

**Text:** [Exodus 18:5-24](#)  
**Date:** January 6, 2019  
**Title:** Healthy Relationships - 2019 New Year's Series  
Week 1: "Non-Anxious"  
**Theme:** Non-anxious presence means not feeling responsible for the whole world, but just yourself.

## Intro

Over the next few weeks, we're going to focus on relationships – what makes for healthy relationships  
I'm convinced that no matter how well we may think we're doing  
We can all do better – we can understand more – and anything we can do to gain perspective is helpful

Now, with respect to today's topic - we're talking about anxiety and how it affects relationships

I want to start with an understanding that anxiety is part of the human condition

We call it different names at times – worry, stress, just plain fear

Some anxiety is unavoidable, necessary, even desirable

But we have to be careful how we manage it, because if we don't manage it well, it spills into friendships, family, work in unhelpful ways

And that's what today is about

I also want to take a minute to recognize right up front that anxiety as a clinical, psychological condition is very common

By some estimates 10% of people suffer from it

If you find that anxiety is affecting your life negatively – keeping you from doing things you want to do – then talk to someone about it

You can start with me, I'll help you find someone

So if whenever I say "anxiety" you go immediately to the clinical definition, then maybe you want to substitute in "stress" or another word

I'll try to mix it up along the way

## Question

All of us have some level of anxiety.

What are some things you do to manage yours?

## Sermon

### 1

I want to start with an idea from a rabbi that I consider one of my greatest teachers

Edwin Friedman was a well-respected rabbi, family therapist, author and leadership consultant in the Washington, DC area who passed away about 20 years ago

I never met him, but I've studied his writings intensively multiple times, and each time I find something new for my life and my leadership.

A lot of this series will reference his work

One of his biggest ideas is this one: practicing "non-anxious" presence  
Now that's a hard thing to explain, but I think it's easy to grasp intuitively

Here's what I mean

Think for a moment about a time when you have encountered a difficult issue – either personally or at work

Think about how the people around you responded.

Were there people who, by keeping an even keel, by taking a few deep breaths, and remaining calm – non-anxious – made things better?

And were there maybe others around you who lost it – who kind of "freaked out" and made things much worse?

Anxiety is catching – it transfers from one person to another

We have a name for it when it happens in a crowd: panic

That same idea is at work in a family: stress and anxiety in one member of a family really affects everybody

You know that already – it's the "walking on eggshells" phenomenon – where every little thing is subject to a big negative reaction

Or, alternatively, it's the family member who withdraws to themselves

That's why I like the idea of "non-anxious PRESENCE"

Because it's easy to just not deal with a situation – to just not be PRESENT

To check out. But that's not what we're aiming for.

Leaders – whether in a family, or in an organization of any kind  
Have to develop skills in order to be that non-anxious presence who is  
deeply connected, but who doesn't allow other people's drama to  
throw them off their center

## 2

I know that some of you may have been surprised that I chose this  
scripture to talk about today  
Surely Matthew 6 would be better:  
“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.  
Today's trouble is enough for today.”  
But that would just imply that if you're worried, stressed, or anxious that  
you're just not praying hard enough.

That's not the point of today.  
I think the real point of today is to see how this plays out in different kinds  
of relationships  
And helping us to see some of key signs that we need to manage our  
stress better.

I thought about the famous story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10, where  
Martha is upset that her sister has left her to do all the cooking while  
Mary is sitting with Jesus, soaking up his teaching  
That one I think is getting closer to my point  
Martha is doing a classic first-born thing – I have to assume she's the older  
sister – where she feels personal responsibility for everything  
And she's upset with Mary, who isn't doing a thing to help, until finally she  
appeals to Jesus and says, “don't you care that she isn't lifting a  
finger to help me?”  
Instead of engaging her sister about a problem in their relationship, she  
goes over her head to God.

But, like he does in other sibling disputes, Jesus refuses.  
In fact, in his response, he essentially says, “Martha, you're anxious about  
a lot of things. Leave Mary be. She has chosen well.”  
Now, we might not like that.  
Food's still got to be cooked, everyone's still got to eat!

But I think the point here is this: when you say to yourself,  
“I’m the only one taking any responsibility around here,” you’re at that stage  
where you know your stress is getting in the way of relationships  
Clearly it was affecting the relationship between Mary & Martha  
Even if you feel totally justified in that, you’re at that stage where you need  
to pay attention

### 3

So let’s look at Moses’ story  
Now, for those who might feel like psychology doesn’t necessarily belong in  
the pulpit, let me point out from this passage that the whole design of  
Israel’s judiciary comes from a heathen foreigner  
Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, is high priest of Midian  
So good ideas can come from anywhere – it says so right here in the Bible!

Moses is spending his entire day hearing legal cases  
People are bringing their neighbors before him in all kinds of disputes  
Property line dispute here, broken contract over there, stolen sheep  
somewhere else  
And the line to get cases heard is long – like REALLY long

Jethro comes for a visit and says, in the understatement of the year,  
“What you’re doing is not good.”  
“You’re going to wear yourself out, and all these people with you!”  
All Moses can say is, “Well, the people come to me to seek God’s will.”  
Moses has taken on the responsibility for every single problem in Israel.  
He’s acting as though no one else is capable of making a fair judgment.  
As though no one else is capable of following the leading of the Spirit.

Moses has fallen into the trap of: “If I don’t do it, who will?”  
To which Jethro says: “Well, have you ever thought to ask for help?”

### 4

Moses is a classic case of someone who “over-functions”  
Who takes up the slack for everyone else by working too hard, doing too  
much, taking too much responsibility  
We know about the phenomenon of “helicopter parenting”

A parent can't stand the idea of a kid failing in anything – so they just step in and do it

But what's happening when you're doing everything for your kid?

They're not growing

The same is true for any other relationship

When one person over-functions, someone else under-functions

When you take on all the responsibility, all the sense of urgency, all the work

You might think you're doing it in order to serve that other person

Clearly Moses thought he was just doing his job!

So it can seem noble, even like the right thing to do –

But I would be willing to bet that if you really look at why you're doing it, the reasons are all about YOU

When I am overfunctioning in the church, why is it?

It's because I want to be perceived as a "successful" pastor – whether that's to all of you, or the bishop or even God

That's not really about doing a good job

It's about making sure people SEE me as doing a good job

One of the tools many of us use to manage our anxiety is to take control of a situation

To manage every detail that we CAN control

And worry about those we CAN'T control

These strategies are good up to a point

They help us identify risks & prepare for them

## 5

But let's take Moses' story as a cautionary tale

He came to believe he was responsible for every problem in Israel

Likewise, we can be led to believe we're responsible for fixing every problem in our families

Every issue with our co-workers

Every relationship in our circle of friends

But here's the thing: we can't be  
That's a recipe for continued anxiety, stress, burnout and resentment

It's also denying the people we care about the most the opportunity to grow  
into the people God created them to be

To be non-anxiously present means being responsible for what we can be  
responsible for – no more, and no less

The tools that help us consistently do that are spiritual tools that you know  
already:

In particular, I want to recommend three:

Sabbath – time set aside for rest and either connection or  
disconnection, depending on what you need

Naps – which are like a mini-Sabbath anytime

and Prayer – which is really the process of turning over the keys to  
your world to God

Remember today:

You are not responsible for everything in the world – only God can do that

And you're not responsible for everything in a relationship – just yourself

Amen.

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