

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

10. Creating a safe space: a Christian perspective to managing anxiety

Michele Hampson shows how creating a safe space can help us respond to stress and anxiety, starting with an understanding of our natural biological reactions. A 'safe space' is one we can picture in detail and that we associate with a sense of peace. In this reflection we will first consider the rationale for this approach and then the steps involved.

Understanding exhaustion as part of our stress response

Jesus said 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' (John 10:10). The reality, when we are anxious or stressed, is that we feel robbed of this sense of vitality. This is part of our stress response. Alongside the 'fight or flight' adrenaline response mediated by the sympathetic nervous system, we have the 'freeze' or 'feign death' response activated by the dorsal pathway of the vagus nerve; part of our parasympathetic nervous system.

Activation of this pathway causes the heart rate and blood pressure to fall, our breathing becomes shallow and we may have nausea and diarrhoea. Emotionally we feel detached, deadened or numb and this impacts on our social relationships.

Tiredness is the price for this emotional and physical shutdown; it is natural to feel exhausted when stressed! We are not wimps or failures; our bodies are simply using a primitive survival mode. The body's aim is to reduce stress, so it is unhelpful to compensate for our inefficiency by working harder.

If we are physically and emotionally shut down, we can expect a similar impact on our spiritual wellbeing. We can become disconnected from God as well as our social relationships.

We may feel too tired to pray; we struggle to experience God's presence and to respond emotionally; we may be tempted to abandon the effort it takes to do so.

Simultaneously, we may experience symptoms of the adrenaline response; feeling unsettled and with our thinking distracted by worries. To 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10) may feel impossible. Furthermore we may worry that we might hear God making further demands on us, despite Jesus' assurance that 'my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:30).

Creating a safe space

Creating a safe space is a way of reducing the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, with its release of stress hormones including adrenaline, and the parasympathetic dorsal vagus pathway. Instead it helps our bodies activate the ventral vagus pathway, which seeks support, help and comfort from others.

Here we experience God with us in our difficulties. 'The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.' (Deuteronomy 31:18). God promises to be our support, our strength and our comfort.

So having understood its efficacy, let's consider the practical steps involved.

How to create a safe space

1. Decide on the chosen space.

The space may be a specific place; perhaps a specific landscape or room in a house. Equally it could be more general; waves rolling on a beach or woodland, for example. To start with it is probably helpful to choose a tangible experience that evokes memories of being at peace.

Later we might try direct Biblical images of God's safety:

the baby or weaned child with its mother (Isaiah 49:15; Psalm 131:2),

chicks under the mother hen's wings (Matt 23:37),

being engraved in the palm of God's hands (Isaiah 49:16a),

the rock in whom we can take refuge (Psalm 94:22),

Jesus as shepherd (Psalm 23), who 'gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart' (Isaiah 49:11).

2. Employ the senses to deepen the experience

To go deeper, we use each sense in turn to be fully present in that place. What can I see? Is there anyone with me? What sounds are there? What is touching me? Is there a breeze, for example? Does my skin feel warm or cold? Can I smell anything? Maybe I can taste something. We need to take time to be fully aware of ourselves and our surroundings until, the habit established, we travel there with ease. This may initially take three to five minutes.

3. Where is God?

God is 'an ever-present help in trouble.' (Psalm 46:1). We ask: 'How does God gaze on me in this place at this particular time?'

4. Be present in this place with no expectations

Watch with curiosity to see what happens. We may simply enjoy the peace, it may invite a specific memory or something might happen. We simply notice without judgement.

5. Prayer/ conversation

If you have imagined a person with you in your safe space, you might want to imagine a conversation with them. Similarly you might want to have a conversation with God, as Father, Son or Spirit, about your feelings.

6. Give thanks

We thank God for being with us in this time and to bless us as we move from here.

Spending five minutes in this place on a regular basis helps us to establish a 'go to' place that we are then more likely to be able to access even when feeling anxious; as an experienced sailor, we become adept at navigating into this safe haven, despite the storms of fear. Regularly moving from experiencing anxiety symptoms or traumatic recollections to this safe space may share some of the principles of eye movement desensitisation response (EMDR); a well-recognised treatment for trauma where the person repeatedly shifts from recollecting the trauma to the neutral experience of following the rhythmic movement of the therapist's finger.

Michele Hampson is an honorary adult psychiatrist and priest in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. St Luke's is grateful for her regular contributions to this series of reflections.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website below or on 020 7898 1700.