



Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

You're listening to the Faith & Work podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor and society through our daily work.

Joanna Meyer ([00:17](#)):

Hi, everyone, and thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast. I'm Joanna Meyer, the director of events and sponsorships at Denver Institute for Faith & Work, and I'm excited to share this podcast episode with you.

When the coronavirus pandemic began earlier this spring, we had to change plans for spring gatherings and move many of our events online, but this also opened up an opportunity to host virtual conversations in a way that we hadn't explored before. As an organization, we wanted to recognize the changes that people in specific roles or industries were experiencing in their daily work, and so we asked ourselves, who could use an extra measure of encouragement in this season? And as you can imagine, healthcare professionals were at the top of that list.

So a few weeks ago, we hosted a thought-provoking conversation for healthcare providers, which we're sharing with you today. It was an amazing conversation on Zoom. By the time we were finished with the call, I looked at a couple of colleagues and I thought, "This is such a powerful moment to be caring for and connecting with this community." We had asked Megan Nunnelly, who is a clinical nurse manager at [inaudible 00:01:18] Health in Denver to talk about her experience leading a unit that was serving patients suffering from the coronavirus. And we also asked our friend and pastor, Steve Cuss, who you've heard on this podcast before. To talk about issues around anxiety that many of us are facing, but especially our friends working in healthcare.

So Megan will offer us a perspective from the front lines that many of us don't have, and I hope that you'll gain a greater appreciation for the work our healthcare professionals are doing now as the virus continues to surge in many areas of the country. And after we hear from Megan, Steve will help us understand anxiety, how to recognize it and how to mitigate it. His wisdom is applicable to anyone, even if you don't work in healthcare. I found this to be a really inspiring conversation. I think you'll come out of it with some practical tools for your own life and work in this unique season. So enjoy today's podcast.

Megan Nunnelly ([02:22](#)):

This time and serving in this way has certainly been more challenging than I originally anticipated, and that might be true for a lot of us. When we first kind of started, I thought, "It'll be short. We'll get through this like we do everything else. We'll kind of hunker down and power through, and we'll all be okay," and that isn't the trajectory we're on or the current experience right now.

It's been humbling watching the strength of nurses and of our other caregivers at the bedside. And really, one of the things that has been most humbling and hopeful to me is just watching the community come together in ways that I was really surprised, some through Fellowship Denver, some through my community group, some was just nurses caring for each other and serving one another. It has been incredible to see.

Some of the challenges that we've been experiencing is working and practicing in ways we never thought that we would have to. It's working under conditions of limited protective equipment. So we're using some of that stuff as safely as possible, which can bring on its own concerns and anxiety of, "How much risk am I putting myself in and my other patients in?" and some is patients are by themselves. They are alone. They don't have visitors. And part of that is to protect their families and themselves, but



it is emotionally challenging watching patients decline and sometimes die with the door closed and alone, or with nursing staff at the bedside. And it's a lot. In a cohorted unit, you're seeing the same disease process play out over and over and over again, kind of on a loop, and so it's hyper concentrated, a lot of those emotions and challenges.

I found that my team is experiencing a lot of anxiety around what I've already mentioned, and they're not sleeping well. And part of it is that they're taking it home. And it's hard to remember that you're doing the right thing when you're practicing in ways that you're not used to.

So I've found that I spend a lot of my days and my efforts really getting the staff just basic needs. Sometimes it's taking a break, sometimes it's taking the mask off and laughing about something. It's getting water, it's eating, it's celebrating the small things and reminding us that there is good that's still happening. We've had patients that have been there for 42 days that are discharging. They're going home, and we need to celebrate that. And so how do we do that? So we've been working through that. Some, it's playing music and celebrating as they walk out the hallway. It's working through some of the challenges to just, I think Stevie said it, frivolity. Just kind of allowing us to celebrate the small things and laugh again has been part of how I try to spend my time and support.

Some of it has really been opening conversations that haven't been there before around hope and strength and where can I find hope and strength when I don't have it within myself anymore? And what does that look like? And what does the future look like? And how do I not get anxious with the overwhelming fact that we may be in this for a while? So I find that's where a lot of my conversations and time and efforts are spent, there and at the bedside and connecting with families as well.

One of the ways that I've seen God at work is opening those doors for conversation, and just really the strength of the team that I'm working with. It's really incredible the struggles, the fear, the overwhelming and the anxiety of what's happening next. Being a Christian and working as a manager of a department in this time has really shaped the way some of the decisions have been made and how I make them, and some of that is managing others' fear.

There were, at the beginning, I think just because we didn't know what was the right or best thing to do, there were ideas of only go in and visit patients every four to six hours if you have to. And just really being grounded in truth and the dignity of human life, patients need to be seen more than that. We can't go in only every six hours. They need somebody to talk to, they need some connection with others. And so I think my faith and my groundedness in gospel-centered truth has really helped give me confidence and really drive those decisions as well.

I think one of the biggest prayers that I have is truly around wanting my team and myself to ask the questions around the anxiety and the experiences that they're facing now, because I have a deep concern of what this looks like after things kind of settle out and what kind of trauma or anxiety experiences that we will be working through after, and how we can maybe lessen or mitigate that by talking through those things now.

Jeff Haanen (08:03):

Hi, this is Jeff Haanen, the founder of Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Hey, thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast and for letting me interrupt you briefly to share just a request. I want to ask you to consider becoming a financial contributor to Denver Institute. Each day, thousands of people listen to our podcasts, engage our [inaudible 00:08:20] courses and grow spiritually as a result of generous donors like you. Each podcast episode is a hundred percent funded by generous donors who believe that work is a way to love God, serve our neighbors and demonstrate the gospel to our world.



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Steve Cuss ([09:06](#)):

Here's the deal, anxiety's a big word, and it covers a lot of territory. So PTSD, for example, is a form of anxiety. Most medical professionals, particularly in this COVID season, your bread and butter anxiety is what's known as acute anxiety, and acute anxiety is of course around the nature of life and death. Acute anxiety happens when we are actually under threat. So right before we started this, one of you, I think it was you, Megan, was just talking about the anxiety that comes with coming home to your kids and what do you have to do to protect your family from getting infected?

In the work that I do, that anxiety is completely healthy and encouraged because it's acute anxiety, it's anxiety that really does come down to life and death and health and safety.

The work I do with faith leaders is a different kind of anxiety, which is called chronic anxiety, and that's really what we're going to be spending our time on. Now, every healthcare professional I've ever worked with, and I've worked with a ton of you guys over the years, carries a large dose of chronic anxiety. Some of you are very aware of it and some of you may not be as aware of it.

Chronic anxiety isn't life and death, it's more what happens, what shows up when you don't get what you think you need. So if figuring out how to keep your kids and your loved ones from getting infected is a real need, then, for example, someone disrespecting you at work, or the family of a loved one begging you to do more when you can't do more, or the need to do [inaudible 00:10:49] for people, those things are chronic anxiety. They're not things that you actually need to live, but the way you're wired, your body believes that you have to have them to be okay.

So what ends up happening is, every day, we find ourselves in situations where we're chronically anxious because whenever we're in a stressful environment, all of these things that we think we need start bubbling to the surface. The way I describe it is, it's like we all have this little bubbling volcano just under the surface of our life, and anytime we're exhausted or under pressure, or feeling attacked or cornered or defensive or stressed, also known as your average shift at work, anytime we're in that situation, this little volcano can erupt and it spills out chronic anxiety.

And the challenging thing is our bodies actually don't know the difference between acute anxiety and chronic anxiety. Our bodies, unless we train them, have the same physiological reaction when we're actually under threat of our life and when we think we're under threat.

So my body, for example, in my case, one of my sources of chronic anxiety is I always believe I need to know the answer. If I'm in any kind of situation, I don't know if you've dealt with this too as you deal with patients and families, but you don't always know the answer. And so anytime I don't know the answer, I get chronically anxious because I believe the lie that I always have to know what to do in any given situation.

Now, each one of us have different triggers and it takes certainly more than 20 minutes today to really start to uncover your triggers, but the first thing that you guys can start doing today, and I'd invite you, if you want to, you can use the chat if you'd like to try this right now, is to see if you are able to name what is something in my life that I believe I need that I don't actually need to be okay? What's something in my life that I believe I made that I don't actually need to be okay?

And most of us have dozens of these. So all you need to do today is try to come up with one or two or three, and I'm going to very quickly give three examples from my life and then we'll move on. I believe I need to be respected. If somebody disrespects me, I get really angry. One of the misnomers about anxiety, people think anxiety is just worry and fear, anxiety is actually whatever happens next after you don't get what you think you need. So anger can be an anxious response. Bingeing Netflix on the couch can be an anxious response. Mansplaining is always an anxious response. So for me, anger is a sign that I'm anxious. If I'm disrespected, like oftentimes, when my kids were younger and their friends would come over to the house and they would disrespect me, I'd get really bent out of shape.

I believe [inaudible 00:13:55] people need to like me in order for me to be okay, and I also have this chronic need to appear like I'm very intelligent. If somebody thinks I'm not intelligent, I get all anxious. Now for some of you, it might be different. For example, it might be that you have this raging inner critic where you need to do it perfectly all the time.

One thing that you can do to notice your anxiety is to start to notice what is it I think I need that I don't really need? And then the next step is actually to name it to someone you trust. In the scriptures, that's what confession is, is to actually say it. And it's this crazy thing, that by just naming it, you actually flip the power dynamic by it controlling you, you now can start to manage it.

So my experience with healthcare professionals, these first two questions, is we all carry a lot of chronic anxiety, and then Joanna's second question, how do you get a handle on it, my experience with anybody in the caring profession, pastors, social workers, healthcare professionals, two things about us. We're often the last person in the room to know when we're not okay. That's one thing. We're often the last to know we're not okay. And because we're so others focused, we're often not great at self-care. We wrap it up in the idea that we're selfless people and that we're serving others.

And that's true, but what's also true is oftentimes, we're bad at that life balance. And so we end up pouring it all out and getting burned out or feeling empty. We don't believe, for example, that a very effective way to serve somebody is to take care of yourself, that actually, if you want to serve more people for longer, doing more work on self-care is actually the best way to serve others.

But number one, a question that you can ask yourself right now is, who in my life who loves me knows that I'm not okay before I know it? It's a very humbling question. I'm married to an amazing woman and I have three kids, and my kids are teenagers now. But my youngest, when she was nine or ten, she's very perceptive, and she was one of the people in my life that would know I'm not okay before I knew I'm not okay.

So figure it out in your mind. Maybe it's someone in your family, maybe it's someone in your workplace, but it has to be someone who cares about you. It has to be somebody who has your interest. And all you have to do is ask them, "How do you know when I'm anxious?" Now, this is a brave question because it's vulnerable, but how do you know when I'm anxious?

And I'm just going to tell you, I know there's a lot of different people on this call, you haven't lived until your nine year old, like I wrote the book on anxiety, I'm supposed to be the expert, you haven't lived until your nine year old daughter comes to you and tells you you're anxious when you're not aware you're anxious, and then offers to pray for you. That's a pretty good life, but that's because over the years, my wife and I have had very open conversations with our family.

In fact, I host a podcast called Managing Leadership Anxiety, and one of my all time favorite episodes, they got my family on, and we all went around on the microphone and we simply answered the question, how do you guys know when I'm anxious? And we all took turns answering for each other. And we're five very different personalities, which means that our anxiety shows up in very different ways.

But that's one thing you can do. How do you know when I'm not okay before I know? The second thing, guys, is just to believe these people when they tell you. It sounds easier than it is. When they tell you what you do, then just believe them. And then you can say to them, "Would you help me? And when you notice that I'm anxious, would you tell me?" And that moment can become a moment where you can start to flip the anxiety dynamic.

The second part of this question, how do we get a handle on our anxiety? Because we're so others focused, you and I are not so good at self-care. That's a universal statement. It's a broad statement, so maybe, for some of you, you're the exception, but in my experience, I mean, I've now worked with hundreds, yeah, probably hundreds and hundreds of caregivers. I would say less than 5% of the caregivers I work with actually have a pretty decent self-care regimen.

When I was a hospital chaplain, I served on the code team. And while you guys are in the room with the paddles and the clear and you get to do something, the chaplain has to sit with the family just out in the hallway, and we have nothing. We don't have paddles and we don't get to make commands. We just have to sit with highly anxious people and wait. And somehow, in that moment, we have to try to manifest the presence of God while we all wait. It's awful.

And the code team was a real challenge, especially for someone like me who is action-oriented and I like to do. And one of the code doctors pulled me aside when I was a chaplain and he said, "Hey, just a little tip." He said, "Any time somebody's heart stops beating, first, take your own pulse." That was just his little mantra. Anytime somebody's heart stops beating, just first take your own pulse.

Another way of saying it back in the good old days of when we used to actually get on an airplane and fly somewhere, also known as February, the flight attendant would always say, "In the unlikely event that oxygen masks fall from the ceiling, first, place the mask on your own face before helping others." Right? And I think that's because flight attendants know that when you're in a crisis, when it's all flying, when you're having to take care of people, it's counterintuitive to you and I to take care of ourselves so that we can take care of others.

And Jesus of Nazareth, he taught us to love our neighbor, but I think for most of us who are caregivers, the way we love our neighbor is by emptying ourselves. And that's fine. That's a completely legitimate way to love your neighbor. But if the only way you do it is to empty yourself, you're going to burn out. You're going to get bitter and cynical and exhausted and angry. You're going to spit on the dog. You're going to do these weird things. But if you also start to learn that one way you can love and serve your neighbor, which of course in your context is your fellow staff members and the patients that you take care of, another completely legitimate way to fulfill the command of Jesus is to fill yourself up and to love people out of the overflow of your own life.

And so first, take your own pulse. And I think the way that you do that is you learn to pay attention to when you're anxious. And then rather than just grinding and buttoning down and doing more, you can just pause. And sometimes that pause is literally three minutes. Of course, sometimes that's a vacation, sometimes it's an evening, but even when you're in caregiving, it's amazing how you can displace your anxiety in two or three minutes time.

So what I'd encourage you to do, and I'm actually going to challenge you to do this before the sun goes down tonight. Now I don't care if you're at work and you don't have much time, I'm going to ask you to consider trying this before you go to bed tonight, just make a list of life-giving activities and life-giving pleasures and life-giving people. Now, you don't have to make an exhaustive list, but what are some activities in your life that make you feel human, that make you feel like a kid, that when you do them, you lose track of time? What are some people, that when you're around them, you just feel energized and you feel loved? And what are some simple pleasures in your life that you really enjoy?

Now, this is what I call, and I write about it in the book, I call it a life-giving list. It's the most simple thing. It's just a life-giving list. I have about 75 things on my life-giving list. When I first started it, I didn't realize I'd had this many things, and you can really indulge it. So for example, for my wife, popping popcorn on the stove old school is on her life-giving list. It's the simplest thing. The last time she did it was last night. My wife's a therapist and she'd had a very intense day. She had done a Zoom with some families with terminal kids, and she felt a little out of her league. And she came down from the Zoom call and boy, she was emotionally really wiped out. And the next thing you know, she's at the stove popping popcorn because that's just this life-giving thing.

Every one of us can do things that are life-giving, even in between patient care. Now obviously you can't go pop popcorn, but it might be that there is a pleasure in your life. For me, playing acoustic guitar. For whatever reason, I can just pick up a guitar for five minutes, just play a little bit of James Taylor or Paul Simon or something, and my anxiety is diffused. Oftentimes, we try to tackle our anxiety head on, but sometimes, the most effective way is just to displace it with something that connects us to being human and to being God's child. And I think when you're in the caregiving industry, like medical professionals, everything gets so earnest because everything matters so much, and there really is magic and the grace of God through frivolity, through play.

And so just a few things I'm going to suggest, a breath prayer. Even before this call, I'm at my church building right now, and we have... We probably can't see it out the window. No, we can't. Well, maybe, but we have a prayer labyrinth that we built on our property, and I just made sure, it took me about 20 minutes, just to walk the prayer labyrinth before coming on today. It might be going and finding an ice cream that you enjoy. It might be that there's somebody in your life who loves you and it's physically appropriate, and you can ask them for an extended hug. Like when you think about it, a physical touch is an incredible way to experience the tangible grace of God.

So I would encourage you to do that, to figure out who in your life knows you're anxious before you do, have them help you name the something that you think you need that you don't really need. Like if you're going into that patient's room and maybe you believe that you need to hold it together, some of my most powerful experiences with people, even in death, is weeping together, and just being completely human with them and grieving with them rather than being professional.

Whatever it is that you think you need, you can name that, but then also, first taking your own pulse and noticing when you're feeling a little worked up, and doing something that's life-giving and just connecting you to the love of God. The way my family uses our life-giving list is when my wife goes and pops popcorn, or sometimes, if I want to take care of my wife, I'll go pop popcorn and serve her, and then it's a double win. She gets something life-giving and she's also been served. She does the same for me. We actually share, in our family, our life-giving lists with each other. That's something you can do with your friends or people in your life who love you.

But when we're popping that popcorn, we literally actually take a moment just to say, "God, thank you for the gift of popcorn." This may sound crazy to you, but I assure you it works, "And thank you for the pleasure of making then the smell of popcorn." Like God has given us good gifts, and just being able to enjoy the gifts of God in the midst of stress and pressure is an incredible thing that you can do.

Just in the last two minutes, that final question, how can we become a nonanxious presence at work? And oh my goodness, that's such a huge question because what ends up happening if we all have this little volcano under the surface, it's almost like we're all carrying a bucket of anxiety. Maybe we know it, maybe we don't. For some of you, maybe the doctor doesn't know it and you know it, you know what I mean? That can be tricky. But if you're carrying a bucket of anxiety and then you're in a group



setting and you get anxious and you spill over, you end up just like dumping your bucket into each other, and so anxiety is contagious.

Some of the work I've been doing lately is just helping people realize all the work that we're doing to isolate so we can care for each other, to protect each other from catching COVID, what we're still catching is each other's anxiety. The fact is that chronic anxiety is more contagious than any virus. We all catch it more than we are going to catch this virus. When somebody in the room is anxious, it's very common that everybody in the room ends up anxious.

So one of the things that you can start doing is you can actually start watching anxiety spread in your group. It's a little freaky when you first start noticing it because you're going to notice it everywhere. Now you already know this, you just may never have talked about it because we already react to each other's anxiety unconsciously. But one of the most powerful tools you can do with your staff team is to start taking that unconscious noticing and to start to name it to each other.

Now, I just got to say, if you're in a team that's not safe to do that, I wouldn't do this because it's vulnerable and the wrong kind of personalities are going to use your vulnerability against you. But if you have a caring team, if you really do care for each other, you can actually sit down and you can start to notice how anxiety spreads in your group. And by far, the most disarming way to notice it is to you to go first, is for you to simply say, "Here's how I'm contributing to the anxiety of the group."

And then after that, what you can do is get into the habit of becoming hyper aware of when someone else's anxiety is spilling into your heart, and just to do some personal work to stop you from catching their anxiety. And then the other thing you can do is to start noticing when your anxiety is spilling over and you're spreading it to others.

Speaker 1 ([28:49](#)):

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