



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712
Email: info@nacsww.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**ANXIETY:
OUR VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCY AS CHRISTIAN
HELPING PROFESSIONALS**

Marci Brown-Gilpin

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2005
October, 2005
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

Introduction

Many social work settings are experiencing ongoing job performance pressures. These pressures are generated out of dynamics such as changes in funding trends, changes in allowable lengths of stay, paper work requirements, high caseloads, as well as licensing requirements. Within this context, the helping professional's experience of pressure becomes a source of stress. This is demonstrated through the following definitions of stress "1, importance; emphasis,2. a strain.3, chronic pressure; tension" (Morehead, 1995, p. 651).

In helping professions, there is much tension generated by competing demands and as a result much stress. The emphasized tasks and important job functions compete with one another generating tension and pressure within one's overall job focus.

Through these tensions and pressures, this field generates its own unique experience of

stress. Therefore, all providers must learn self-care and coping skills to manage over time.

Stress can lead to anxiety. Therefore, one must be aware of causes for stress in the field, as well as the ability of stress to trigger into experiences of anxiety. Anxiety is “a state of being uneasy, apprehensive or worried about what may happen; concern about a possible future event” (Neufeldt and Guralnik, 1988, p. 62). For example, child protective workers may have this feeling when a child recants sexual abuse allegations, leaving providers confused as to how to meet that child’s future needs. Mental health clinicians may be left with anxiety when a depressed client presents with symptoms of self-harm and needs a safety plan. The importance of addressing a priority theme such as safety for clients is just another example of potential stress for helping professionals. These therefore become an invitation to be anxious about the outcomes for our clients.

The helping profession of social work as a field is full of challenges in the management of both stress and anxiety. All social workers within the field must navigate these challenges. The development of coping strategies can be diverse among those in the field. However, for Christian helping professionals there are many common coping strategies as well as vulnerabilities to the management of stress and anxiety. Those coping strategies common to the Christian helping professional lend to their resiliency against the negative effects of stress and anxiety. Conversely, potential areas of weakness for the Christian helping professional may lead to vulnerabilities in the management of stress and anxiety.

Vulnerabilities

The Caring Christian Attitude

Christians entering the field of social work often consider their choice of work a vocation or mission to serve others. Their profession is profoundly spiritual in nature and guided Biblically. Paul instructs the believers in Galatians 5:13 to “serve one another in love” (New International Version). Furthermore, serving one another through social work can be embraced as a spiritual gift. Paul in Romans chapter 12 explains that we as Christ’s church are like one body that has many members. It is taught that we as many members have differing spiritual gifts for the purpose of supporting and giving to one another. Paul lists many possible gifts among the believers including, “If it is serving, let him serve” (Romans 12:7).

The caring Christian attitude brought to service delivery is central to so many Christians in the field of social work. Anxiety is an easy trap within this context. Christian helping professionals care what happens to their clients and those clients often come to services with a high-risk status in some area. Concern for the well being of others is a significant way we show Christ’s love and follow the Word of God.

For the Christian helping professional sharing the Word of God, which includes his message of care and concern, is a delicate matter. As Sherwood proposes in the article “Ethical Integration of Faith and Social Work Practice: Evangelism” (2002) social work practice and direct proclamation of the Word are separate callings. Sherwood makes a distinction between proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. In an effort to demonstrate the care and concern of Jesus, Christian helping professionals may slip

into worry for the well being of their clients. The act of worry, however, is to “cause to feel anxious” (Moorehead, 1995).

Living in a Fallen World

Biblical instruction is given regarding anxiety because of the vulnerabilities to God’s people living in a fallen world. This is acknowledged in both the Old and New Testaments. In Proverbs 12:25 we are told, “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but an encouraging word makes it glad.” To address these vulnerabilities we are directed, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Satan attacks mankind with anxieties and helping professionals are among them. C. S. Lewis’ book The Screwtape Letters explains the role of evil forces in keeping people from God’s intended way of living. Screwtape, an associate to the Devil writes instructions to his apprentice stating, “There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against the Enemy [God and his son Jesus Christ]. He wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them” (1996, p. 25). We must remember that it is not intended for us to experience anxieties for our clients. In turn, God wants us to stay focused on what we do within our work for those clients.

Diverse Backgrounds and Length of Exposure to Christian Teachings

Christian’s in social work come from diverse backgrounds. Vulnerabilities to anxiety while providing social work services will vary depending on length of exposure

to Christian teachings as well as life experiences. There is much for us to learn in this lifetime as we strive to further ourselves in Christ's teachings as well as our profession.

Joyce Myer in her book Be Anxious of Nothing states that,

there are many stages we must go through in the course of our spiritual growth.

We need to learn how to enjoy the glory we are experiencing at each level of our development. It is true we are not yet where we need to be, but thank God, we are not where we used to be. We are somewhere in the middle, but we are making progress toward our goal-and we ought to be enjoying each stage (1998, p.22).

It is essential for believers in social work to be aware of work related temptations to become anxious. We must remember that this is not intended by our loving God as an experience for our lives or professions. We are encouraged to develop distinct Christian coping strategies. These coping strategies are founded in Jesus' teachings along with the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Resiliencies

The Christian helping professional has unique resiliencies founded in their faith and the teachings of Jesus Christ. A personal relationship with the Lord Jesus brings forth many blessings for the Christian. These blessings are carried forth into the work of the helping professional. Continuing to learn to draw upon and strengthen the presence of these blessings in our life is our mission as Christians. "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).

Prayer

Prayer is a central coping strategy available to the Christian helping professional. We are instructed to “Be joyful always; pray continually” (I Thessalonians 5:16-17). In addition, as previously discussed Philippians 4:6 instructs us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”. You are promised that by doing so, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). This encourages and comforts us that instead of anxiety we are called into both joy and peace.

Prayer brings the presence of God into our lives and our situations. In my church, we pray in unison weekly for the Lord to “keep us free from sin and protect us from all ‘anxiety’ as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ”. By petitioning God, we release our needs to him and receive his promised presence into our situations. The Christian is directed to have faith when petitioning God. James 1:6 explains, “When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind”.

Scripture

All scriptures are God-breathed and inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). Scriptures have been used thus far in order to examine the Christian helping professional’s vulnerabilities and resiliencies to anxiety. We have examined scripture that addresses direct instruction on the management of anxiety (Philippians 4:6). God’s will for us to be spared the difficulties of living anxious are evident through his Holy Word. In 1 Peter 5:7, you are reminded to “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”.

Instructions on his plan for our coping are always being revealed. Jesus promises us,

The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:26-27).

This scripture speaks of Jesus' intended peace and joy for his people. Peace, as compared to anxiety, is the opposite emotional, psychological, and spiritual state of well being.

Other Christian Literature

Many Christian writers explore the Word of the Lord and its implications for our modern lives. Topics of stress, anxiety, and peace are available and often beneficial to believers. Many authors become known for their spiritual gift of teaching. For example, Robert Schuller has published over 25 books on Christian themes. In the book, Turning Stress into Strength Schuller explores how to make positive use of stress. Schuller gives example after example of bringing glory to the Lord through stress. This is quite different from allowing stress to become a trigger for anxiety.

In addition, Joyce Meyer's book Be Anxious for Nothing (1987) is an example of a comprehensive exploration of Christian living and its protections against anxiety. Meyer applies Biblically teachings on the very issues that tend to cause us anxiety and distress. The Christian social worker has materials such as these for application to personal and professional life experiences.

Community of Believers

“A community is a group of people who feel a bond with each other because they share an identity, common interests, and a sense of belonging” (Shaefor, Horejsi, &Horejsi, 1997, p.314). The Christian helping professional belongs to a community with those who also believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Within this Christian community, a helping professional can find a strong identity, an outlet for common interests, as well as comfort from belonging. As a reflection of this, Paul instructs the early church of the Thessalonians to encourage and comfort one another (I Thessalonians 5:11). As a result, the environment of a Christian community can support and rejuvenate the helping professional who is experiencing job related stress.

Jesus promises us, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). Through this promise, we are guaranteed Jesus’ presence and therefore his blessings upon our Christian communities. There are unique weekly blessings for our community worship services as we are called to actively support and love one another. In I John 3:18, we are instructed, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (I John 3:18).

Summary

Helping professionals are exposed to many stressors within the context of service delivery. Because of ongoing stress, helping professionals may be triggered into experiences of anxiety. All providers in the social work field are faced with the need for coping strategies in the management of stress and anxiety. Specifically for the Christian helping professional, there are common vulnerabilities and resiliencies to managing stress and anxiety effectively.

Vulnerabilities for the Christian helping professional are influenced by several factors. Christian helping professionals bring a Biblically based caring attitude to their work. However, caring and concern for clients who are at high risk in some areas may lead to anxiety for the future well being of those clients. In addition, living in a fallen world exposes children of God to ongoing uncertainties and temptations for anxiety. Learning to recognize and navigate these temptations is one of life's challenges for all Christians including the helping professional. Furthermore, the Christian population is vast and comes from very diverse backgrounds. This leads to varying life experiences and length of exposure to Christian teachings. It is our task as individuals to continue to learn and grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In contrast, Christian helping professionals have many potential resources available to aid in coping with stress and anxiety. We as Christians are taught to bring to the Lord Jesus in prayer our care and concerns. This includes any concerns we carry for our clients. In addition, Christians have scriptures available for teaching and reassurance in the areas of coping with anxiety. Other Christian literature is also available for extra guidance and application in our modern lives. Furthermore, staying connected in our Christian communities offers us belonging as well as the promise of Jesus' presence.

We can know with confidence that the Lord our God understands our vulnerabilities and is the provider of our resiliencies. Paul reports his own experiences with vulnerability and weakness in 2 Corinthians. He pleads to the Lord to have his weakness removed. Paul records, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Likewise, we are not to

despair about our vulnerabilities, but instead to persevere in our resiliency growth through our Lord Jesus Christ.

References

- Lewis, C. S. (1996). *The screwtape letters*. New York, NY: Harper San Francisco
- Meyer, J. (1987). *Be anxious for nothing: The art of casting your cares and resting in God*. New York, NY: Warner Faith.
- Morehead, A., & Morehead, L. (Ed.). (1995). *The new American Webster handy college dictionary* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc.
- Neufeldt, V., & Guralnik, D. (Eds.). (1988). *Webster's new world dictionary of American English* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Schuller, R. (1978). *Turning your stress into strength*. Irvine, CA: Harvest House Publishers.
- Sheafor, B. W., Horejsi, C. R., & Horejsi, G. A. (1997). *Techniques and guidelines for social work practice* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon
- Sherwood, D. (2002, Spring). Ethical integration of faith and social work practice: Evangelism. *Social work and Christianity*, 29, 1-12