

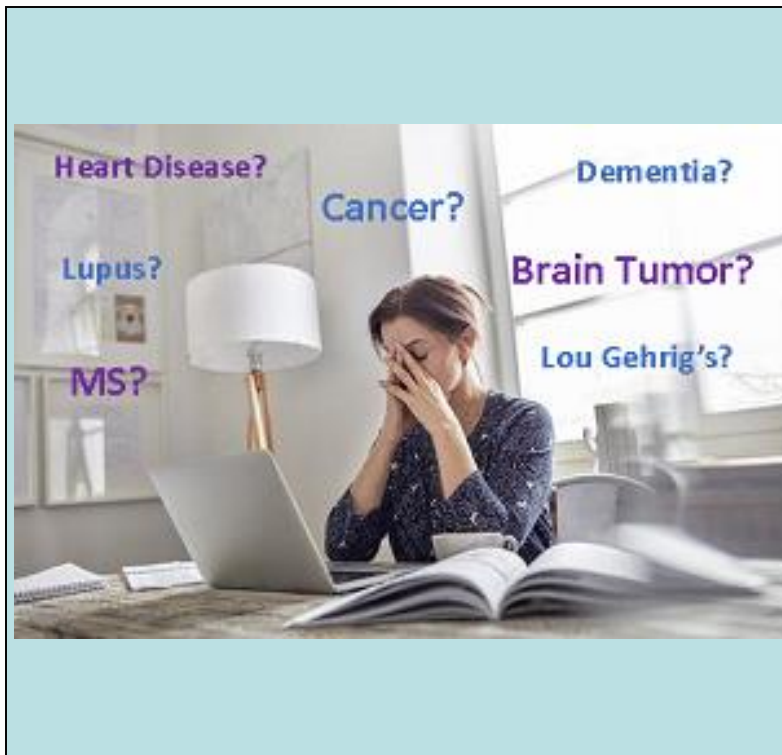
SUNDAY NEWS

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Anxiety & the "Thinking Cure"



Health researchers say that at least 4% of the U.S. population lives with "health anxiety," which is an excessive preoccupation with health and illness. These experts say that "symptoms of the condition may have emerged or worsened for certain people during these virus-dominated recent years" according to a current article in *TIME*.

"Health anxiety disorder" is the current term approved by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) for what was formerly called "hypochondria." The DSM is the handbook used by health-care professionals in much of the world as the authoritative guide to the diagnosis of mental disorders. In 2013, the DSM retired the older term because it was seen as belittling and inadequate.

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People with such anxiety may worry about developing a serious disease even when tests show nothing amiss. They may obsessively research symptoms online, or may become fixated on normal physical sensations and assume they are early signs of serious illness. And such anxiety can even manifest itself physically in symptoms such as shortness of breath or elevated heart rate.

The pandemic years, with constant news about Covid-19, along with legitimate fears about the illness, exacerbated health anxiety for many who were already prone to it.

TIME magazine says, "Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the only treatment for health anxiety with strong evidence behind it, [says clinical psychologist Paul Salkovskis]. According to the Mayo Clinic, CBT can help people with health anxiety acknowledge and adjust their fears related to illness and physical sensations and develop coping strategies. Two-thirds of people with health anxiety saw a reduction in symptoms after being treated with CBT, and about half went into complete remission, according to a research review published in 2019."

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CBT is a form of psychotherapy where patients are taught to approach their emotional problems using good critical-thinking skills. People learn to identify self-destructive thought patterns -- sometimes called "cognitive distortions" in CBT lingo -- and replace them with clearer thinking. As individuals learn to do that, they are often able to obsess less over problems and give themselves more credit for the positive things in their lives.

Common cognitive distortions include such thinking pitfalls as catastrophizing, discounting positives, expecting life to be fair, overgeneralizing, "what if?" thinking, assuming the worst, taking too much or too little responsibility for one's problems, emotional reasoning and more.)

Even after learning to employ the principles of CBT, a person's anxious thoughts may still pop up, but the individual now knows to examine those thoughts to determine whether these internal judgments are valid or distortions. As an example, if someone acts rudely toward you, you might conclude he is a bad person and take offense -- or worse, conclude that you deserved to be treated rudely. But with clearer thinking, you might allow the possibility that he is simply having a bad day, and not take the rudeness personally.

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CBT has been found to be a helpful treatment for a range of emotional disorders, including health anxiety, persistent worries, obsessive-compulsion, depression, perfectionistic tendencies, chronic fatigue, eating disorders, as well as some general life issues, like marital problems and grief.

While people with chronic anxiety, other emotional disorders or painful life issues may benefit greatly from seeing a counselor trained in CBT, many people can learn to employ the principles of CBT on their own so as to outthink reasoning traps.

One pastoral counselor explained, "We have found that some of the most emotionally balanced people we know seem to have learned to examine their thoughts and recognize cognitive distortions for what they are. They may call such thoughts simply 'illogical' rather than distortions, but the point is, once the notions are seen as mental spins, the person is able to at least lower the volume of those internal troublemakers, if not turn them off altogether."

Whereas psychotherapy is sometimes referred to as "the talking cure," we might label individual mental processing using the tools of the CBT, "the thinking cure." END

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Read Psalm 30:4-5

Notice the implied distortions and stated corrections: One implied distortion is "God's anger is forever"; the other is "there is no end to weeping." But the psalmist recognizes that neither of those things is true and corrects with "God's anger is for a moment" and "joy comes in the morning."

The psalmist uses critical thinking to put troubles of life into perspective. Of course, the psalmist understands these corrections to be dependent on the nature of God, but he relies on God's track record, alluded to in broad terms in verses 1-3 and 11. Verse 2 might be considered a summary: "O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me." In this case, "healed" can apply more broadly than to just physical recovery; it can also be a metaphor for God's help in thinking better.

Questions: How might personal prayer help us when dealing with persistent fears and worries about things that are unlikely to happen to us? What might healing look like in such circumstances?

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Read 2 Peter 2:17-22

For some people with anxiety disorders, there were traumatic or shaming incidents -- perhaps in childhood -- that instilled the notion that they are unworthy or are not deserving of something better. It's as if their minds were recorders that made "tapes" of their emotions and fears during those incidents, and anytime something makes them recall those incidents or they experience some new thing with similar dynamics, the "tape" from that time runs in their mind, affecting their response and feelings in the present. One intractable and unwelcome memory can influence a lifetime of perceptions, emotions and behavior. The unwanted "playing" of the tape is like the dog returning to its vomit or the freshly washed hog plopping down again in the mud.

One aim of CBT is to help people use the power of reasoning to "turn off" or at least "turn down" the volume on those tapes.

Questions: What does the image of mental "tapes" help you understand about what it means to be human? How might that image help us understand our need for God?

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Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

The apostle Paul is here speaking about spiritual warfare, but the strongholds he mentions sound very much like thought traps, and taking "every thought captive" suggests confronting cognitive distortions.

Here's how the Bible paraphrase *The Message* renders the last sentence quoted above: "We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ."

Questions: What "strongholds" (cognitive distortions) from the culture might Paul have had in mind when writing these words? What "strongholds" in our ways of thinking need to be disarmed?

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Read Romans 12:2

CBT as such wasn't known in Paul's day, but clear thinking was. Paul's overarching aim was to bring people to Christ and help followers of Jesus stay on track. Paul's major concern was for people to have their minds clearly thinking about who Jesus is and to behave out of those thoughts rather than out of sinful thoughts.

Question: What do you think he was calling for when he said "be transformed by the renewing of the mind"? How might clear thinking help us "discern what is the will of God"?

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Wrapping It Up

A few questions to wrap up our discussion.

- Anxiety disorders are being diagnosed now more often than ever before. How might you respond with empathy to people who deal with anxiety disorders about their health or anything else?
- We all have anxieties and fears, even if we are not diagnosed with a disorder. How does our faith speak to our fears? How does it help our thinking?