Anxiety and Stress

- “My life just seems to be one pressure point after another... my days are like tightropes, stretched really thin...”
- “I’m restless, my head goes a mile a minute, I’m always worrying... something I’ve done, something I should do... something I didn’t do...”
- “Sleeping in the night is hard... I lay awake and can’t sleep... then I toss and turn all night on waves, up and down, in and out of sleep... and in the day, I’m constantly fatigued...”
- “No, I’m fine... just constantly fatigued...”
- “I get so uptight about things... sometimes it’s little things, sometimes it’s a booming big one, but I can’t let go of being uptight, strung out...”
- “My job brings pressure... by the very nature... it’s the due dates for reports, and the environment is demanding, and I’m expecting a lot of myself, and I want to look good all the time... I bring my work home... seems like my whole life has this one focus...”
- “I really want to be a good parent... but I don’t have any experience... and I’m just not confident in myself... so I constantly evaluate what I’m doing... is it enough, am I not being myself, what does that mean...”
- “School’s O.K. If my folks would only leave me alone. I feel they’re constantly looking over my shoulder, judging me, expecting me to meet their standard... it’s no wonder I can’t concentrate on school work...”
- “I’m all right mostly... except sometimes I have these attacks... my heart beats so fast it feels like it’s going to stop... can’t breathe, I think I’m going to suffocate... waves of something dreadful going to come down on me... then I can’t breathe, and I know I’m going to die... and I’m frightened so much you can’t know how this feels...”
- “I’m frightened of being outside, I just feel safer in my own home where there’s just myself... I can’t even look out the front door, it’s indescribable how overwhelming it all is... when outside, I wanted to creep along a sturdy wall, but more, to run home...”
- “I’m quite normal, calm, in control, organized... until I see a dog, and then I’m out of control, I know it’s harmless, but I choke in my throat, my knees go weak, I feel helpless and in danger...”
The Prevalence of Anxiety and Stress: Epidemiology

The existence of stress and the presence of anxiety appears now to be one of the expected conditions of modern life. Stress and the negative consequences of stress are now recognized by industries and businesses to the degree that stress management programs, especially for executives and managers, have been developed. Although executive fitness programs were mainly associated with the value of physical health and vitality, more and more research is now promoting physical exercise as a means of coping with anxiety and tensions. But we can also note other evidence of the degree to which stress has become an ever-increasing problem. One such confirmation can be found by examining the case load of physicians. Although physicians are the professionals seen by persons in need of help for physical complaints, currently physicians are also the source to whom persons go for mental health complaints (Goldberg, Steele, Johnson, & Smith, 1982; Orleans, George, Houpt, & Brodie, 1985). It is quite revealing therefore that one study of local physicians discovered the most common reasons for a medical visit were for a physical checkup, or for hypertension, pharyngitis, or tonsillitis, or cuts and bruises. However, following quite close behind these reasons was the complaint of “anxiety.” And not only was anxiety ranked extremely high, but this complaint as a cause for seeing a physician was more frequent a reason than bad colds or bronchitis (Marsland, Wood, & Mayo, 1976).

Indeed, at one point, the National Institute of Health recognized the need for primary care physicians to receive training in mental health since so many mental health complaints were coming directly to them. Cragan and Deffenbacher (1984) sent out letters to patients in a family practice clinic, offering a program for coping with stress and anxiety. Over 100 persons responded in search of help! These persons ranged in terms of occupations from accountants to secretaries, engineers, factory workers, professors, and construction workers. Interestingly enough, when asked about their major symptoms of stress, these persons listed symptoms that were mainly physical in nature. The most frequent stress symptom was tension in the neck and shoulder region (21.8%), followed by headaches (14.5%), then stomach complaints (13.6%), general tremors and shakiness (10.9%), and, finally, insomnia (6.4%). Epidemiological estimates are that approximately 8.3% of the population, or about 13.1 million people in the United States, suffer from an anxiety disorder (Wilson, 1988). The economic impact is reflected in the annual cost of treating panic and agoraphobic disorders alone, an amount estimated to be between $4.1 and $20 billion.

Another signal of the extreme prevalence of anxiety conditions are