

DR. JOHN DELONY

REDEFINING ANXIETY

What It Is, What It's
Not, and How to Get
Your Life Back

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*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down,
but a good word makes it glad.*

—PROVERBS 12:25

INTRODUCTION

My eyes shot open at 2:35 a.m. Again.

I sat straight up in bed, heart racing, bitten with anger and frustration.

I woke up almost every night between the witching hours of 2:00 a.m. and 3:30 a.m. It was maddening. It didn't matter whether I took prescription sleep medicine, made a lavender—infused essential oil potion, did deep breathing and yoga, or tried any number of the faux pop-psychological offerings the internet had to offer. Without fail, I would collapse from exhaustion sometime after 10:00 p.m. and be wide awake a few short hours later.

I remember getting to a point where going to sleep was so frustrating that I would get anxious thinking about waking up anxious.

This was not a life.

On this particular Texas morning, my body ripped me from sleep, letting me know it sensed danger and disconnection. Of course, there was no immediate danger. I was healthy, my wife was asleep next to me, my beautiful child was asleep in the next room, and my stable job was not going anywhere.

But my body sensed danger. It always sensed danger. Or disconnection. Or a lack of control.

This set my heart racing and my stomach flooded with a familiar warmth—a confusing and damning mix of brain chemicals that caused me to either fight, flight, or freeze. The regulators inside my mind and body no longer cared for nuance or truth. Feelings ruled—and on the inside, everything was spinning a hundred miles an hour.

Sadly, this wasn't just affecting me. I knew my anxiety was burning up my work relationships, my marriage, my relationships with my new son and my

friends. I was electric. I kept thinking bad or stressful things were coming, and I was frustrated that no one around me saw the dragons.

And make no mistake: I was doing a hero's job holding things together. On the outside, I was doing great.

I had three degrees, including a PhD. Professionally, I worked at a university where I managed multiple departments, hundreds of staff and paraprofessional employees, and millions of revenue and expense dollars across a dozen or so accounts. I was on call 24/7 and made hospital visits in the middle of the night a few times a week. I responded to students' mental health breakdowns, and hugged parents through tragedies. I was responsible for crisis response across the thousands of students living on campus, taught graduate courses, and had an amazing family. I was a leader at a faith-based university, in the midst of my own deep faith crisis, a fledgling member of a local church, and I was desperately trying to emerge from a cocoon of old beliefs, privilege, and bad theology.

I wasn't stupid. I wasn't irresponsible. I loved everyone and I always showed up. I was living the dream.

But I couldn't shake this feeling that I was malfunctioning. That I was breaking apart in my own skin.

After lying in bed for hours that morning, waiting for the sun to come up and burn off my catastrophic thoughts and my intrusive memories, I got out of bed, got dressed, and headed to work.

I began to walk across campus to my office . . . when I just stopped. I couldn't take another step forward. I paused for several moments in the Texas sun, spun around, walked to the parking lot, and hopped into my wife's little Corolla.

Without a word to my team or my wife, I left campus and drove several hours away—to a completely different city—where I had a close friend who also happened to be a brilliant medical doctor. I arrived at his office and burst past his receptionist, past his lab testing area, and crashed into his office.

He looked up from his desk and said, “Delony? What are you doing here?”

He was as surprised to find me standing in his office as I was.

I took a deep breath and looked him in the eye and said, “Dude . . . something is wrong with me. I’m losing my mind. And I need help.”

You Mean I’m Not All Alone?

Soon after that day in my friend’s office, I began a long, windy road to figure out what happened. I had to know what was wrong with my brain.

I went to therapy. I took medication. My wife and I took a huge pay cut so I could take a new job. I learned some things at Harvard and spent a year with a professor who helped me practice meditation. I got a second PhD, this time in counseling. I worked with SWAT and police teams as a crisis responder, counseled clients, and traveled across the country speaking to other counselors, academics, and everyday folks like you and me. I spent time reimagining friendships and reconnecting with loved ones. I sought out mentors and submitted to their wisdom and insight. My family suffered multiple tragic losses, we had a second child, and I almost imploded my marriage a few times—but we hung on and tilled the soil deeply and forever.

And I discovered something that changed my life: anxiety is not the problem.

Anxiety is just a symptom.

Anxiety is a signal.

I’ll say it again: *anxiety is not the problem.*

Currently in the United States, anxiety affects more than forty million adults—and that number is only increasing and often

highly under-reported.

If you were to read the statistics, you would think that anxiety had suddenly descended upon the human race, like a dark, heavy plague. Currently in the United States, anxiety affects more than forty million adults—and that number is only increasing and often highly under-reported.¹

We're being told there is something broken inside of us. That *we're* broken and only a professional can fix us. We are a diagnosis, an insurance code, a label. But that's not the whole story.

What Is Anxiety?

Now before you get indignant and say mean things about me on the interwebs, and before you call the League of Diagnosis Defenders (not a real thing), hear me out.

The terms *anxiety* and *anxiety disorder* are often used interchangeably. Medical and mental health professionals refer to what's called a "clinical diagnostic manual" to formally define and diagnose someone with an anxiety disorder. The most common manual in the United States is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). With few exceptions, I'm not a fan of the DSM or most mental health diagnoses in general. In almost every situation, I despise the DSM as much as my friend Dave Ramsey despises the FICO score.

Formally, the DSM defines an anxiety disorder like this:

Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least six months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance). [Additionally], the anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms present for more days than not for the past six months): restlessness, feeling keyed up or on

edge; being easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating or mind going blank; irritability; muscle tension; sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep); and intrusive (unwelcome and disturbing) thoughts.²

While this definition can be helpful in certain situations, for most of us, it's incomplete—and it's definitely not helpful.

Here's the full story: *Anxiety is just an alarm system.* Nothing more and nothing less. Anxiety is our body's internal notification that our brain is detecting danger,

that our body is in desperate need of sleep and restoration,

that we are disconnected from our tribe or community,

or that we are lonely.

Our anxiety alarms cause restlessness, racing hearts, panic attacks, a stomach drop, hypervigilance, and looping, intrusive thoughts. They do this because it's our body's way of screaming, "DANGER! NOT SAFE! RUN!"

But . . .

Anxiety is not a permanent medical condition. Anxiety is not an identity. Anxiety shouldn't be a way of being, an excuse, or a reason for giving up on connection and joy.

**Anxiety is not a permanent medical
condition.**

It's just an alarm. And in our never-ending quest to avoid pain, negative consequences, or uncomfortable feelings of any kind, we've channeled all of our spiritual, pharmaceutical, medical, and psychological energies into trying to fix or disable the alarm system instead of putting out the fires and clearing out the smoke.

Friends, the alarm is not the problem.

The problem is the psychotic and destructive ecosystem that we call "normal life," filled with busyness, disconnection, clichés, influencers, and *more* of everything. On top of it all, some of us have been born into raging fires of poverty, racism, or abuse. And now we're annoyed that our hearts and minds are sounding the sirens.

The alarm is not the problem.

The alarm is just trying to save our lives.

So, What Do We Do Now?

What does this mean for the millions of us who struggle with anxiety symptoms? What does it mean for the countless people bending low under the weight of our own bodies betraying us—who know we are safe but our heart rates, intrusive thoughts, impulsive behaviors, and exhausted bodies are no longer serving us well? What about the millions of other people who have been robotically churning along, living lives of avoidance, solitude, addiction, or fantasy—all of which are ways we try to duct-tape a pillow over the alarm without having to address the fire and the smoke in the room? Worse, what about the millions of people who are stuck in debilitating negative thought spirals, in abusive relationships, in oppressive systems, or other nightmarish economic, sociological, or psychological cages? Or more recently, what do you do when the alarms are ringing due to an unforeseen pandemic, real job loss, or fear and uncertainty about the future?

Please hear me on this singularly important point:

There is light at the end of the tunnel.

You can get your life back. And it starts today with this Quick Read. We're going to talk through four of the biggest myths we've been told about anxiety—and what's really true. Then we're going to look at what you can start doing immediately, and for the long haul, so you can begin to experience less stress and worry and start moving forward with your life.

PART 1: THE MYTHS WE BELIEVE ABOUT ANXIETY

Throughout my career working at multiple universities, I witnessed a lot of move-in days, with nervous parents and wide-eyed freshmen unpacking belongings and settling into their new homes. I remember one mom, Sarah, who broke down while saying goodbye to her daughter. Sarah started breathing hard, crying uncontrollably, and eventually launched into a full-blown panic attack. Her body was trying to get her attention. She came into my office and sat down on the couch. She couldn't breathe, she felt like the walls were closing in, and her heart was racing.

As her breathing slowed and she regained her composure, she opened up to me about the racing thoughts carving up her mind: *Did I do enough to prepare my little girl for the real world? What if my daughter hangs with the wrong crowd? What am I going to do when I go back home and walk by her empty bedroom? I'm going to have to face the marriage I've been avoiding for so long . . .* When Sarah started to share her thoughts with me, I could have explained it away with the sayings we've all heard before: *You're going to be fine. I'm sure your husband loves you. You just need some "you" time. You must have some sort of genetic tendency toward anxiety. Just relax. Get a hold of yourself.* But one-liners like these aren't helpful—in fact, they can be damaging.

Anxiety alarms are real. When your thoughts spin out of control and your body begins to betray you, it's terrifying.

Anxiety alarms are real. When your thoughts spin out of control and your body begins to betray you, it's terrifying. I sat with Sarah and helped her acknowledge and normalize the alarms that were sounding in her heart and mind. And because she was a brilliant, loving mom, she was eventually able to put her finger on the root problem: facing an empty nest, a struggling marriage, and sorrow because her little girl was leaving home. Sarah's marriage had been slipping away for years and her daughter had given her someone to love and hold on to. Sarah had not worked in years and now that her last child was out of the house, she was facing the hard task of figuring out what she would do next. Sarah's life was on relational life support and transforming into something completely new. Her body was letting her know that it was overwhelmed. Her alarms were letting her know that danger, a lack of control, and loneliness were upon her!

Sarah didn't need me to give her a pep talk and some clever advice and send her on her way. She needed me to be present, acknowledge her physical symptoms, trust and honor her feelings, and let her regain control over her intrusive thoughts. I recommended that she meet with a counselor who could begin to walk with her during her upcoming life transitions. I let her know that she was not broken or crazy. This type of response flies in the face of our culture, which is more likely to offer up cute (and lame) advice ripped off of Instagram, Pinterest boards, or CrossFit gym chalkboards. Most of the time, this advice isn't helpful or even true.

When it comes to anxiety, myths are everywhere! I'm sure you've heard, or even said, some of them before. Myths about anxiety include:

Anxiety is a disease.

Anxiety is caused by your genetics, and you inherit this destiny from your parents or grandparents.

If you have anxiety, you are broken and there is something wrong with you.

Anxiety only affects lazy, weak, or undisciplined people.

If you're anxious, you're probably hiding something from your loved ones, from God, or yourself.

What is the matter with you? Chill out . . . and quit acting all nervous and fidgety and worried.

Anxiety is just stress. We all worry. Get over it.

People with anxiety probably just want attention.

Anxiety can be fixed with yoga, breathing, and a better attitude.

Anxiety can only be cured through medicine.

Everyone has an opinion about anxiety or a personal experience with anxiety. Everyone has a brother in college or a friend or a professor or a church pastor who considers themselves an expert in anxiety, panic, worry, or stress. A simple google search of the word *anxiety* offers more than 331 million results. Wow. The fact and fiction of anxiety are often woven together, presenting a confusing, and sometimes deceptive, picture of reality. While I believe that most people (other than drug companies) are trying to help, the things we've heard about anxiety are generally partial truths at best and complete myths at worst. Let's dive in and start to untangle what isn't true about anxiety.

Myth #1: Anxiety is a disease

or genetic condition.

You've likely heard—even from mental health and medical professionals—that anxiety is a medical and/or genetic condition. You may have even heard or read the research headlines suggesting that generational trauma and stress responses are passed down from generation to generation. These headlines seem to suggest that if you have certain genes, you are predestined to suffer from anxiety—and there's nothing you can do about it. Such is your lot in life. Fortunately, this is not an accurate telling of the story.

Is a person with a certain genetic tendency toward anxiety destined to live a life of anxiety and chaos? Absolutely not.

Follow me on a quick elementary science class refresher. Hopefully, you remember that you inherit traits like hair color, eye color, height, and bone structure from your parents. You also inherit all sorts of personality, physical, and environmental tendencies from your parents. For instance, based on the genetic cocktail I received from my parents and the environment I was raised in, my brain might release more or less stress hormones and brain chemicals than yours during a scary movie or an uncomfortable conversation. My genetic/environmental cocktail might make my heart race a bit faster and my shoulders tense up more than yours. That's because everyone is born with a unique combination of traits and into different home environments (even siblings raised by the same parents will experience their environment differently).

But is a person with a certain genetic tendency toward anxiety destined to live a life of anxiety and chaos? Absolutely not. As Brené Brown clarifies,

“Genetics loads the gun and the environment pulls the trigger.”³

So what does this mean? It means that genetics is only a role player—not a main actor—in the story of our lives. Our experiences and environments are the stars of the show. Point blank: genetics can make you more inclined toward anxiety, but it does not have the final word on how you live your life—not even close. This is good news! Thankfully, you have a role to play in the choose-your-own-adventure story of your life. You don’t have to let surviving an abusive childhood, a traumatic event, a jerk boss in a thankless job, or three kids and a passive-aggressive spouse sentence you to a lifetime of ringing anxiety alarms. There is healing on the other side of anxiety.

You Are Not a Machine to Be Fixed

The relationship among anxiety, genetics, and environment is complex. And when it comes to our health, wholeness, and joy, we don’t like complex. Here in the United States, most people hold a simplistic view of health. We’ve reduced the complexity and interactions of the human body, heart, and mind to a series of parts, much like a machine. Think Legos or vehicle parts. We often treat visits to the doctor like taking our car into the shop. We explain to the doctor the noises or smells we are making, and we get our diagnostic tests. If something is wrong with us, there must be something off in the “machine”: the wiring, the parts, or the fuel. Unfortunately, research scientists, specialized medical doctors, and medical schools have created artificial boundaries for distinct parts of the body so they can study them as individual pieces. Over time, this has caused us to view ourselves in parts and not as a whole person.

Why am I telling you this? We must stop separating parts of our health and well-being. Most of the time, there is little to no difference between heart health, gut health, mental health, and skin health. You are all of these things, all at the same time. A person might struggle to lose weight due to stress, food intake, a hurt foot, depression, lack of exercise, or drinking too much. A person with excessive stress and anxiety might end up with skin

issues, weight gain, heart disease, joint pain, back pain, and so forth. Your mental and physical health are one and the same and must be addressed as a whole.

It's important to point out that anxiety alarms *are* biological phenomenon happening in your body. Cells fire, chemicals flow, hearts push blood, and lungs process the inflow and outflow of air. Skin tingles, nerves burn, and pupils narrow. Trillions of biological interactions take place every day. But the over-simplified medical obsession with biological origins and solutions has proven dangerously overblown. For all of the hype surrounding biology, there are no blood tests or MRIs to even prove an anxiety diagnosis.⁴

And yet, anxiety has been lumped into the same category as cancer or type 1 diabetes. The assumption is that anxiety is just something you can get, like a cold, or something that you inherit from generations before you. We are led to believe that anxiety is a disease, a malfunction, or a broken part of our brain or body. Once you get (or inherit) anxiety, you are stuck managing it forever. This is a dangerous and frustrating lie.

People are not machines to be fixed, computers to be rewired, or puzzles to be solved. People are relational beings to be with. We are vastly complex organisms, made up of living connections, thoughts, and feelings, charged with electricity and water, and highly impacted by internal and external environments. It's actually wild and beautiful how everything is all connected—your mind, body, and spirit. That's why anxiety can't be reduced to simply genetics or disease. Your relationships, work, thoughts, environment, genetics, and actions all add up to who you are and have a significant impact on your anxiety.

**People are not machines to be fixed,
computers to be rewired, or puzzles to be
solved.**

Myth #2: Anxiety can only be cured with medication.

When we reduce anxiety down to a medical disease, a foregone genetic conclusion, or a part of a broken or malfunctioning system, the next logical step is to ask: is there a pill for that? I understand why trying to find a pill to solve the anxiety problem is so appealing. If anxiety is just a medical problem we can fix with a pill, we don't have to do the hard work of looking at and changing our lives. We don't have to examine our relationships, the disconnection between our dreams and realities, our lack of exercise and self-care, or the systemic issues in our culture. We especially don't have to stare down past traumas and abuses. If it's all a medical issue, I can just take a pill, skip all of that pain and work, and head out into the world feeling "happy."

Let's be honest: as a society, we are *way, way* overmedicated. We have turned almost every up and down of normal life into a disease or a medical issue. Some people are really trying to use science to help, while others just want to sell more drugs and medications. We've turned every uncomfortable feeling, thought, pain, or emotion into a medical condition. I am not a medical doctor and recognize that there are plenty of unique situations that require medical interventions, so I will not belabor the point or step too far out of my lane. But understand this: despite a massive increase in the use of medications for anxiety, no country in the world is seeing a reduction in the number of diagnoses.⁵ Despite the billions and billions of dollars spent on anxiety medications, the anxiety problem is only getting worse.⁶

When we reduce anxiety to a condition that can only be solved with medication, we surrender responsibility to take control of our lives and make changes to our environments and our family trees. We end up handing the problem off to our doctor and pharmaceutical companies to fix. This gives us an excuse to throw in the towel and bury our face in our hands in defeat.

Please don't give up on yourself. You are worth your full attention.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I would have done it, but I have anxiety . . .” or “My anxiety makes me . . .” or “I was late because of my anxiety . . .” or “I can’t sleep / exercise / be kind / show up because of my anxiety”? The bigger gap we can wedge between biology and personal responsibility, the better we feel about outsourcing our personal health to other people. Then we can release ourselves from taking full ownership of healing broken relationships, ending abusive relationships, learning to manage our thoughts, and choosing to get well. The good and the bad news is this: only we can choose a life of wellness and healing. We have to take responsibility if we want to grow and move forward.

**Despite the billions and billions of dollars
spent on anxiety medications, the anxiety
problem is only getting worse.**

If you’re struggling with anxiety, remember you probably don’t have a disease that can only be solved with medications. Instead, you may be stuck in or choosing an unsustainable, overwhelming life—dragged into or leaning into the chaos and disconnection of our modern world. Or you may have found yourself lonely and without relationships. But you can change.

Make no mistake: this is really, really hard. We’re all addicted to comfort, and we’re all addicted to quick fixes. We don’t know how to have uncomfortable conversations about our needs. We feel trapped between values and felt obligations. We avoid every difficult feeling, and we’ve taken to playing whack-a-mole with our brain chemistry—trying everything we can to get rid of our hard choices and difficult feelings without actually confronting the hard and uncomfortable realities we are living in. This is dangerous and highly unsettling.

My Journey with Medication

About a decade ago, I allowed my anxiety alarms to get too loud and debilitating. I ran, pushed, avoided, and denied myself right into a ditch. The alarms became so loud and so overwhelming that I was unable to do anything except cover my ears and hide under the covers. So, for a season, I took a reduced amount of anxiety medication. I found medication very helpful to turn down my body's anxiety alarms so I could actually do the work of meeting with mentors, restoring my marriage, spending time with mental health professionals, changing my sleep and diet, taking a deep and honest look at my relationships, and making the necessary changes to move forward in life. If you're considering taking medication for anxiety or you're considering stopping your medication, you must work with the right medical professional before jumping in or out of the pool.

When I met with my doctors (both a traditional medical doctor and a licensed holistic doctor), I told them that I would not put a pill in my mouth before having a planned exit strategy for transitioning off of the medication. I wanted to make sure my doctors were experts, teachers, and partners in my wellness journey. I wanted them to know that I was grateful for their expertise and partnership but that I wanted to take full ownership and responsibility for my long-term health. Not surprisingly, my two doctors were extraordinary. They answered my questions and recommended supplements and dietary changes. They were not afraid for me to challenge them, and they gladly supported my desire to take ownership of my heart, mind, and spirit.

In the short term, medication can be a wonderful way to tone down the alarms that are constantly ringing, giving you a chance to catch your breath and do the