

Anxiety: Getting Back on that Horse
By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

Recently a man came to my office who, having retired, was preparing to go on an LDS mission with his wife. His foreign language skills probably played a role in his being called again to the same part of the world where he'd served a mission as a 19-year-old. But as he started preparing for his second mission, he began having severe feelings of panic. When he went to a doctor about a minor issue, the panic, which mimicked symptoms of a heart attack, earned him a trip to the hospital for a full cardio-workup.

In a given year, 18% of adult Americans will suffer from an anxiety disorder (29% at some point in their lives). We're not talking about normal jitters associated with a first date, an important test, or facing a deadline at work. A few jitters may actually help you focus or be more alert when facing difficult, threatening, or challenging circumstances. Anxiety disorders, on the other hand, are longer term, restrict a person's normal functioning, and often get worse if not treated. They include panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), phobias, and something called generalized anxiety (GAD).

What causes an otherwise physically and emotionally healthy person to suddenly develop an anxiety disorder? Genetics can set you up for it. A biological predisposition may lurk within, waiting for the right stressful situation to trigger the disorder. Some drugs can contribute to anxiety as can some medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism. Also previous conditioning or trauma can result in an anxiety disorder. Untreated anxiety can contribute to school failure, inability to get a driver's license, avoidance of job interviews, social isolation, breakup of a marriage, alcoholism, drug abuse, job loss, and general misery.

My client's emerging anxiety was tied to experiences he'd had during his first mission, which had been nothing like he'd hoped. Shortly after his arrival, he came down with a debilitating illness that caused him extreme pain when he walked or tried to ride a bike. Over the next year, he went through 3 excruciating surgeries in less than sanitary conditions, one in which he was insufficiently anesthetized, experienced the pain acutely, but couldn't move. None of the surgeries were successful. Eventually, mercifully, he was sent home for treatment and recovery. He was relieved to have the entire ordeal behind him. Thereafter, he coped with his painful memories by shutting them out, utilizing the same coping mechanism he'd used to block some of the previous year's pain.

But 40+ years later, he found out memories, pushed aside, can still disrupt. The psychic trauma in the nether recesses of his mind, was still alive and waiting to be healed. Hence the panic attacks.

What can be done to help people with anxiety disorders? Actually, a lot. We have better medications than we've ever had before and there's promise for more on the way. Psychotherapy has been shown to be particularly effective with most anxiety disorders. The combination of medications and psychotherapy yields a good prognosis for most sufferers.

My client clearly had panic disorder, but the origins suggested a PTSD protocol. He had kept a journal during his crucible, which he had tucked away. He got it out and forced himself to rewrite his experiences, as though he were reliving them. He found himself becoming emotional as he wrote, sometimes facing horrific feelings again. It was hard for him to read them in therapy and hard to hear, but he could feel healing happening inside as he did so. His anxieties and panic symptoms resolved. He was able to fulfill his assigned mission for his church.

Avoidance is the primary coping method people instinctively use to deal with anxiety. Unfortunately, avoidance tends to make anxiety stronger. Facing anxiety—working one's way through one's fears and memories—tends to weaken it. Turns out Grandpa's homily was right. Psychologically, it's best to get right back up on that horse.