

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

11. Understanding the body: A Christian approach to managing anxiety

In the second of this series of reflections on managing anxiety, Michèle Hampson shows us how we can incorporate a spiritual dimension into simple methods to still our bodies and minds.

Most anxiety management strategies focus on our bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts and ignore the spiritual dimension. Some of the popularity of yoga stems from its holistic approach. This reflection seeks to provide a Christian equivalent in relation to anxiety management.

Body awareness

Our bodies are very expressive of our anxiety; whether it is tension, the knot in the stomach or shallow breathing. Body scanning involves becoming aware of how each body part in turn feels.

God can be brought into this self-awareness by initially becoming aware of God gazing on us and recalling that our bodies, created by God are precious; they are temples of the Holy Spirit. With God's grace we seek to release the tension we discover.

Bodily rhythmic movement is as soothing for adults as for children; so we can use it to help us focus when distracted. We are called to praise God with tambourine and dancing (Psalm 150:4). So we might focus our attention on God by using a simple repetitive drumming movement of our fingers as we read a psalm or develop a simple rhythmic dance, such as taking three slow steps forward and one back as we slowly circle the room. (This works well to the Pachelbel Canon in D Major). Rather like walking the labyrinth, this can help us reflect on what draws us to God and what impedes us. The good news is that we progress despite the setbacks!

Breathing exercises

Controlled slow breathing is key to anxiety management - it reduces the release of adrenaline. It is a reminder to seek the security of the present moment as the only time where change is possible.

We can remind ourselves that the God who gives us breath (Genesis 2:7) is closer than our next breath. We can be conscious of breathing in God's Spirit to replenish us body, mind and spirit and release all that is not of God on the outbreath. (A similar bodily exercise 'palms up, palms down' involves holding our palms up to receive God's love and palms down to release all that impedes our relationship with God).

Taking three deep breaths is sufficient to slow our breathing. So we might reflect that we want to draw close to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit with our successive breaths. I might for example recall that God protects me as my Creator, that Christ is in me and that the Spirit within inspires me (Job 32:8).

It is good to prolong the out-breath as this is calming, through stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system, whereas the in-breath has the converse effect. One way is to sigh, bringing God into the situation, by saying for example 'O Lord.'

Many breathing exercises recommend counting as we breathe - to slow down our breathing and to shift our focus from our anxious thoughts. We can however replace the counting with a mantra or phrase. Some might worry that this is an Eastern mystical practice, but it was practised from the early days by the Orthodox Church. The aim is for the calm of the breathing to help us stay mentally focused on God.

The most well-known is the Jesus prayer; with the phrase 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me' to which the words 'a sinner' were later added. Four-syllable words such as Emmanuel (God with us) or Maranatha (Aramaic for 'Come Lord Jesus') are popular too.

Mindfulness

Using mantras moves us from simple breathing exercises to a meditative mindfulness on God. As you continue, the words may cease and you are simply aware of God's presence.

We can anticipate the distracting thoughts that arise. In mindfulness we simply note them in a non-judgmental fashion and let them go. One might picture the thoughts floating away like a cloud; they are just thoughts. This helps to disempower the urgency of our worries, the weight of regrets or the anticipatory anxiety that might invade the present. There is a lovely analogy in Isaiah (44:22) where God says 'I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.' So we return to God in the present moment with our next breath.

You may find your own image - such as picturing God as a flowing stream and picturing the worries or distress as stones that you cast into God's healing flow.

Some find it helpful to have a visual focus of symbolic significance; perhaps a candle, as Jesus Christ is the light of the world. For others, touch is effective; such as using a holding cross to be aware of God's presence; or prayer beads, with the rhythmic movement inducing an attentive calm. One friend described a time of very poor concentration when she would simply hold her morning cup of tea and remind herself that in like manner God was holding her.

Exercising creativity

These exercises can be combined to be holistic and we can enjoy discovering what helps us. Personally I try to breathe deeply as I perform stretching exercises whilst reciting Psalm 8.

What might work for you?

Michele Hampson is an honorary adult psychiatrist and priest in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. St Luke's is very grateful for her regular contributions to this series of reflections.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website or on 020 7898 1700.