



Leadership in Anxious Times



Florida – Bahamas Synod Rostered Ministers

January 27, 2021

A thumbnail sketch



Bowen

and

Friedman



Bowen the doctor / researcher
Friedman the rabbi / "Metaphor Man"

1. Emotional Triangles

Basic building block of a larger emotional system. It is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system is stable in times of calmness or low anxiety. However, when tension increases between two persons, one party will automatically involve a third person.

2. Differentiation of Self

Solid self, individuality, principled, connected

3. Nuclear Family Emotional Process

Describes the patterns of the family's emotional functioning in a single generation

4. Family Projection Process

Unresolved anxiety/immaturity between parents is projected to the child – child focus

5. Multigenerational Transmission Process

Family projection through multiple generations

6. Emotional Cutoff

Describes the way people deal with the unresolved emotional attachments to their parents.

7. Sibling Position

First researched/documentated by Dr. Walter Toman – observable and similar traits in oldests, middles, youngests, onlys, and variables

8. Societal Emotional Process

Originally “societal regression” – society will go through periods of disintegration with more anxiety and symptoms, alternating with other periods of better integration.

Emotional system – circuitry from person to person by patterned emotional reactions:

Distance

Conflict

Overfunctioning/underfunctioning

Triangling

In his research with families, Bowen discovered that one variable affects all of emotional process:

Anxiety



Anxiety can powerfully affect thoughts, feelings, and actions. Acute anxiety occurs in response to an immediate or imminent real threat. People are keenly aware of acute anxiety.

Neuroscientists equate Bowen's concept of acute anxiety with fear – a state accompanied by fight, flight, or freeze behaviors.

(Dr. Michael Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*)

Chronic anxiety occurs in response to threats that are uncertain or distant in space and time. Such threats are commonly more imagined than real and associated with relationships. Human beings are commonly less consciously aware of chronic anxiety than of acute anxiety.

(Kerr, pg. 171)

- **Chronic** anxiety is more habitual
- It cannot be laid to rest easily
- It is structured into the relationship
- People can adapt to chronic anxiety while in the long term there may be less flexibility when challenged
- Chronic anxiety “runs quiet and deep” (Dr. Walter Smith)

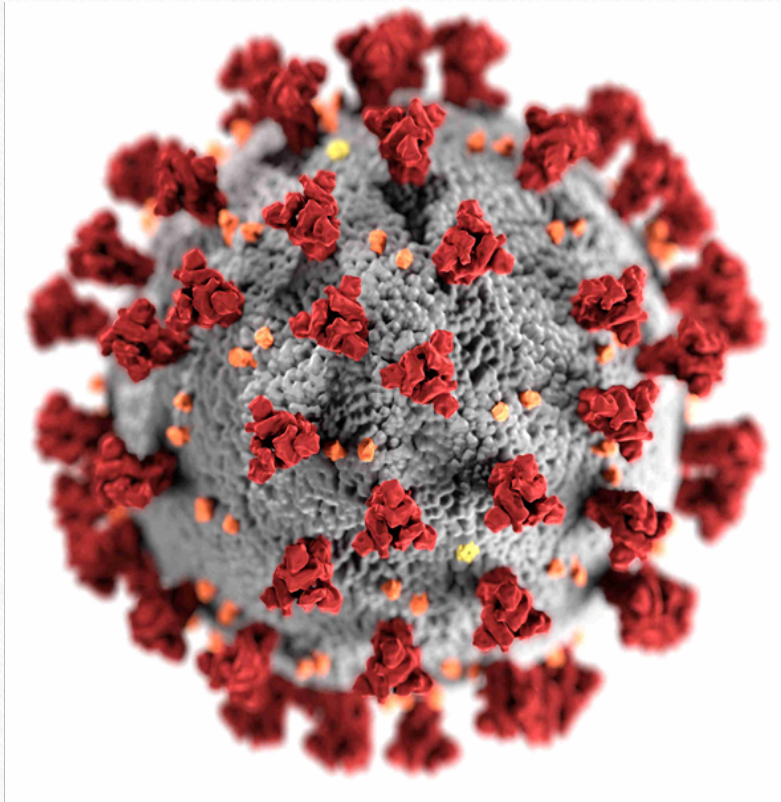
Other features of **chronic** anxiety:

- Lessened learning abilities
- Differences in people are magnified
- Imagination capacity is constrained
- More demand for certainty
- More negative diagnosis of others
- More secrecy
- A push for immediate resolution or relief
- Strong tendency toward togetherness and like-mindedness

Dr. Dan Papero, Bowen Center faculty. . .

The costs of chronic stress/anxiety = chaos and rigidity

There is a new cause of world-wide anxiety. . .



Are we moving from a stage of acute anxiety
into
a state of chronic anxiety?

An anxious relationship system and a person's anxious reaction to it is likely key to stimulating a chronic stress response that promotes chronic inflammation somewhere in the body. Like hypertension, chronic anxiety could one day be known as the "silent killer."

(Kerr)



634%

JUMP IN USE OF ONLINE
TOOL FOR **ANXIETY**

AMERICA UNDER PRESSURE

CORONAVIRUS TAKES DEVASTATING TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH

8:46 • Coronavirus Takes Devasting Toll On Mental Health

Broadcast (Full) - October 20th, 2020 | NBC Nightly News

Up next

In highly anxious times or situations, the drive toward togetherness intensifies and becomes the default mode (*i.e. the strong urge in some congregations to return to in-person worship*).

As a result, people experience strongly conflicting urges:

- A heightened sense of responsibility another's distress
- A compelling urge to avoid getting entangled in another's expectations (withdrawal)
- Conflicting urges raise anxieties which further infects interactions.

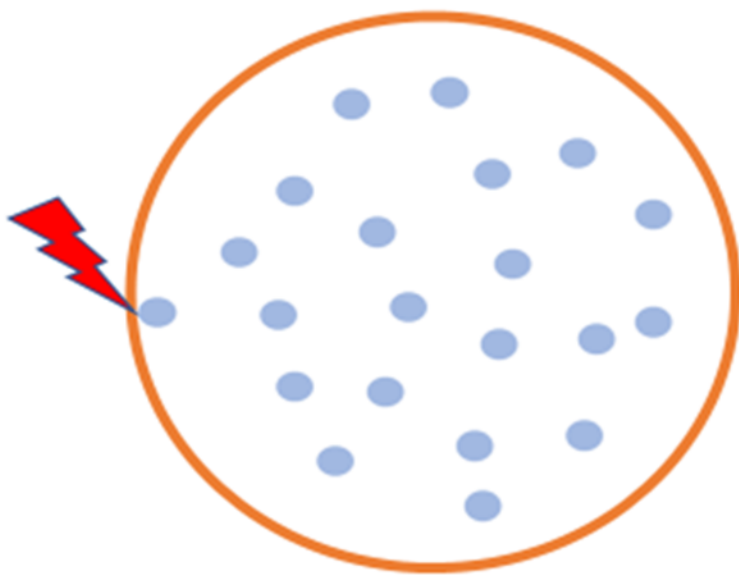
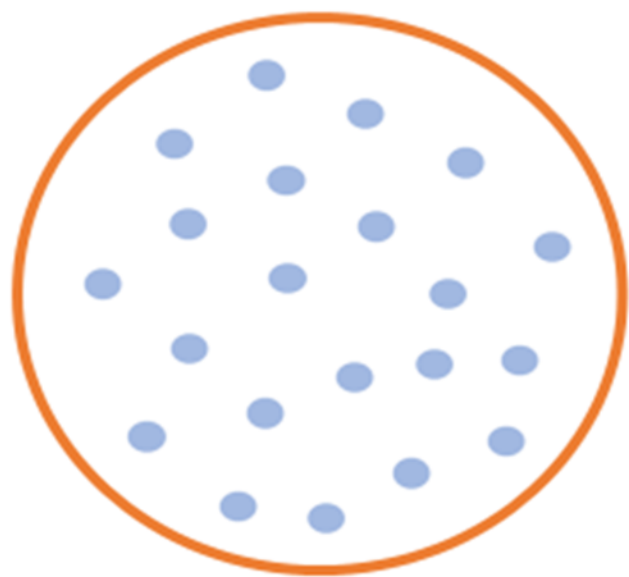
(Kerr, pg. 68)

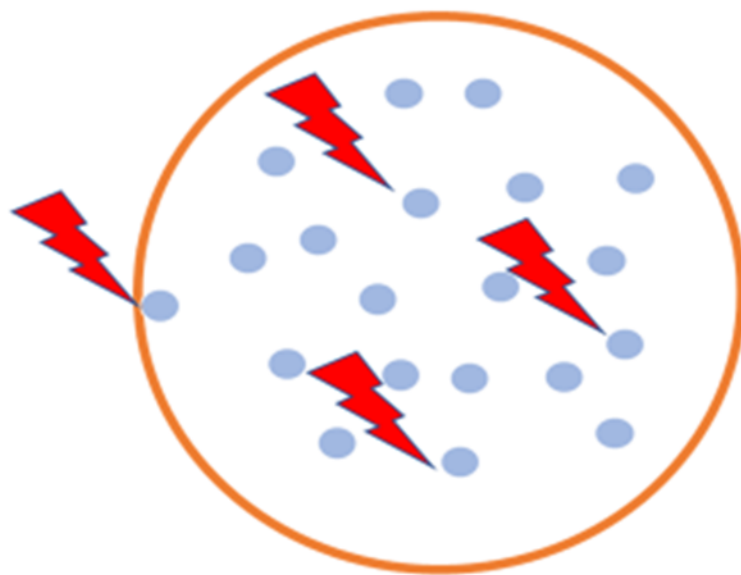
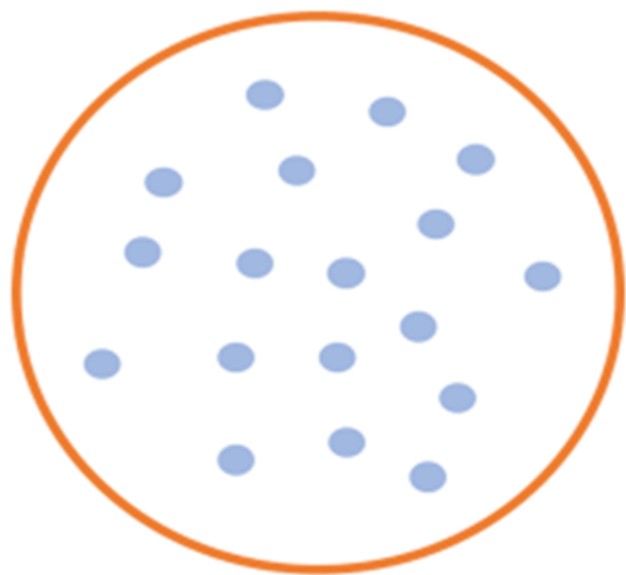
Anxiety in congregations

- Reactivity increases
- Constant criticism, blame, fault-finding
- People insist on their own way through threats, manipulation, tantrums
- Factions, herding
- High turnover of leaders
- Reaction to new ideas
- Increased secrecy
- Polarization, either/or thinking
- Strong desire to relieve symptoms with a quick-fix

In such an anxious system, it is important to be “present and accounted for” and not be overcome by feelings –
in contact with, but outside of, an emotional system.







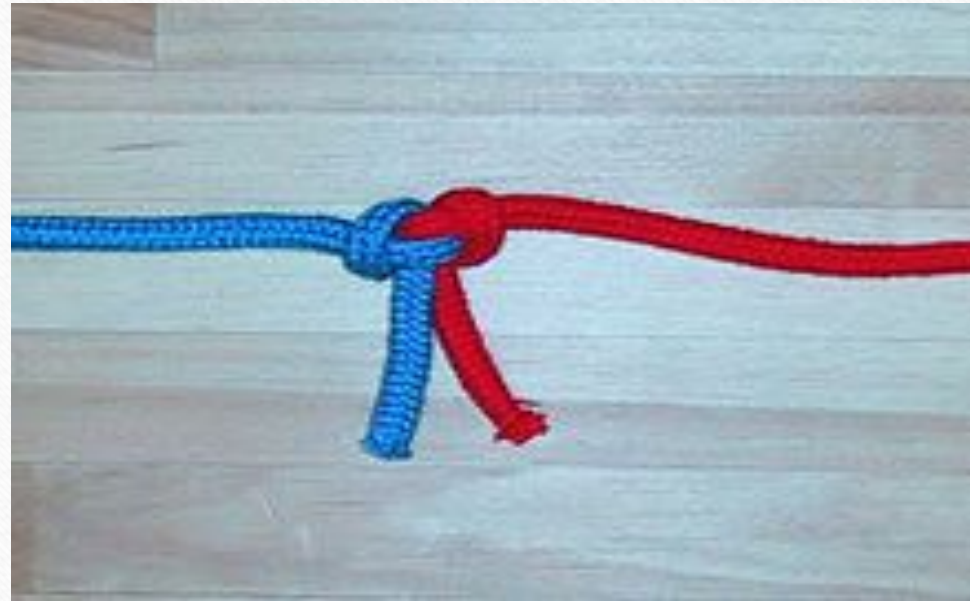
A baseline for leadership in an anxious symptom is a calm and thoughtful position, but often that is not enough to moderate the system's anxiety spiral. It may also require a principled stand – *I am no longer willing to believe that this congregation's troubles all point to him/her, this/that.*

- This person does not tell others what they should do, but defines what he/she is going to do.
- **Confidence, courage, and connection** are effective accompaniments to a principled position.
- Well-thought out positions are useful and ultimately provide calm in the face of anxiety.
- The key is to live into a more calm position, not to tell others to calm down.

It is important to remember that anxiety is part of nature and serves a purpose:

- It alerts
- It helps us cope
- It forces us to respond in some ways
- It can motivate us to change, to see things in a new way
- It is a basic emotional and automatic response to a real or perceived threat

Anxiety connects people



Anxiety is required for evolution.

Evolution is never elegant.

Kathy Wiseman, Bowen Center faculty

Factors that affect the spread of anxiety/polarization
in a congregation, organization, or family:

- The severity and magnitude of the stressor
- The degree of perceived threat
- The state and condition of the relationship network
- The average level of fusion of the group
- The ability of leaders to act in a more mature and non-reactive manner in the face of pressures

Rev. Ron Richardson (*Polarization and the Healthier Church*)



Some moves toward driving down the anxiety

- Healthier forces show up in the capacity to not avoid tension but to engage more thoughtfulness and neutrality in listening
 - Good questions appeal to the whole brain
 - Objectivity helps toward more useful decision-making
 - Lowering anxiety is on the side of health
- continued . . .

Mary Ann-isms:

- Can you care a little less? Is your energy to keep the peace, provide a solution, or lower anxiety in the group keeping others from taking up the challenge for themselves?
- Take a position on the edge of the emotional field rather than being drawn into the middle of it.
- Connect with nature. That connection serves as a strong tether to God and a sense of rootedness, purpose, and calm.

Anxiety pulls us apart because anxiety magnifies differences. That's a key understanding of anxiety. It magnifies the differences that we have. And until we can reduce the anxiety, the chances we have of doing things together is diminished.

Anxiety is not a negative. Anxiety just is. It becomes a negative when it intensifies or becomes prolonged, because it interferes with clear thinking. Anxiety is an informer, rather than an enemy. It tells us something about ourselves and the world around us.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Steinke

So instead of trying to fix anybody, I stand witness to the resources you have within you for your own healing. This is not simply for counseling and pastoral meetings; this is a stance for preaching, teaching a class, leading a committee, and really any situation in which I am wanting to accomplish something. My integrity is my strongest asset. My presence, not my expertise, is what I have to offer. But that is not an easy position, because I and most people have a deep urge to step in and help people, to fix them, to make everything better, to keep things smooth. Friedman said we live “in the land of the quick fix.” What is needed is maturity, stamina, and personal responsibility – not expertise, information, or even empathy. “The emphasis [is] on strength, not pathology; on challenge, not comfort; on self-differentiation, not herding for togetherness.”

(A Failure of Nerve, by Edwin Friedman, p. 2-3)

The Rev. Doug Taylor, *Faith and a Little Anxiety*, 2013

Questions for conversation:

- What are the symptoms produced by your own anxiety? What purpose do they serve?
- What is your responsibility in relating to the congregations of the synod as anxieties rise?
- How are you working on your own functioning in these days?