxiety and run away from group activities where they might find themselves put on the spot and not know what to say. Whatever the issue might be, running away merely subsidizes the very anxiety we are trying to avoid. As Jordan Peterson explains in *12 Rules for Life*, “Our anxiety systems are very practical. They assume that anything you run away from is dangerous. The proof of that is, of course, the fact you ran away.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, instead of running away from something that causes anxiety, we go into fight-mode or freeze-mode (two primordial defense mechanisms we share in common with animals). Consider the following examples. The first is a fight response, and the second and third are freeze responses.

- Mia’s husband, Jared, often speaks to his wife in a passive aggressive way. Jared’s verbal abuse has progressively caused such high levels of anxiety in Mia that what might appear a simple conversation causes her to react with fight responses. The irony is that when she loses her temper, Jared then turns around and blames Mia as if it was all her fault.
- Albert is one of the brightest students at the junior college he is attending. However, Albert has significant anxiety about exams or any type of project where he will be evaluated. This anxiety immobilizes him, causing him to put off assignments (freeze response), sometimes waiting until the evening before an essay is due before beginning to write it. This creates a vicious feedback loop for Albert since the impact of his procrastination increases the anxiety associated with tests or assignments.

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<sup>3</sup> Peterson, *12 RULES FOR LIFE*, 21.

- Annette knows she needs to clean the guest bedroom before their friends arrive on the weekend. However, for months the guest bedroom has been the family dumping ground for everything they don't want to put away. Faced with piles of clutter to sort through, Annette is overwhelmed. Each time she begins cleaning up the room, she experiences a type of self-paralyzing fear that stops her being able to work on it (freeze response).

These examples illustrate how our attempts to avoid anxiety can often make the anxiety worse in the long-term. Our attempts to avoid anxiety stop us having to face our fears, which only cedes more power to the objects of our fear. At the level of oversimplified brain science, what is happening is something like this:

- **Stage 1: Person encounters anxiety-producing stimulus.** In the first stage, a person encounters something that triggers an anxiety-response, causing the person to feel symptoms that may include fear, panic, stress, worry, rapid-fire cognitions, pounding heart-rate, muscle tension, feeling of not being able to cope, and a variety of other symptoms.<sup>4</sup>
- **Stage 2: Person reacts to anxiety-producing stimulus.** In the second stage, a person reacts to the anxiety-producing stimulus with a fight/flight/freeze response. The fight/flight/freeze response occurs because the sympathetic nervous system has released hormones such as adrenaline into the brain that prepare your entire body for avoiding or engaging a hostile entity. This response may offer some level of short-term relief, however unsatisfactory.

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<sup>4</sup> The stimulus might be eliciting anxiety by traveling via the cortex neuropathway of the brain (e.g., as a result of thinking, planning, conscious memory or rumination) or via the amygdala pathway (the part of the brain that regulates our most primordial instincts and is not regulated by conscious thought), or a combination of the two. To learn more about the difference between these neuropathways and how they relate to anxiety, see Catherine M Pittman and Elizabeth M Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain: How to Use the Neuroscience of Fear to End Anxiety, Panic, & Worry* (New Harbinger Publications, 2015).

- **Stage 3: Person has subsidized the anxiety.** By reacting to the anxiety-producing stimulus with fight/flight/freeze response (Stage 2), the person has sent a message to the brain, “I am unable to cope with this.” This further subsidizes the neuropathways that associate this particular stimulus with high levels of anxiety. This occurs because of the brain’s fire-together-wire-together principle,<sup>5</sup> as well as because of the role of the amygdala in forming emotional memories that attach emotional significance to situations or objects.<sup>6</sup>
- **Stage 4: Person habituates anxiety-avoidance.** The short-term relief the person has experienced by reacting to the anxiety (Stage 2) then reinforces habits of anxiety-avoidance via negative reinforcement (see text box below). This makes it all the harder for Stage 2 not to follow from Stage 1 in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent treatment of the “fire-together-wire-together principle”, see Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Viking, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> On emotional memories, see Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 5 & 39–50.

### ***How Negative Reinforcement Works***

*To understand the meaning of “negative reinforcement”, I want you to imagine a rat, who we will call Templeton. All his life Templeton has been kept in a cage, the victim of a human experimenter who performs all sorts of weird psychological tests on him. In one test, an electrical current is sent through Templeton’s cage, giving him a series of painful shocks. The shocks send Templeton into a series of desperate movements until he accidentally bumps into a special lever on the north-facing wall of his cage. Bumping the level turns off the electric shocks. Over time, Templeton begins to realize that whenever the electric shocks start up, all he has to do is press the lever and all will be calm again. The more Templeton does this, the more the habit of pressing the lever is reinforced.*

*Now I’m not advocating cruelty to animals, but this is a good example of negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement involves any habit that stops an aversive stimulus. Whereas positive reinforcement involves strengthening a habit through favorable outcomes that follow an action (i.e., pressing a lever that dispenses food), negative reinforcement involves strengthening habits to avoid unfavorable outcomes.*

*Human beings are very unlike rats, but when it comes to negative reinforcement, we share a lot in common with rodents. Without even thinking about it, we naturally develop habits that help us avoid unpleasant results. For example, chances are you have a habit of not speeding in order to avoid having to pay a fine. Also, if you have a habit of putting on your jacket to avoid becoming freezing cold in the middle of winter, that habit is also a result of negative reinforcement.*

*Sometimes negative reinforcement causes unhealthy outcomes, as when it stops us embracing healthy pain and discomfort. You see, sometimes human beings need to experience short-term unpleasantness in order to achieve their long-term goals. For example, sometimes we need to put ourselves in unpleasant social situations in order to make new friends and expose ourselves to new opportunities. Sometimes we need to have a difficult conversation with our partner in order to grow into deeper intimacy. Sometimes we need to stretch ourselves in uncomfortable ways in order to learn new skills and reach our goals. When these types of necessary unpleasant experiences lead to anxiety, we may experience extreme relief by avoiding the activity, in the same way that a college student may experience short-term relief by deciding to watch TV instead of studying. The negative reinforcement involved in anxiety avoidance really does take away the unpleasant experience, just as watching TV really does help to avoid the stress of studying. However, by subsidizing the initial anxiety, avoidance behavior increases the likelihood that anxiety will become more crippling in the future.*

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Notice that both Stage 3 and Stage 4 are effects of Stage 2. In other words, if we make a habit of reacting to anxiety with avoidant behaviors, then we inadvertently subsidize the anxiety. Therefore, the key is for a person to learn to stop the process at Stage 1. How do you do that? It goes back to what I said earlier about positive self-talk.

To understand more about positive self-talk, think of yourself like a bridge. If a bridge is about to break, it is necessary to lighten the load on it. But if you only lighten the load without also working to strengthen the bridge, then it will become weak and sustain less and less weight. In a similar way, when we are struggling with anxiety, we often need to lessen the weight of stress, and that could certainly involve removing ourselves from a stressful situation. But more often we need to strengthen ourselves for dealing with anxiety in a healthy way. If we take a one-sided approach and only work to lighten the load, then we are in danger of

#### Further Examples of Positive Self-Talk

In Catherine Pittman and Elizabeth Karle's book *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, they give the following examples of types of positive self-talk that can combat anxiety:

- "I'm going to try, because then there's at least a chance that I'll accomplish something."
- "I don't know what's going to happen. These kinds of feelings have been wrong before."
- "Cortex, you've spent too much time on this and need to move on."
- "No one is perfect. I'm human and expect I'll make mistakes at times."
- "No one is liked by everyone, so I'll encounter people who don't like me."
- "This isn't the end of the world. I'll survive."
- "Worrying never fixes anything. It only upsets me."
- "Trying to please everyone is impossible and stresses me out. Let it go."
- "I'm a competent person, and even though I don't like this situation, I can get through it."

losing the very resources that will help us to manage stress in a healthy way. We may even find ourselves feeling like we need carefully to control every aspect of our life and environment to limit exposure to stress. When we find we cannot control everything, that itself may even become a new source of anxiety.

What positive self-talk does is to strengthen the bridge, halting anxiety at Stage 1.<sup>7</sup> It's very simple: the next time you encounter something that triggers anxiety and you find yourself thinking, "I can't cope with this," choose instead to say to yourself, "God has given me tools for dealing with this and to grow stronger as a result." This may sound

<sup>7</sup> This is not at the exclusion of other methods for strengthening a person. When anxiety is chronic, it is often necessary to pursue professional counselling before positive self-talk can achieve its full effect.

overly simple, but when we understand how the brain works it makes perfect sense. Remember that one of the reasons we experience anxiety is because we overestimate the impact of a threat and underestimate our ability to handle it. Positive self-talk helps remind ourselves that we actually are able to handle the threat in a healthy way. Moreover, positive self-talk enables the brain's executive functions to kick in and override the fear signals coming from the amygdala. When your amygdala is telling you to panic, sometimes you just need to buy enough time for your executive functions to kick in and direct your behavior towards goals that are good for you. Positive self-talk—even for a few seconds—can give your executive functions the time they need to take control. It isn't easy and takes practice, but over time you may find that positive self-talk can enable you to experience an anxiety-producing stimulus without automatically defaulting to anxiety-avoidant behaviors.

In order for positive self-talk to work, however, it has to be *true*. I can tell myself all day long that I have the skills to be an NFL quarterback, but this will do me little good if I don't actually have football skills. Remember, without competency positive self-talk is just delusion. Thus, simply telling yourself that you have tools for coping with an anxiety-producing stimulus (i.e., positive self-talk) will do you little good unless you actually have the tools for coping with it.

So what are some of these tools? We've already covered some of these tools earlier in this article, but below are a few more.

### Your Tool-Box For Defeating Chronic Anxiety

- *Recognize That Your Feelings Do Not Define You.* A first step in rewiring the brain is recognizing that it is what you *do* that defines you, not what you feel. Listen to what Jeffrey Schwartz observed in the context of helping patients with OCD (a type of anxiety disorder): “I like to say, ‘*It's not how you feel, but what you do, that counts.*’ Because when you do the right things, feelings tend to

improve as a matter of course. But spend too much time being overly concerned about uncomfortable feelings, and you may never get around to doing what it takes to actually improve. Focus your attention on the mental and physical actions that will improve your life...”<sup>8</sup>

- *Challenge the Faulty Beliefs that Underlie Anxiety.* Faulty beliefs can include thinking errors or automatic thoughts like, “I can’t cope with this” or “something bad is probably about to happen,” or “he must really be thinking I’m stupid.” The next time you experience a fight/flight/freeze response, stop and examine if there are faulty beliefs that are causing or amplifying your anxiety. In their book on the neuroscience of anxiety, Pittman and Karle write that “The key is to be skeptical of anxiety-igniting thoughts and dispute them with evidence, ignore them as if they don’t exist, or replace them with new, more adaptive thoughts, also known as coping thoughts. Pay particular attention to the anxiety-igniting thoughts you catch yourself using quite often. Remember, neural circuitry is strengthened by the principle of ‘survival of the busiest.’”<sup>9</sup> As we pay attention to faulty beliefs that underlie anxiety, it is necessary to replace them with what we know to be true of Christ, which leads to the next tool.
- *Rest in Jesus.* There is nothing more annoying than over-spiritualized solutions to clinical problems, such as “just trust in Jesus and all your problems will go away.” But in the case of chronic anxiety, learning to rest in Jesus really is a crucial part of the answer. Consider that in a world without God, chronic anxiety is the most logical response. Our world is fraught with danger, confusion and uncertainty, and without Christ we would be left to hold onto the tenuous hope that things might work out okay. Without Christ, we are left to seek the Good Life in the things of

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey M Schwartz and Beverly Beyette, *Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior* (Place of publication not identified: Regan, 1998), xxxv.

<sup>9</sup> Pittman and Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 184.

this passing world (1 Cor. 15:32), with all the unpredictability this entails. On the other hand, if we have a relationship with Christ as our personal savior, then we know that even bad things work together for good (Rom. 8:28) and that ultimately we have nothing to fear: “He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5-6). During times of intense anxiety, it is easy to forget these truths, which leads to the next tool.

- *Take a Deep Breath.* The next time you feel yourself having a threat response, take a breath that is a little longer and deeper than normal. The action of the breath should be centered in your diaphragm and not your throat, to enable maximum oxygenation. Use this breath as a time to recall God’s promise to always take care of you (Mt. 6:25-34) and then gently depend on His strength instead of your own. From a neurological point of view, a deep breath is sometimes all we need to enable the reasoning part of our brain to kick in and not to be sabotaged by the amygdala. The amygdala sends signals of panic to our body in a fraction of a second, whereas the cortex takes longer to kick into gear. A deep breath buys your cortex the time it needs to gain control of the situation and enable you rationally to assess what is best for you, and to remember what is true about your situation.

- *Do a Lifestyle Audit.* Since anxiety is often subsidized through lifestyle choices, it can be helpful to take a quick audit to assess if you are reinforcing habits that are inadvertently feeding anxiety. This could include some of the avoidant routines mentioned earlier, as well as choices like;
  - sleeping with your phone turned on;
  - trying to predict the future;
  - over apologizing;
  - over preparing;
  - rechecking things you've already checked;
  - seeking over-assurance from others;
  - forecasting (see text box);

#### **Jesus on Forecasting**

“Forecasting” is a type of cognitive distortion whereby a person expects negative outcomes in the future. When we engage in forecasting, we are unable to enjoy the present because we are worried about the future. Jesus linked forecasting to anxiety. In His sermon about anxiety in Matthew 6, he concluded with these words: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Mt. 6:34)

Often the above behaviors have a chicken-and-egg relationship to anxiety: they are both symptoms of anxiety as well as reinforcing it.

- *Explore Solutions.* When you give your cortex time to kick in, you can begin exploring creative solutions to problems instead of letting anxiety dictate your reactions. Remember the story of Mia, who reacted with fight-responses to Jared’s unkindness? When their pastor learned what was happening, he helped Mia begin implementing solution-based responses instead of fight-responses. The main solution they explored was drawing boundaries. Now whenever Jared starts tearing Mia down, instead of reacting with a fight-response, Mia calmly replies, “I don’t think this is a good time to be talking about that, but I would be happy to discuss it later as long as we remain respectful to each other.” What about Annette who experienced a freeze-response every time she thought about cleaning up the guest room? When she started to understand that she was being immobilized by a

freeze response, she decided to get her cortex into gear and pursue solution-based approaches. The solution she came up with was just to work on the room for half an hour a day until it didn't feel so overwhelming.

- *Harness the Power of Imaginative Rehearsal.* Anxiety-management is a skill and it takes practice just like any other skill. One of the most effective ways to practice anxiety-management skills is through imaginative rehearsal. Here's how you do it: imagine yourself encountering something that stimulates anxiety, and then mentally rehearse yourself responding in a healthy way. The healthy response could be anything from positive self-talk to calmly drawing boundaries with people who are causing your anxiety (for example, by saying something like, "I don't think this is a good time for you to be firing questions at me—can you write your questions down and I'll get back to you about it?") By practicing healthy responses within an environment that is safe (namely, your own imagination), you will better equip yourself for responding properly the next time you encounter the anxiety-producing stimulus in the real world.
- *Reassess Priorities.* Sometimes we suffer anxiety from putting too high a priority on the things of this world. As Christians, we must always remember that we are sojourners and pilgrims (1 Pet. 2:11) on a journey to the new heavens and the new earth. Keeping a sense of healthy detachment from this world can be stabilizing when the things of this life threaten to overwhelm, confuse or scare us. Part of this is knowing how to keep our relationships with others in perspective. A lot of anxiety arises from trying to be man-pleasers instead of God-pleasers, and caring more what others think of us than what God thinks of us.