

Staying Peaceful in an Anxious Society: APART Described

By Gary Sweeten

"My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer because I am greatly disturbed. Job 20:2

⁶For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. II Timothy 1

Do you find yourself being timid, fearful and anxious? Do you find it hard to be confident and evidence 'a spirit of love, power and a sound mind?' You are not alone. Sadly, depression and anxiety are on the rise among the affluent nations of the western world. Dr. Martin Seligman says the rates of mood disorders have increased dramatically since the early 1900's. Estimates from the World Health Organization suggest that they are the most costly of all human problems.

As I pondered those things I could hardly believe the statistics. How can it be that we who live so much better lives today than our great grandparents are more worried, anxious, and depressed than they? We have so much and they had so limited medical innovations, creature comforts and technology. The answers must lie in our minds and hearts not in the surroundings, events and society. Seligman suggests we are not as resilient today as they were one hundred years ago.

Stress arises from inside us not from our surroundings. Every culture, society and nation has suffered from calamities, wars, diseases, accidents and natural disasters. In fact, we live in an era when these events are more buffered and interrupted than any people in history. Solomon in all his glory and with all his palaces, wives, jewels and fancy robes was a pauper compared to most every American. Even the poor live in prosperity compared to the kings of long ago. So why are so many of us clinically sad, anxious and filled with guilt, shame and low self esteem?

Our unique perceptions can cause miscommunication and misunderstanding because they can vary in accuracy from 0 to 100%. "I say tomahto, you say tomato..." If we perceive that the boss is critical of us, our automatic mental, emotional and physical reaction will become defensive. If we perceive that others are attacking us, we will live in a state of emotional distress. Our view of the world sets us up for either peace or pessimism. While dwelling on the perceived attack by replaying it repeatedly in our self-talk long after it has passed, we are left in a state of *perpetual* attack, because our ability to remember it with audio-video clarity propels us into a state of continual upheaval and exhausting defensiveness.

Dr. Seligman is an expert at helping people understand the origin of low self-esteem and sad feelings. His classic research found that depressed and anxious persons have some things in common: For one, they share negative ways of thinking about life events. He calls it *Explanatory Style*. (AA calls it stinking thinking.)

They have Belief Systems filled with self-criticism and self-contempt. They do not need any outside help to make them feel wretched. They are experts at it. It is a cycle of chronic anxiety, shame and defensiveness. Sadly, they may have suffered trauma and/or significant or emotional neglect as children. Loss in divorce, death or parental drug use planted a seed of self-condemnation in the heart. Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS) rise from that seed and provide the fruit of the flesh. Stinking thinking is an ongoing mental process that recycles bitterness on a daily basis pushing the pain and stinking thinking deeper than a thousand traumas.

How to be Miserable

Pain is inevitable but misery is optional. Anonymous

We have met the enemy and it is us. Pogo the Possum (Walt Kelly)

Stress is a communicable disease that disables millions and rushes many to an early grave. Every year we see lists of the top ten most stressful jobs. We read articles by Doctors and Counselors about how to reduce stress and those who take the Bible seriously know it says, "Don't be anxious about anything..." so we get more anxious and stressed out because we are anxious.

The most powerful source of stress or relaxation; anxiety or peace; depression or joy comes from one place; an organ in my own body! My brain! Take a look at this ABCD diagram.

A = Activating Events: My job, family actions, weather, illness, etc.

B = Belief System: What I think, say and believe about that Activating Event

C = Consequential Feelings: How my Beliefs make me FEEL about the Actions

D = Decisive Behavior that arises from my Beliefs and Consequential Feelings

In real life, we react with C and D in a millisecond. The reaction is not CONSCIOUS but my Belief System influences the feelings and actions. What can I do to stop being overstressed and upset? Changing my reactions to events is hard. Since stress is everywhere, why not boost it to levels of misery and a total funk? Here are my guidelines on how to do that.

This is why the Bible is so clear about renewing our mind with truth. Romans 12:2 that says, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by renewing your mind.” The term renew is a new word coined by Paul to indicate a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Our minds are filled with worldly ideas about how to develop self-esteem. We hear that beauty, money, clothes, fame, fortune, applause, etc will fill our identity needs. If so, why do so many famous people do drugs, kill themselves and get plastic surgery? Misery is optional when we know who we are in Christ.

So, we have developed techniques to help people stop stinking thinking belief systems based on old memories and irrational thoughts. These techniques can give us rest in Christ to allow the Holy Spirit to change our old mind set. God can heal old memories and self-talk.

How to Really Be Miserable

Those who suffer from mood disorders and other mental lock-ups allow *Adversity* to overcome them. They usually follow the acrostic: APART.

A-Adversity occurs in my life or thoughts. It can be a memory of a past failure

P- Pessimistic Thinking

Perfection is required to be a Christian

I have a Problem

My Problem is Pervasive

My Problem is Permanent

A-Anger, Aggravation and Anxiety fill me

R- Ruminating self-talk reminds me of my Problems and Failures

T- Traumatized thinking that makes the real Problems much worse

A – Adversity is anything I do not appreciate. There are many things we do not like so that means that it is chronic, pervasive and lifelong. It comes to us in school, sports, marriage, parenting, games, rejection, thoughts, etc. (Job 5:7). When *adversity* arrives, it is vital to stop its downward spiral of Stinking Thinking. We must manage our thinking!

Some react by hold themselves totally to blame for every problem. They say “Because of my own personal flaws I am drawing problems to me. And, my flaws are powerful, pervasive and permanent.” This is a perfect recipe for Hopelessness, Haplessness and Helplessness and leads to long-term sadness, anxiety, depression, anger, and frustration. This is the *preferred* thinking style of the habitually pessimist and must be changed in order to find *peace*.

On the other hand, when adversity is assumed to be something from which it is possible to recover, **normal** feelings of sadness and frustration are soon overcome. Adversity

can bring energy loss and pain, but a Hopeful person bounces back whereas the Hopeless person does not.

How does a Hopeless, Pessimistic Person handle Adversity?

The First P-Perfection is Possible and I should be perfect. This unconscious Belief sets us up for Anxiety and Depression. It leads us to set impossible goals based on “Shoulds” that tell us constantly we “Should be Jesus” by asking ourselves “What would Jesus do?” It denies the fact that we, unlike Jesus, have a fallen, broken nature. This comes from making the core of Christianity about obedience rather than a relationship with God as His child who is just learning how to walk and talk.

The second P - Personal Flaws: I say to myself that the adversity occurred because of my personal flaws and imperfections. That can lead to doubt that I even belong in God’s family. One young man said that he was depressed because he knew he was just like his father, a drug addict. He said in a plaintive voice: “I can’t win. I am marked for life as a failure. My wife tells me that almost every day.”

Gary: “Do you agree with her?”

Man: “Yes, I do agree with her.”

This is Hopelessly Pessimistic Thinking that leads to depression and anxiety.

The third P – Pervasive: We assume that our personal flaws are Pervasive or ***all encompassing***. The man above believed that every area of his life was marked for failure because he was “Just like his father.” No wonder he felt terrible and was driven to drink and drugs! It was an effort to relieve his pain. But people in pain often make bad decisions and find only poor solutions. The drug use also confirmed his Stinking Thinking and reinforced his wife’s nagging. The root of his pain was not his father or his wife but his own Pessimistic Hopeless thinking, which was coming from his own mind.

The fourth P – Permanent: A pessimistic belief system is fixated on personal flaws that are pervasive and *permanent*. No change allowed! Permanent Hopelessness means we are Predestined for misery! Nothing can stop it! On top of all these lies, the devil declares you are finished. We are Humpty Dumpty who cannot be put back together again - ever.

A is for Anger, Anxiety and Aggravation. It is next in the downward cycle. A belief system filled with the pessimism of the Ps will lead naturally to anguish and usually erupts as anger. The *anguish /anger* is sometimes aimed at others - even a golf ball - but ends up back at ***self*** - the one with the Personal Flaws that are Pervasive and Permanent. Therefore, that awful self must be attacked and beaten down. Some of the harshest words ever spoken to any person come from our own mind and are aimed at

ourselves. “We have met the enemy and it is us!” said the cartoon character Pogo the Possum

R – Rumination: Rumination is the Killer App of self-talk. A simple mistake like flubbing a golf swing can lead to a day of misery if ruminating is allowed. Reviewing the stroke over and over, watching the flight of the ball, seeing it splash into the water and disappear. The mood gets worse and worse as the replays go to that high-quality audio-video player in the head that we call the brain. With each ruminating thought the sad, anxious feelings get worse until we finally sink into total despair.

Rumination is negative meditation. The Bible clearly suggests that we need to both pray with petition and praise but also meditate. But scripture doesn't say to meditate / ruminate on catastrophe, pain and disaster. We are to meditate on whatever is good, pure and holy, gracious, merciful and loving.

*How long must I wrestle with my **thoughts** and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Psalm 13:2*

T – Traumatizing self: No one is able to damage the heart and soul as badly and deeply and permanently as we hurt ourselves! There is a lot of talk about trauma and abuse. I strongly agree with the need to stop all kinds of bullying, child abuse and violence. However, we can traumatize ourselves 100 times as deeply by ruminating on the negative messages we say to ourselves about the adverse events that come along in life. The words of others cannot do us lasting damage unless we ruminate on them. As the Bible says, “Life or death is in the tongue”. If we choose to listen to our own negative ruminating soul death is the result.

Self-Traumatization leads to “black and white” thinking which is separated from reality. This means everything is either wonderful or terrible; there is no middle ground, no gray, and no balance. The mood following a poor golf shot is not simply unhappy, but misery that can last for hours and days. It is normal and healthy to feel badly after losing a game or making a bad shot. However, misery and “awfulizing” is not normal and it is **self**-inflicted. No golf ball ever made me feel awful but I chose to allow a replay of bad shots cause me to be upset for hours.

Here is the good news: Pessimists can change! Hopelessness can be turned around and let Hope emerge. The brain is a wonderful organ capable of being reformed over and over continuously and permanently. We can choose to learn, change and grow until the day we die. Anxious, pessimistic people intuitively allow Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) to make them miserable. Hopeless people have trained their brains to think negatively. Pessimistic, self-talk about life and it can only change with hard work. Alcoholics Anonymous discovered the pain of *stinking thinking* many years ago as they focused on helping people break the bondage of addiction. The founders of AA back in

1930's learned from a Christian Movement how to help people change. The web page of AA tells its history this way.

The origins of Alcoholics Anonymous can be traced to the Oxford Group, a religious movement popular in the United States and Europe in the early 20th century. Members of the Oxford Group practiced a formula of self-improvement by performing self-inventory, admitting wrongs, making amends, using prayer and meditation, and carrying the message to others.

People coming to them with a history of alcohol addiction had minds that were filled Pessimistic Thinking and no amount of encouragement or truth from other people can change those internal lies. The alcoholic needed a spiritual experience and new ways to think. They had to decide to make a radical change in their self-talk.

Even King David knew that ANTS could disturb both sleep and his waking hours. He called upon God to hear and answer his desperate prayers. *Hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught Psalm 55:2*

How to Develop New Brain Pathways that Lead to Peace

The basis of the following principles lies in faith in God. We, like the addicts, of AA need to meet God personally and develop our faith in His mercy, grace, power and truth. As we rest in Christ we can face Adversity and thrive personally and relationally even as we face the tests and trials of everyday life.

A-Adversity is still a universal human problem after rebirth that cannot be avoided by anyone. The Bible focuses on Helping us face our issues directly and trusting God. James declares that God is with us in our trials so never doubt that God's love is consistent in every situation.

James 1: ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Our Mind is focused on our Personhood with Positive Faith in The Heavenly Father

P-I am **Positive** that the truth will set me free.) John 8:32 Jesus promised. And I will repeat the truth over and over to myself.)

P-I have **Positive** thoughts about my human fallibility. (I have no expectation of infallibility or acting like Jesus. I can fall forward. Philippians 3:12-15)

P- I have **Positive** Faith that God created me good. I am a child of God an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus. (What God says about me is more important than what anyone else says.)

P-I am **Positive** that I have the mind of Christ to think on things that are from God. (Philippians 4:8 true, good, honorable, right, lovely, pure, etc.)

As a result of my Positive Faith I have feelings of:

A-**Attitudes** and **Feelings** of confidence, freedom, joy, and peace.

R-I **Realize** that meditating on God's truth will fill me with optimism.

T-I **Treat** myself and others with genuine concern, respect, empathy, and warm interest. (Galatians 5:22-23. My inner thoughts lead to positive feelings and actions.)

Repetitive Reading and Saying for 40 Days can Change the Brain/Mind

The Positive Faith laid out here need to be repeated over and over on a daily basis in order for the residue of the past to be erased and replaced by God's truth. My very simple explanation of the brain/mind follows.

The brain is constructed in such a way that we retain and remember things in two sections. One is the neocortex that focuses on facts and things that happened. The other is the limbic system that was given to us by the Creator as a safety center. Over time, the things we learn and the ways we relate become habitual as a way to make sure we do not have to stop and think about how to put on our shoes, drive the car and cross the street dig such deep pathways in the brain that our daily behavior become automatic.

My automatic habit patterns almost caused my death in Singapore. The drivers sit on the opposite side of the car from Americans and drive on the left. When crossing the street in America we look to the left because traffic always comes from that way at home, but not in Singapore. There we must look to the right side.

I did not look right because my habit pattern was automatic. I looked left and stepped off the curb only to feel my friend's hand on my shoulder pulling me back to the safety of the curb. With my mind I knew the facts, but with my memories I turned to a different direction. I had been to Singapore many times and knew the rules, but my automatic habits had not changed.

The limbic system remembers dangerous or threatening events and alerts us to possible dangers on a moment by moment basis. The limbic system can react instantly in a blink of an eye. It is our survival center and reacts immediately to protect us. It is our early warning center to keep us safe.

The alerts come about as either fight or flight. When we sense a threat our bodies react to keep us safe by running away or preparing to attack. It is a necessity for survival. If a

tiger jumped out of a bush there would be no time to stop and think over my options for safety. My RADAR SYSTEM immediately causes me to run away, climb a tree or possibly draw my sword to fight it. Being in ongoing wars and facing threats daily can cause our limbic systems to become overwhelmed and we are said to be “emotionally flooded”.

Modern society has few direct threats from wild animals, marauding bands of criminals or poisonous snakes, but we do have stressors that cause our limbic system to “heat up” and react to keep us safe. Conflicts in marriage, work, church and friendship can bring about an overly sensitive limbic system. Stinking Thinking can cause our LS to become flooded and super sensitive because we “bully ourselves”. Of course, when we live in an oppressive home, church, school, workplace that bullies us the result will also be a chronic flood or emotional sensitivities.

Thus, when we first begin to renew our minds, we may “know the facts” but our “limbic system” memories and automatic reactions may not have changed. It is called “limbic Lag” because “We know what to do but we cannot yet do it automatically. Developing new ideas, patterns, behavior patterns and turning them into new, life generation habits does take some time with repetition.

I hope you can be patient with yourself while you do the very tiring work of renewal!

Action Steps

- Write the Positive Scriptures on a card.
- Spent 20 minutes each day meditating about one passage
- Spend 5 days with each passage
- Carry the card with your to read at lunch and breaks
- Choose songs that build your spirit.

Take one Passage and Write it as it applies to You.

Romans 8 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*”

¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. (Full legal standing of an adopted male heir in Roman culture.

Example: *I (Gary Sweeten) am led by the Spirit of God. The Spirit I received did not make me a slave again as though I had been removed from the Family of God. Rather, the Spirit I received I, Gary, received, brought about my adoption into the Heavenly Father's Family as an Eldest Son and I can call him Abba Father.*

That same Spirit testifies that I, Gary Sweeten, am God's child and as a child I am an heir of God and a co-heir with Jesus.

Music is a Powerful way to Renew my Mind

- [Good Good Father](#) by Chris Tomlin
- [Chain Breaker](#) by Zach Williams
- [No Longer Slaves](#) by Jonathan David and Melissa Helser
- [Amazing Grace](#) by John Newton
- [It is Well](#) by Kristene DiMarco
- [Oceans](#) by Hillsong

This approach is more fully developed in my book Power Christian Thinking found on our web page www.sweetenlife.com/store.

Other Positive Faith Bible Verses to Renew the Mind:

Romans 12:2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the **renewing** of your **mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, and perfect will.

Romans 7:25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus **Christ** our Lord! So then, I myself in my **mind** am a slave to God's law, but in my nature a slave to the law **of** sin.