



## CHAPTER 7

### OVER THE WALLS OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

*Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad.*

- Proverbs<sup>73</sup>

The couple facing me across the desk had busy professional careers and a five-year-old daughter.

“We need to work through some things,” Nathan told me. “We have been trying to get pregnant again for almost four years. We’ve been discussing fertility options.”

His wife, Evelyn, nodded. “We think the problem may be that we are too anxious—I am too anxious,” she corrected herself, glancing quickly at her husband. He nodded. “I’ve been having panic attacks,” she said. “I have been on medication for anxiety for some time. It helps a bit, but these panic attacks are recent. I have taken a leave of absence from work in order to try to deal with this constant pressure of juggling my job, looking after our home, parenting Lily and trying to be a good wife for Nathan.”

“What do you hope to get out of our sessions?” I asked Nathan.

“Oh, I’m here to support Evelyn,” he said. “I don’t know what else I can do.” He looked sadly at his wife who looked down at her fingernails.

“I wanted him to come,” she admitted after a moment. “I lose my temper a lot with him, and it’s hard on him. We thought that if we could get to the root of my anxiety, we’d both be more relaxed about our next pregnancy, and maybe it would help us conceive again.”

After further discussion we discovered that Evelyn’s anxiety arose only when she was not getting along well with Nathan. We spent time building up some coping skills for Evelyn to use at home.

As we continued to meet, it became apparent that Nathan was supportive of and affectionate toward Evelyn. He admitted, however, that when he got angry, he felt overwhelmed. Even though he tried to contain himself, he would give her a quick blast of his own and then leave. He would go out for a drive or visit friends, and stay away until he felt ready to go home. He could not understand why Evelyn yelled at him whenever she became anxious.

This had been a pattern with them: she yelled, and he ran.

Looking within, he said he had noticed that right before he ran, he felt an overwhelming need to be alone. That sense of being overwhelmed was there everywhere he went. Between work-related stress, a young daughter, and a wife who yelled at him when she was upset, he reported that on some mornings he just could not seem to pull himself out of bed.

We took a look into both of their family histories. An assessment of Evelyn’s revealed that although her parents were warm and nurturing, her mom was very anxious and reacted with criticism and hypervigilance. She would express her own fears by constantly making sure that everyone in the house was safe, to the point that she would monitor and control what Evelyn and her siblings ate, what they wore, where they went, and who they went out with. She constantly stressed that if her children didn’t listen to her, something bad might happen. The underlying message that Evelyn received from early childhood was, “There is always something to be afraid of.”

In school, Evelyn struggled with feeling left out and rejected by friends. Both her two previous serious relationships had ended because she was considered “too needy.” Evelyn and Nathan met in their last year of undergraduate studies. The relationship was somewhat conflictual at times, and even back then, Nathan would storm away when he was angry. This left Evelyn facing her greatest fear—that Nathan did not love her and might eventually leave.

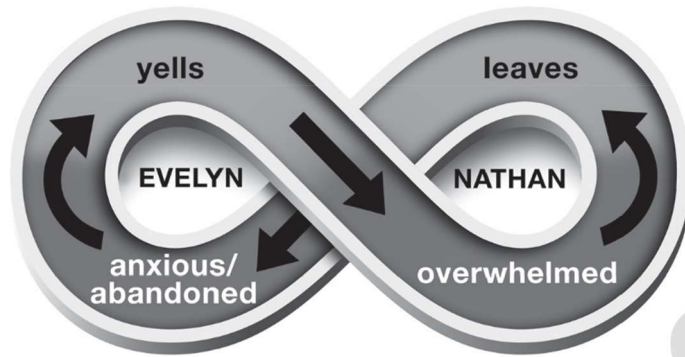
Nathan’s father was an alcoholic, and Nathan, the only child, found it difficult to connect with him. His parents fought frequently, occasionally violently, until they separated when he was ten. He was close to his mom, and lived with her, rarely seeing his dad. He managed to get through high school and college, but had some academic and relationship struggles. He didn’t give these much thought at the time, believing that being focused and working hard was the best way to cope well with his losses.

Nathan kept what was going on inside of him hidden. He internalized his feelings and let them fester until they became an uncomfortable weight. When angry, he would argue and stand his ground at first, but after a very short period of time he would bolt. Evelyn was afraid of the anxiety inside her and her screaming was a cry for help, but Nathan felt attacked and, not knowing what to do with the anger and mixed emotions he was feeling, he would flee, abandoning Evelyn. This, of course, stirred up even more anxiety in her.

Facing infertility issues while wondering if their marriage could survive this difficult pattern had them both very confused.

Their cycle plays out like this:

- Nathan generally keeps his feelings hidden
- Evelyn feels generally anxious
- When conflict arises, she panics and yells at Nathan
- He feels overwhelmed
- He raises his voice, then leaves the house
- She feels abandoned and her anxiety increases



## ANGER AND DEPRESSION

If it is not processed, anger may strongly contribute to depression and sometimes anxiety.<sup>74</sup> Anger is a source of emotional power and strength that is meant to propel us into action. When it is turned inward, however, the negativity takes ownership and makes itself at home. We understand that there are almost always other emotions with or behind the anger. Depression and anxiety can be a result of internalized feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and/or worthlessness. Depression and anxiety can also be a visible expression of the hidden anger.

Evelyn did not simply discard all the fearful messages from her mom and the rejecting messages from friends at school. Although she didn't consciously think of them, they turned out to be extremely strong messages she carried in her core. Although her parents were loving, she was not able to help them understand what she was going through. They never knew of her experiences of rejection, and the great fear she harbored of being alone. For his part, Nathan fought depression that seemed to be rooted in feelings of inadequacy and shame. He worked hard to avoid feeling or addressing his internal pain. He kept busy and avoided most social interactions. Evelyn's angry attacks toward him made it difficult for him to have the confidence to stand by her in those moments. They both felt helpless and alone.

Nathan's habit of shutting down and pushing his own feelings aside left him with little interest in personal activities he had once enjoyed, such as soccer, woodworking, and playing with his daughter. Eventually he started to lose interest in life itself. Subtly he withdrew from taking part in family activities and found comfort in sleeping as much as he could when he was not at work. Evelyn became more panic-stricken. She was tired from the busyness and chaos of work, childrearing, and trying to maintain a happy home, and she felt very alone as she banged on what felt to her like another wall of rejection. The harder she tried to hold it all together, the more she raged. The more she raged, the less Nathan enjoyed life. The more helpless he felt and the more docile he became, the more Evelyn raged. When they began therapy, Evelyn could hardly contain her anxiety and Nathan presented with signs of depression.

Depression is a serious and common factor in aggressive expressions of anger. Sometimes it is easier to acknowledge and express anger than it is to acknowledge any feelings of depression. In the case of Nathan and Evelyn, it was easier to assume that Nathan was probably suffering from a depressive disorder than it was to assume that depression was only a factor with Evelyn. A simple depression check questionnaire revealed evidence to suggest that both Evelyn and Nathan had struggled with low mood and needed to let their family physicians know.

Depressive disorders can be hidden behind the wall of anger, which explains why it is so difficult for some people to gain control of themselves. If depression is beneath the anger and has not been diagnosed, then it is not going to be treated. We have already noted that for a long time Nathan had retreated from family events and other social activities because these underlying feelings weighed him down. Less obvious symptoms of depression were soon apparent in Evelyn who was able to express her discouragement and sadness when we slowed the cycle down and validated her anger. I encouraged her to allow herself to experience, acknowledge and process what was at the root of her anger.

Evelyn carried unmet emotional wounds into her marriage from her childhood. She had anxieties and fears of being hurt or alone that stemmed from childhood, and screaming at Nathan was her way of calling out for help. Another factor was Nathan's own fears of helplessness, as he found himself ineffective in changing the cycle. Feeling stuck in a destructive cycle usually adds to whatever underlying negative emotions pre-date the relationship.

(This is a preview. Portions of this chapter have been omitted.)

## ANGER AND ANXIETY

Though the words stress, anxiety, and fear are commonly used interchangeably, they actually have different meanings. Stress is the pressure we feel when we become overloaded with activities and responsibilities. Anxiety is an underlying unspecific apprehension or nervousness, as in a continuous or frequent worry. Fear is an immediate real or perceived threat to safety and security, such as being startled suddenly, feeling in jeopardy, or even having a phobia.

*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines anxiety as “an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (such as sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.”<sup>77</sup> It is normal to feel anxious about an upcoming event when we are expected to perform to a certain standard, such as a test, a formal event or a presentation. Anxiety gives us a heightened sensitivity to danger, and empowers us to try to control our circumstances rather than to wait passively.

While stressful events will trigger feelings of anxiety that are part of normal life, anxiety disorders can set in when regular, heightened anxiety becomes part of everyday life. We develop a sense of helplessness that we can't do anything to change the stress cycle. Anxiety is a sense of uneasiness and apprehension that anticipates the worst and doesn't necessarily have a specific trigger.

So what is the relationship between anxiety and anger? There is research evidence to show that anger intensifies and exacerbates the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and that anger is “uniquely related to GAD.”<sup>78</sup> This study also pointed out that the thought processes connected to GAD are probably the same thought processes that increase anger.<sup>79</sup> We can see this in Evelyn: her thoughts that Nathan wasn't fully committed to her left her feeling both anxious and angry.

Anxiety is a habit-forming activity, a learned behavior that can be picked up in childhood. It can form from an environmental influence from caregivers, siblings, or others. At least a part of Evelyn's anxiety was environmental because her mom maintained an anxious atmosphere. Anxiety can also be hereditary and have a biological factor. Studies verify that a tendency toward anxiety runs in families. This can be true even if the family members don't live together. But even though anxiety is learned and inherited, it can be overcome.

## Anxiety and Physiology

Anxiety is like a barometer that lets us know when we have reached our peak of information intake. Anxiety tells us when we are in need of peace, and when we need to say *no* to others. It also indicates when we should run. When we are in danger, or if we are about to be attacked, anxiety will push us into the fight-or-flight mode so we can protect ourselves or others.

Symptoms of anxiety may include some of the following:<sup>80</sup>

- palpitations or pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- sweating; trembling or shaking
- dry mouth (not owing to medication or dehydration)
- difficulty breathing; feeling of choking
- chest pain or discomfort
- nausea or abdominal distress (e.g. churning in stomach)
- feeling dizzy, unsteady, faint or light-headed
- feelings that objects are unreal (derealisation), or that one's self is distant or 'not really here' (depersonalisation)
- fear of losing control, going crazy or passing out; fear of dying
- hot flushes or cold chills
- numbness or tingling sensations
- muscle tension, or aches and pains
- restlessness and inability to relax
- feeling keyed up, or on edge, or of mental tension
- a sensation of a lump in the throat, or difficulty with swallowing.

People experience these symptoms in varying combinations. Don't assume that it's "just" anxiety, nor make assumptions that it's serious. Get yourself checked to ease your mind.

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## Anxiety and Attachment Theory

Anxiety is very closely related to our need for attachment. When attachment needs are not met—whether it is an infant needing his parent or an adult needing her partner—the inner reaction is the same. Panic attacks are the ultimate physical, emotional and psychological response to the belief and feeling that our worst fears are about to be realized. For Evelyn, when her worst fear of abandonment seemed to surface, she would find herself fighting off anxiety and often reacting with anger. She would have weeks with no problems, and then days or weeks with heightened anxiety. Gradually, with therapy, Evelyn learned how to keep her anxiety manageable. She had no more panic attacks and was able to calm herself down reasonably quickly when anxiety did arise.

In the midst of an argument neither Evelyn nor Nathan could see their own pattern. Dr. Sue Johnson says, "When we feel cornered and flooded with fear, we tend to see and go with the obvious—I can see and feel what you just did to me. It's much harder to see the impact of my responses on you."<sup>85</sup>

A normal response to abandonment, real or perceived, is anxiety and fear. A normal response to abandonment for someone with an anxious attachment style is full-blown panic. Evelyn's response to panic was to yell and scream over minor irritations. Other visible behaviors people display when they panic can include hiding, crying, chasing, or, as with Nathan, fleeing. Fleeing is a normal response to fear, particularly for someone with an avoidant attachment style.

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Highly avoidant people tend to be less happy and less satisfied in their relationships. They tend to have a higher degree of conflict and anger, due in part to the negative cycle in which avoidant partners, when feeling highly anxious, fail to provide comfort and support to their anxious partner. The anxiety increases the urges to avoid in the already avoidant person, who then abandons the partner whose anxiety heightens, and on it goes. The partner who is naturally avoidant is already avoiding because of fear—fear of rejection, fear of conflict, etc. His partner's anxiety increases this. Anger is the easy response. Slowing down, bringing the underlying fears to the surface, and easing them is difficult but possible if you are compassionate, open and honest.

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This chapter helps couples see destructive patterns that emerge when stress, anxiety and/or depression are part of the mix.

To learn more about the Over the Walls Program,  
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