

Transformation Story – Severe Anxiety Attacks – Jeff Stukey

In November 2002, I had my dream job working in ministry, a great boss, loving family, the best support network one could hope for, and so much going for me. But my response to the circumstances in my life at that time nearly torpedoed everything. To be honest, it was a long time coming. Let me explain ...

Anxiety has been an ever-present, but unwelcome companion in my life. It has always been just around the corner, ready to spring into action at any point. In hindsight I think I have had generalized anxiety disorder, which is characterized by constant worry, restlessness, and trouble with concentration, for many seasons of my life.

Anxiety has been an ever-present, but unwelcome companion in my life.

Growing Up With Anxiety

At age five or six, my parents were worried about my anxiety and took me to the family doctor. They were concerned that they might have to place me in a mental hospital, which at that time would have been a very draconian experience (and probably a lifelong sentence!). The doctor's prescription for me was that my parents should give me a glass of warm milk before bed. Evidently it did the trick. (Not really!)

I remember one good year in grade school. It was fifth grade, and I had a teacher that clearly laid out the rules and what her expectations were of us:

- This is what I want you to do, and this is what will happen if you do it.
- And, this is what I don't want you to do, and this is what will happen if you do that.

I flourished. It was a great year!

Before I became a believer at age 24, in my late teens and early twenties, I self-medicated with alcohol and marijuana to deal with my anxiety.

When I was 26 years old, I had a great job as a computer programmer. However, I was so anxious at work that I could not focus. Fortunately, my boss was understanding (it helped that I was a good worker and produced quality programs) and he let me work from home. That was in 1976, when working from home was pretty much unheard of! It is an example of God's mercy to me.

I self-medicated with alcohol and marijuana to deal with my anxiety.

On our wedding day in 1978, my wife-to-be knew I struggled with anxiety. However, my anxiety on our wedding day was pretty extreme. It was the first time she had seen my anxiety at such an intense level. For most of the wedding photos, I could barely smile, if at all. It was a stressful day! Thankfully, we have learned to deal with my anxiety over the years as a couple and have been married for over 44 years, as of this writing.

I took the Certified Financial Planner (CFP) test in 2006. I had studied for the test about eight hours a day, seven days a week for about six months. I had hard tests before in undergraduate school, graduate school, and naval flight school. However, this test was different; it is the hardest test I have ever taken. The pass rate over the years is about 60%.

On test day, the moderator handed out the test packet and instructed us to not open it until he gave the go ahead. I was so anxious I opened the packet before he told us to do so. I was the only one to do this in a group of over 100. Thankfully, the moderator was understanding (God's mercy).

Not only had I studied the material, but I also studied how to take the CFP test and it paid off. Even though I was extremely anxious and couldn't say for sure that I had answered any of the questions correctly, I was able to focus, and I passed the test. (God's mercy again.)

In both of these incidents, it would be normal to have some stress and anxiety. Mine was over-the-top. In life, I learned to just push through. Sometimes that worked and sometimes not so much (as on my wedding day).

Becoming a Workaholic at My Dream Job

Another example where “pushing through” did not work was in 2002 when I was 52 years old and working as assistant director for World Impact at MorningStar Ranch.

Prior to starting the job, I had been going through a midlife crisis, trying to figure out what to do with my life. I owned a successful computer consulting firm but was bored and depressed. I was hoping that working for a ministry would put my life together. You know, give me purpose and excitement.

I was hoping that working for a ministry would put my life together.

At the time, it was the best job that I had ever had. I had great bosses, there was plenty of variety and lots of challenges. I felt needed and appreciated and it was a job where I felt that I could help others.

However, after a couple of years on the job, I had become a workaholic. I was trying to solve all the problems in the ministry in my own power. I wasn’t enjoying anything I was doing at work, at church, or at home or in life in general. Life had become a drag. I was stressed about everything and extremely anxious. I began to have symptoms like not being able to sleep well, back pains and pains in my arms and legs. Instead of putting my life together, working in ministry highlighted the areas in which I needed to grow.

I was not exercising and was eating poorly. My allergies were bothering me, but I didn’t take the time to go to the doctor to get it taken care of. I would eat on the run, and I rarely took time to give any attention to the Lord. My motor was constantly running. I would cycle through periods of hyperactivity and anxiety and then periods of boredom and depression.

Another contributing factor was that our oldest daughter had left for college, and I was surprisingly very depressed about her being gone. Also, during this time, my son was serving a seven-year prison term. I was a mess.

Everything Came Crashing Down

Finally, in November 2002, things came crashing down. I started having severe anxiety attacks where I was so anxious that I could hardly sit still. I could hardly sleep at all, had no appetite, had headaches, chest pains, back aches, arm aches, pains in my feet and sometimes shortness of breath.

I started having severe anxiety attacks where I was so anxious that I could hardly sit still.

I went to the doctor and she gave me some anti-anxiety medication. The good news was that it stopped the anxiety attacks. The bad news was that the medication put me into severe depression. I felt suicidal. I was a basket case! Without the medication, I was having severe anxiety attacks; with it I experienced severe depression. When I tried to schedule an appointment and found that it would be several days until I could get in, I felt like telling the nurse to never mind setting the appointment since I’d likely be dead by the time she could see me and would not require any further services!

I was barely functioning. I worried that I was going to lose my job. I felt like a loser, that I didn’t have anything to offer, that life was hopeless. I felt a tremendous burden of guilt for perceived poor choices that I had made in life.

I obsessed about everything. I especially obsessed about not having enough saved for retirement (which is of course ironic, since three years later I founded a financial planning firm!). I would get a worry in

my head, and it would be in a constant loop. It was like a treadmill that I could not get off of. I felt like my whole life was for nothing.

If someone shared a prayer request in Sunday School class about cancer, I would immediately start worrying about getting cancer and even felt like I had some of the symptoms. If I was in Dillons, I would look at the cashier and assume he would have a better retirement plan than I did. When I was in a store, the cacophony of sounds would overwhelm me, especially if music was playing. Everything in life seemed amplified and more intense.

When I was in a store, the cacophony of sounds would overwhelm me

Over the period of a couple weeks, I hardly slept. I would go on long walks and try to sing songs or review Scripture verses I had memorized. At home, I would pace the house. Sometimes, I would read in Psalms. Nothing really helped take my mind off of my worries.

A Glimmer of Hope

In the midst of my anxiety one day, I gazed out the window and saw a tree. It was a beautiful tree. I reasoned that the tree was much too complex to be an accident and therefore there must be a creator and that creator was God and that God cared for me, even if it did not feel that way at the time. (God's mercy!)

One day, a client from my computer consulting days called me and told me they were trying to run payroll for 400+ employees and the computer program stopped and there was an error message on the computer console. They asked me if I could come and check it out. This was 2002 and I had last done work for them around 1999. It was the first and last time that any client called me after I closed my computer consulting business. (God's timing is amazing!)

I could see that even in the most intense moments of my anxiety, I could still function.

I asked them if I could call them back in a couple of minutes and that I had to check on something first. They said okay. I was in the midst of intense anxiety, and I didn't know if I'd be able to help them. I asked my wife Margaret what I should do. She said, "Go fix their problem!" I drove to the company and read down through the computer program code. I figured it out and they completed the payroll. This gave me a tiny ray of hope that I was not a complete loser. I could see that even in the most intense moments of my anxiety, I could still function.

I cried out to the Lord, "What more do you want from me? I have heeded your call. We have downsized our home. We are living on one-third of my former salary. I am trying to live by faith. Why can't you have mercy on me?" His answer to me was, "This is my mercy to you! Rest in me and put your trust in me."

His mercy to me was to stop me in my tracks and give me an opportunity to see that I was on a destructive path. I was trying to live life on my own steam. I had become a workaholic and was not taking care of important things in my life – like family, my health and my relationship with Him.

I asked: "Where is your mercy?" God's answer: "This is my mercy!"

A verse that the Lord spoke to me was Zechariah 4:6 '... Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty. Rick Warren says in *The Purpose Driven Life*, "Instead of trying harder, you trust more." I began to trust that if I did the things that I knew that I needed to do, He would take care of the rest.

I had some friends pray with me several times. One day when we were praying together, I had a picture of Jesus holding me in his strong arms. I was the size of a baby. There were lightning bolts all around. With one arm, Jesus was holding me. With the other arm, He had a shield and was deflecting the

lightning bolts. In the vision, I was at first afraid every time a lightning bolt would flash across the sky. But, after a while, I began to relax and trust that He would protect me.

I could see that He did want to give me peace. My part was to cry out to Him and have faith in Him, not in my own strength. I believed, but I needed help in my unbelief. The Bible says that He is near the brokenhearted.

The Long Road Back from the Brink

I started seeing a counselor. The counselor (and medical doctor) recommended that I see a psychiatrist to get proper medication. On my first meeting with him, he said to me, “You don’t think I can help you. Do you?” I said, “No.” He said, “You don’t have to be going through the things you are going through. If you will take the meds I recommend and do the things I tell you to do, your life will get better.” And, in contrast to my family doctor, he guaranteed me that if I was in distress that he (or his assistant) would return my calls within one business hour.

The shrink: “You don’t think I can help you, do you?”
Me: “No.”

You have to understand that I was willing to see a counselor for help. My ego could handle that. And, even though I agreed to seeing a psychiatrist, I felt like I should be able to handle the situation without medication, especially if it meant seeing a shrink. Well, he shocked me with his statement. No one had ever been that bold to tell me that they could help me get better if I followed their advice.

And he was right. The medication that he put me on (and the meds he took me off of) helped tremendously. I began going to weekly therapy with him. Even though I don’t believe he is a Christian, the cognitive therapy he used with me also helped a bunch.

I went to an allergist to get my allergies taken care of. I began reading some books about anxiety attacks. I started exercising and eating right. I began journaling and reading in the evenings. I started having a quiet time with the Lord in the mornings. I started getting proper sleep. I made sure that I took a day off every week. I learned to say no to some projects at work.

I saw a physician that specialized in nerve damage. I was numb in my face, hands, feet, wrists, and legs. He tested me and found that I had moderate to severe nerve damage. He suggested that I might need surgery on my spine and carpal tunnel surgery. After researching it, I decided to start stretching regularly. I began walking on a regular basis. I changed my posture while sitting at my computer desk (in my anxiety, I had been leaning forward, subconsciously thinking I could work faster!). I got an ergonomic keyboard. I wore wrist braces for a while. The result ... within a few months, all the symptoms went away! (God’s mercy!)

I had bloodwork done and found that I had a deficiency in my thyroid gland. I began taking thyroid medication.

The result was that 2003 was one of the best years of my life, even though it started out as one of the worst. What the devil intended for evil, the Lord intended for good. The Lord’s discipline is sweet when we respond to it in a proper way. He loves us so much that He goes to great lengths to allow us to grow. Each time I have gone through a great trial and cried out to Him, He has brought much fruit from it.

I have experienced the harvest of righteousness and peace as I have been trained through the Lord’s discipline.

Hebrews 12:5-6, 11 says: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

I have experienced the harvest of righteousness and peace as I have been trained through the Lord's discipline.

One basic principle I learned about anxiety attacks is that there are tactical strategies and there are strategic strategies. One tactical strategy was seeing a counselor. One strategic strategy was journaling. I needed a variety of tools in my tool bag. For example, I no longer see a counselor, but I am still journaling. The truth is that I am, in a sense, still recovering from my anxiety attacks. I still deal with anxiety on a regular basis. However, I now have many coping tools in my bag.

It was a time of crisis because I had let things pile up and was trying to live life on my own steam. It took a major lifestyle change for me to get better. It was (and continues to be) a season where the Lord transformed me!

It was a time of crisis because I had let things pile up and was trying to live life on my own steam. It took a major lifestyle change for me to get better. It was (and continues to be) a season where the Lord transformed me!

Lifestyle Changes

Some of the lifestyle changes I have made or activities that have helped with anxiety (and with life in general) over the years:

1. Stopped drinking caffeine. This was hard for me to do. It took over a year to completely stop. It was an ever-downward spiraling cycle for me; I'd be tired in the morning and drink coffee or Coke to perk me up. Then, I would not be able to sleep very well and would need more caffeine the next day because of lack of sleep. Then, I'd repeat.
2. Journaling (one of the things my counselor recommended for me to do during my anxiety attacks):
 - a. Daily journaling of what's going on in my life. My "news" journal. I have done this almost every day since 2003.
 - b. Occasionally journaling how I feel about what's going on in my life. My "commentary" journal.
 - c. Journaling scripture from time-to-time.
 - d. Journal things I am thankful for.
3. Working on self-talk. Being self-aware of what I am thinking. I could write several pages on this. It is so important! For instance, when we took a transatlantic crossing from England to New York on an ocean liner, I was feeling claustrophobic and anxious, because I could not get off the ship for seven days (I felt trapped). You see, there were no ports (which of course, I knew ahead of time). I plugged in a new tape in my mind and I reasoned to myself that there were 3,000 or so other people on board that were doing just fine and that I'd be fine also. I just needed to put on my big-boy boots and stop whining!
4. Reading books about mental health. "Feeling Good" by David Burns was very helpful to read about anxiety and depression. There was also the Anxiety Workbook.
5. Reading before bed. The best books for me are story-based such as history or novels. It has to be something that makes my mind think about something entirely different than the worries of the day.
6. Limiting time: watching TV, channel surfing, surfing the web.
7. Walking, especially outside.
8. Stretching.
9. Biking.
10. Gardening.
11. Naps. This may be the single most effective way I have discovered to deal with anxiety. It is usually 30 minutes. It doesn't really matter if I actually go to sleep. Things almost always seem better after a nap.

Naps may be the single most effective way I have discovered to deal with anxiety.

12. If I am feeling anxious late at night, the best thing for me to do is to go to bed. I almost always feel better the next morning when I wake up.
13. Medication. I have taken an anti-anxiety/anti-depression medication since 2002. I have tried to get off of it a couple times, but it didn't work. I'll likely be on it the rest of my life.
14. Healthy eating. I try to eat lots of fruits and vegetables for example.
15. Occasionally take a personal retreat for anywhere from one day to several days. I'll read scripture, listen to Christian music, journal and exercise. I have done this seven times or so in the past 20 years.
16. Take a walk with a friend or family member. I currently walk in the neighborhood with a friend once a week (most weeks).
17. Write out a list of things I enjoy doing and try to implement some into my life on a regular basis.
18. Sleep. I find that I function best on ten hours of sleep, which is annoying to me that I need that much because it limits the amount of time I have to get things done. (I actually went to a sleep specialist during my anxiety-attack season and he said I am in the 5% of the population that needs ten hours of sleep in order to stay healthy. It bummed me out because it feels like such a waste of time. But, sigh, at least I know.)
19. Scripture memory, especially regarding anxiety: Phil 4:6-7; Isaiah 26:3; I Peter 5:7; Matthew 6:33-34.
20. Reading, journaling, and praying the Psalms.
21. Quiet times with the Lord.
22. Eating breakfast outside.
23. Reading outside.
24. Listening to uplifting podcasts.
25. Listening to Christian music. I use Spotify, which is very user friendly.
26. When I am especially anxious, I use deep breathing exercises and repeat a mantra. My favorite mantra is to breathe in and say: "Jesus is Lord." And, then breathe out and say: "of heaven and earth." And then repeat as many times as is necessary.
27. Taking one day a week to hike with my wife. We set aside the whole day. It's like a "sabbath" rest!
28. Writing out my story (as I am doing here!). I find that every time I write down a piece of my story, there is healing in my soul and that I discover (or re-discover) things about myself and God. Psalm 119:54 says: "Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge." I take this to mean that the Psalmist wants the Word of God to be the theme of his life, throughout his life and in every season of life; that the Word should guide and inform his life and be reflected in how he lives his life. Like the Psalmist, I want the Word as the theme of my life (my "song"), throughout my life and in every season of my life.

I find that every time I write down a piece of my story, there is healing in my soul ...