

# Fear, Stress and Anxiety

As we approach our death, it is natural to experience fear, stress and anxiety. People often say, “I’m not afraid of death; it’s the pain and turmoil of dying that worries me.” Others are genuinely concerned about leaving behind everything that has any meaning to them, their family and friends, their possessions, and losing their faculties and ultimately their body. “What will happen to me?” So it is good to learn now about the causes of fear and anxiety and to practice their antidotes. However, modern life is not a help in this regard, because many of us live in constant states of fear, stress or anxiety. This is not necessarily to do with dying; it is the nature of modern life.

“We all have fears, the Archbishop explained, “Fear and anxiety are mechanisms that have helped us survive. You know, if you did not feel fear when you saw a lion over there and just walked merrily by, in next to no time there would be no you .... It is when this natural fear gets exaggerated, that we experience stress, worry and anxiety.”

Many of us suffer from this general state of unease, during which we have floating fears and worries that attach to any experience or relationship. It is very hard to be joyful with stress and anxiety; we have a continual feeling of being overwhelmed and not being able to handle our work commitments, our family commitments, or the digital devices that are constantly reminding us of all the things that we are missing. Juggling so many things at the same time, we can feel like we are always one step behind.

Thupten Jinpa pointed out that modern society has prioritized independence to such an extent that we are left on our own to try to manage lives that are increasingly out of control. He explained the life that the Dalai Lama and his people had in Tibet before the Chinese invasion. Life would not have been easy for him and his family, so it was a surprise to me when Jinpa explained that life would have been much less stressful in a traditional village.

For much of human history, whether in Tibet or Africa, or anywhere in between, there were fears and worries, some of them major, like whether there would be enough food for the winter. But these concerns were made more manageable by having a close and connected life. While survival is the greatest stressor or all – for which our stress response evolved – there is something different about the pressures and pulls of modern life. Although there would no doubt have been times of great stress and anxiety at the loss of crops or even the loss of a child, the daily rhythms would have been far less frenzied and unfocussed. “There is a wisdom that has been lost,” Jinpa said, “Our opportunities are so much greater now, but so, too, are our anxieties.”

But if stress and anxiety are inevitable parts of modern life, how can we begin to confront these ever-present irritants? How do we make the ride smoother? How do we minimize the worry we experience?

“Stress and anxiety often come from too much expectation and too much ambition,” the Dalai Lama said. “Then when we don’t fulfil that expectation or achieve the ambition, we experience frustration. Right from the beginning, it is a self-centred attitude. I want this. I want that. Often we are not being realistic about our own ability or our about objective reality. When we have a clear picture about our own capacity, we can be realistic about our effort. Then there is a much greater chance of achieving our goals. But unrealistic effort only brings disaster. So in many cases our stress is caused by our expectations and our ambition.”

What is too much ambition? I wondered. For someone raised in America, where ambition is a virtue in and of itself, the marriage of initiative and persistence, I was struck by his answer. Could it be that all of the getting and grasping that we see as our major ambition in modern life could be misguided? And perhaps the recipe that more is better might be a recipe for stress and frustration, and ultimately, dissatisfaction?

Perhaps it is a question of priorities. What is it that is really worth pursuing? What is it we truly need? According to the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama, when we see how little we really need – love and connection – then all the getting and grasping that we thought was so essential to our well-being takes its rightful place and no longer becomes the focus and obsession of our lives. We must try to be conscious about how we live and not get swept away by the modern trance, the relentless march, the anxious accelerator.

Symptoms of chronic stress are feelings of fragmentation and chasing after time – of not being able to be present. What we are looking for is a joyful, settled state of being, and we need to give this state space. The Archbishop once told me that people often think he needs time to pray and reflect because he is a religious leader. He said those who must live in the marketplace – business-people, professionals, workers – need it even more.

As chronic stress becomes a global epidemic, our stress response is being studied intensively to see if we can unwind its mysteries. It turns out that our perspective has a surprising amount of influence over our body's stress response. When we turn a threat into a challenge, our body responds very differently. What we need is stress resilience. This involves turning what is called 'threat stress', or the perception that a stressful event will harm us, into what is called 'challenge stress', or the perception that a stressful event is a challenge that will help us grow.

The remedy is quite straightforward. One simply notices the flight-or-fight response in one's body – the beating heart, the pulsing blood, or the tingling feeling in our hands or face, the rapid breathing – then remembers that these are natural responses to stress and that our body is just preparing to rise to the challenge.

Extracts from: *The Book of Joy*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, Hutchinson: London 2016, selected by Len Warren.