Mental Health Series Week 4: Fear & Anxiety (David)

Story/Quote

When God created humans, he created us with a body and a soul. The brain is a part of the body and when any part of the body is broken, we call on doctors to treat the problem. I talked about that the first week of this series when I mentioned the “inside the body” versus “outside the body” causes of depression. And the same is true of anxiety. But the mind is a part of the soul. While the treating of the brain can fall under the territory of the doctors, the treating or renewing of the mind is the territory of the church. Each week I have been up here talking to you and I have given enough statistics to highlight the severity of the mental health crisis. This crisis can be solved without the help of the church. So again, a doctor’s territory is the treatment of the brain, but the renewing of the mind is territory of the church. A doctor’s treatment might provide help, but only the church provides hope.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, the average person has 60,000 thoughts per day. On average, 80% of those thoughts are negative. If that’s not striking enough, 95 percent of those thoughts each day are repetitive. What that means is that every day we are largely recycling negative thoughts through our heads all day long. Now most of those thoughts are of little consequence, but we definitely shouldn’t assume that the 20% of the thoughts that are positive are the only thoughts that really matter. We know better. And what scientists continue to discover is that the neural networks in our brains have the ability to change and grow throughout our lives. The brain can rewire itself through what is called neuroplasticity. Which is both bad news and good news. Because when we continue to recycle those repetitive negative thoughts, all day, every day, it changes our brain. But the good news is that we can also work to rewire our brains positively by making a conscious effort to focus on the positive thoughts. So what neuroscientists call neuroplasticity, the counseling world calls it Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and the Bible calls it renewing the mind.

Before we get to the types of anxiety I want to differentiate between fear and anxiety, because sometimes they get used interchangeably. Fear is an emotional and bodily response to a specific and real danger or threat. It is a primary emotion. Anxiety is an unfocused fear that may be triggered by a variety of stressful, but non-threatening situations. Anxiety may persist long after the trigger is removed, or it might arise with no trigger at all. It is a secondary emotion that often occurs when a primary emotions like anger, fear, or sadness is stuffed down.

Types of Anxiety

Here are a few different categories of anxiety

* Generalized Anxiety Disorder
  + Chronic and exaggerated worrying about a wide variety of topics from everyday life
* Social Anxiety
  + Intense fear about social interaction, often driven by worries of embarrassment. Can result in panic attacks
* Phobias
  + Certain places, events, or objects create powerful reactions of strong, irrational fear.
  + Attempts to avoid triggers can take over a person’s life.
* Panic Disorder
  + Panic attacks and sudden feelings of terror that strike without warning
  + Repeated panic attacks for more than 6 months
* Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Signs of anxiety

There are physical, emotional and spiritual components of anxiety

Physical

* Rapid heart rate
* Shortness of breath
* Sweating
* Dizziness

Emotional

* Feeling of dread
* Tense or restless
* Difficulty sleeping
* Trouble concentrating and/or ruminating

Spiritual (these are not said to make you feel like a bad Christian)

* Isolation – might not feel like a spiritual issue but leads to
* Confusion over truth (Did God really say?)
* Doubting God’s Provision & Presence

What to do if it’s you

* Filter your thoughts through Philippians 4:8 (Is it true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy)
* Write down gratitudes
  + This helps to reinforce those 20% of positive thoughts to create new neural pathways.
* Slow, measured breathing patterns
  + This will help moderate the physical symptoms and the unrelenting thought cycle
* Reach out to someone (a friend/Stephen Minister/counselor
* Meditate on Scripture: There are many helpful verses about things to do or remember for those who struggle with anxiety. But in the midst of an anxiety attack, I think it is most helpful to focus verses that highlight the character and promises of God.
  + The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (Deuteronomy 31:8)
  + Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)
  + Psalm 23 (lists all the things that God does for you when you feel under attack)

What to do if it’s someone else

* Seen
  + Take the time to look, listen, and really understand what’s going on.
  + Don’t make them feel as though their feelings are irrational.
  + Don’t lead with bandaids or platitudes. Let go and let God might feel like good advice to give, but it won’t help someone feel seen. Remember that anxiety worsens when a primary emotion gets stuffed. Platitudes do the opposite of making someone feel seen, they will more likely cause someone to stuff their emotions
* Safe
  + Make a commitment that you won’t be the source of fear or anxiety in your home or relationship.
  + Be a safe person for someone to confide in.
* Soothed
  + Offer your P-E-A-C-E: Give them your presence, engagement, affection, calm, and empathy.

How to start a conversation:

You’ve said that your anxiety has been really bad lately. Can we talk about what might be causing it?

You have a lot on your plate. Can you tell me what’s going on and how I can help?

You seem to have a lot swirling around in your head. Do you want to go for a walk and talk about it?

If you have any questions or want to talk through anything you can reach out to me at tambra@southwestchurch.org.