



'Tis the Season



SOLUTIONS

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Happy Anxious Holidays!

David Olsen, PhD
Executive Director

Thanksgiving and Black Friday are now past. The lights are up, and the holiday rush is on! This always brings a mixture of feelings--nostalgia for wonderful memories and the joy of familiar traditions, to grief for those who are not present and sometimes anxiety about awkward family gatherings. For many, there is the additional anxiety of how to pay for it all. The holidays definitely provide a bounty of many types of feelings!

This holiday season may prove to be even more challenging than last year. Newscasters are beginning to use the term "The Great Recession." The year began with dismal news from the stock market and ended with an unemployment rate over 10%. Many are thinking twice about their holiday shopping. While the "ghost of Christmas past" always hovers through the holidays, this year may bring the ghost of anxiety about the future and what it holds.

Anxiety can be either acute or chronic. Acute anxiety is often the result of a sudden crisis – such as a health crisis, job stress, or financial stress. If this crisis hits a relationship that is relatively healthy, the anxiety may be difficult to manage, but the relationship will get through it and return to a healthy state of functioning.

Chronic anxiety is much more complicated. Chronic anxiety often involves cluster stressors over a long period of time. Long term unemployment, long term illness, ongoing relationship problems, financial hardship all have a way of wearing relationships down. Unlike acute anxiety, chronic anxiety can have a very powerful impact. Like the swine flue virus, it can be contagious, spread quickly through a family and impact people on multiple levels.

For many families, chronic anxiety is often a regular component of the holidays. As a result, a relationship's functioning is impaired. Did you ever wonder why you begin to feel like you are fifteen years old again in the presence of your extended family? Are you surprised every year when you get "hooked" by a dig or com-

ment from a family member and become flooded with hurt or anger? Is it any wonder that alcohol consumption increases during the holidays? This is part of the chronic anxiety of family gatherings. Add in economic pressure or illness, and the holiday gatherings get interesting.

So how do we handle chronic family anxiety? Several steps can be helpful.

First, learn to recognize your own anxiety level. Picture an "anxiety meter" that registers your anxious feelings. This is extremely important. If we remain unaware of our anxiety level, we will become "hooked" and react much more easily. When we both feel and act like we are fifteen, it is at least partially because we are unaware of how anxious we are, and become much more reactive.

Second, understand your "default" relationship position when anxious. When you get anxious do you become the "peacemaker" or overfunction in order to keep everyone happy? If you do, you will be exhausted by the end of the holiday season. If you distance when anxious,

(continued)

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*Helping those most at risk
heal, function and live life
more fully*

you will look for ways to detach from people during the holiday. Do you mistakenly think that you will find the acceptance and love from extended family that you have been longing for? Others become reactive and argumentative during the holidays. Each of us has an anxiety driven “default position”. Understanding that enables us to do something different when anxious. If you can predict what you will ordinarily do when anxious, perhaps you can experiment with doing something different.

Third, recognize that family interactions are amazingly predictable. There are very few surprises. The same people will push your buttons in the same ways. The eccentric uncle who drinks too much, will probably drink too much this year. The overfunctioners will overfunction and then act like martyrs. If you can predict what is going to happen and recognize your own anxiety, you might be free to try something different. But remember, the only person you can change is you. Focus on

your own reaction and consider what you can change.

In the midst of this holiday season recognize the power of anxiety in yourself and in your significant relationships. Use the holidays to learn better and more creative ways of handling holiday anxiety. As you look to the New Year, consider how you'd like this year to be different, and resolve to be the change you wish to see. 

Mirror Neurons: A New Way of Understanding Relationships

Oona Edmands, LMSW, EMDR II
Staff Psychotherapist

There is much we could be grateful for this holiday season—friends, family, the sunshine, good food, and the beauty of the season's changing. With so much distressing economic news creating so much anxiety, it is hard to remember to be grateful for what we have. Moreover, the holidays themselves can create or revive old emotional anxieties, limiting our enjoyment of the moment.

We write many articles about handling anxiety in relationships, but it is important to know that we are biologically hardwired to pick up anxiety. New research on “mirror neurons” shows that we are programmed to mirror other people's behavior, to imitate actions as if we were doing them ourselves. This has had a survival value. Picture a flock of birds resting peacefully on a telephone wire. When one is suddenly disturbed, they all fly as if in unison. They empathically perceive a threat and act accordingly.

In their latest book, *Connected*, Christakis and Fowler suggest, “We are biologically hardwired to mimic others outwardly, and in mimicking their outward displays, we come to adapt their inward states.”


In human relationships, we may feel this in a very subtle way. New employees in an organization may ask older ones whom they trust, “I could feel the tension in that staff meeting; you could cut it with a knife.” Not even knowing what the conflict might be about, they respond intuitively to the sense of peril and tension present.

Going home for the holidays poses other challenges. In such circumstances, you may painfully understand the source of old tensions. Your mother and sister never got along and, as a child, you may have been caught in the middle. Now, do you typically agree with your Aunt Sue every time she makes a disparaging comment about your mother? Do you bristle inside, or do you feel pressure to go along with it? Often the answer to this lies in how strong Aunt Sue is in the family, and how much you have felt the need to ally with her for your own survival and happiness. But what do you really feel anyway?

There is anxiety in all relationships. Ironically, anxiety might increase when you attempt new behaviors or stop old ones. For example, countering Aunt Sue's comments with a polite statement that holds your ground might be extremely threatening to her. You might even notice that if you do not smile and nod at times when you know you are expected to, you will get the silent treatment or she might just be a little less friendly.

Don't beat yourself up if you lapse back into old habits. Remember, you're neurologically wired to do so. Understanding this can help you realize that what triggers you is deeper than just a thought in your mind; it is happening at a less conscious level. We are naturally empathic beings. But how do we work with it if it is so deeply rooted?

One way is through self-soothing, or mindfulness. Choose a particular thing that distresses you in a relationship. Go to a quiet place and close your eyes. Notice how your breath is moving for several minutes and just connect with yourself. Then, visualize the interaction. Notice where you tense up in your body. Notice if you have trouble looking directly at the person you have an issue with. Then, ask yourself: Could this be different? What would that mean for it to be different? Could I tolerate standing up for myself or resisting pressure to agree? Challenge yourself to make one small change in YOUR response. Don't expect anything from the other person and, whatever you do, don't expect it to go over well. You may have to self-soothe and relax yourself when you try a new behavior and Aunt Sue then believes you are against her. Just breathe into it and relax. If it seems right to talk about it directly, you might say that you love her, but don't agree at this time.

You can't change another's actions. When you make changes in yourself that you feel are connected to your own integrity, people may not react as well as you would wish. Through self-soothing and mindfulness however, you will notice subtle yet very profound changes that eventually occur in your relationships. You can relate to others without giving up on your self. 

Your help is desperately needed!

It has been one year since the official beginning of the financial meltdown. Last year, we were amazed to see the disastrous results of the economic collapse in our clients:

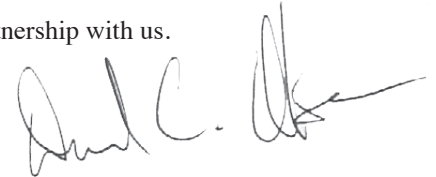
- clients lost their jobs in record numbers, or were anxious about job loss;
- clients had unemployed family members living with them;
- clients could no longer afford counseling they desperately needed;
- many clients lost employer-based health insurance.

To continue our work, we desperately need your help in two ways:

First, please consider making a donation to our **Active Samaritan** fund. We value all of your support as it helps enormously. Your investment could change a life or help save a marriage.

Second, recruit friends to become Active Samaritans. The Active Samaritan program is our new venture, engaging the larger community to actively support our efforts. If you're on Facebook, visit our page, become a fan and share, and invite your friends.

Thank you for your partnership with us.



David C. Olsen
Executive Director

In Gratitude...

Jenness Clairmont, LCSW, LMFT
Training Director

We especially want to express our gratitude to the churches for their donation of space, which allows Samaritan to bring help to five counties:

- *Blooming Grove Reformed Church*
- *Brunswick Presbyterian Church*
- *Delmar Reformed Church*
- *First Church in Albany*
- *First Reformed Church of Schenectady*
- *First Reformed Church of Scotia*
- *Jonesville United Methodist Church*
- *Loudonville Presbyterian Church*
- *Second Reformed Church - Coxsackie*
- *Shenendehowa United Methodist Church*

Most especially, we would like to thank the **First Reformed Church of Scotia**, which provides space for our main office.

In addition, we'd like to give a special thanks to *Peaches Café* in Stuyvesant Plaza and *The Rusty Anchor Waterfront Bar and Grill*. Each of these restaurants hosted charity nights on behalf of the Samaritan Counseling Center. A portion of the proceeds went to our Active Samaritan Program, which aids in providing financial assistance to those who are either underinsured or cannot afford their co-payments. Without this important funding, this population would be unable to receive services. Thanks again to all who attended and to our generous hosts!

We appreciate your support of our mission. 



Mindfulness and

Relationships

~For couples and singles~

Four-week Class

Wednesdays

January 6th ~ 27th

7:30 ~ 9:00 pm

\$200

This class will combine elements of mindfulness, self-validated intimacy, working with difficult emotions, and "relationships as mirror."

Classes will be held at the First Reformed Church of Scotia. For more information, please e-mail: office@samaritancounselingcenter.org or call 374-3514.

Oona Edmands, LMSW, EMDRII, is a psychotherapist at Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region, and a long-time meditation instructor in the Buddhist tradition.

Healthy Relationship Gift Guide

- ∞ *The Spiritual Work of Marriage* — David Olsen, PhD
- ∞ *Passionate Marriage* — David Schnarch, PhD
- ∞ *The Mindful Brain* — Dan Siegel, MD
- ∞ *Connected* — Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler

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Samaritan Counseling Center
of the Capital Region
220 N. Ballston Ave., Scotia, NY 12302



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Jeness Clairmont, LCSW, LMFT, Training Director & PR Coordinator
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Samaritan Services: Individual, Couples, Family Therapy, Educational Workshops, Professional/Organizational Consultation and Supervision.

Office Locations: Scotia, Schenectady, Albany, Brunswick, Rensselaer, Clifton Park, Jonesville, Saratoga. Please call the Scotia office at (518) 374-3514 to schedule an appointment. Financial statements for Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region are available upon request through the New York State Attorney General's office.