

# Anxiety and Freemasonry

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**T**oday we see a term made popular in the Mental Health world that may warrant further review within Freemasonry. The term to which I'm referring is, "Anxiety."

I know, I know, what in the world, right? I'm sure that right now you are thinking, "How in the world do anxiety and Freemasonry fit in the same box?" But bear with me for a moment, and let me take you on a small journey that may explain how anxiety is likely to be causing a problem within Masonry, and what we may be able to do to help correct an issue that has gone undetected within our lodges for many, many years.

The DSM-V (Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5<sup>th</sup> Edition) used in the psychological world to diagnose Mental Health disorders defines many characteristics of anxiety. Although I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, I do not anticipate that I will be diagnosing anyone reading this paper. So, you can breathe a sigh of relief, sit back, relax, and enjoy what you are reading! In this paper I will speak only of General Basic Anxiety and how it can affect our work within the lodge and our attendance at other lodge functions.

Anxiety can be defined as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome."<sup>1</sup> I'm almost certain that anyone reading this who has performed any kind of ritual work, or who has sat in an officer's chair within a lodge, can relate to this definition.

Public speaking has been known for years to top the charts as one of the most phobic activities in which one may participate. Most people, even professionally trained individuals, will shun speaking engagements to the best of their ability when given the chance. When standing before an audience to deliver that time perfected ritual that you have studied for untold hours, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in and you automatically feel the heart begin to accelerate. The bronchial passages widen, giving you that tickle in the back of your throat and that common ehmm, ehmm. Blood vessels constrict, pupils dilate, piloerection (better known as "goosebumps") can be present; all while the blood pressure begins to slowly increase, and the sweats glands jump into action. This, my brethren, is what is known as the "Acute Stress Response," better known as the "Fight, Flight, or Freeze" zone. The sympathetic nervous system is activated by the sudden release of hormones, which stimulates the adrenal glands, triggering

the release of catecholamines (including adrenaline and noradrenaline).<sup>2</sup> It is at this very moment that a Mason like yourself, who has studied the ritual religiously, has put in every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears to memorize each word meticulously, loses track of thought in the blink of an eye. And, of course, it's always at the most important time, right? This, my brethren, causes anxiety!

The fight-or-flight response plays a critical role in how we deal with stress and danger in our environment. When we are under a perceived threat, the response prepares the body to either fight, flee or freeze. Knowing this information, and always applying my vocation to Masonry, caused me to contemplate a major question with which I have struggled for years, "Why are the majority of Masons fleeing, instead of fighting to stay in lodge?" I understand very well that there are many factors to which we may point as causing men (even good men) to not come back into the lodge on a regular, consistent basis, or, perhaps, not at all. It's unarguably known that we have not guarded the West Gate well. Apathy has led to a lack of good substance within our meetings; and education on the craft is non-existent in many parts of the world, especially in the United States. Even within the first few encounters arising in their new Masonic journey, it's not hard for candidates to see the desperation existing in many of our dilapidated and unkempt lodges. But, being professionally trained to look a little deeper, I always try to find root causes and attempt to problem-solve. Here are a few things that I have found:

- It's well known that within the jurisdiction in which I hold membership, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 56% of Masons who are initiated, passed and raised hardly ever darken the doors of a lodge again.<sup>3</sup> This statistic haunted me, as I feel it should every Mason who reads this. I started asking myself questions such as, "Was it the pressure of being front and center as a candidate that was too much for a man?" I wondered why a man would endure all of the intricate parts found in the beginnings of a Masonic journey, all of which require a considerable amount of work, time, and dedication, and then fade away so quickly. I really didn't find an answer.
- The next thing that came to mind was, "If 56 % of newly made Masons just don't show back up for whatever reason, that still leaves the Grand Lodge of Kentucky with 44% of its members who must be active. Wrong!!! We know the majority of these men are not within our halls on a regular basis, although they once were. What happened to this group of men? This question is also begging to be answered. The rough number today of men who show up to do any kind of work is approximately 6%.<sup>4</sup> That number alone warrants not only deep concern, but deep study on why so very few return to lodge after they just took an obligation to do so.

A theory that I propose, and I promise you it is just one of many, is that men may get nervous and experience stress, which may lead to anxiety. They are not ready to be front and center. Nor are they ready to be thrown into the lonely depths of Masonry, and left to sink or

swim in the dark, murky waters of the unknown, with no Masonic life vest in sight. All the while, the Brothers on the left and right quietly giggle at their demise (all in fun, of course), because we've all been there, right? This is the moment where we should stop for a second, critically think, and ask ourselves, "Is this doing more damage than we realize? Are we overwhelming our new members?" Truly, this is something on which to contemplate.

For instance, I was raised on a cold November evening, with no heat working within a dank and monstrous lodge room. Not a familiar face was in sight, for none of my friends, whom I later found to be brothers, showed up for any of my degrees (even after some promised that they would). To say that was a shock is an understatement; and immediately my nerves began to engage. Only one short month later, the Election of Officers quickly came on December 27<sup>th</sup> – Saint John the Evangelist's Night. And there I stood, the newly elected Junior Warden of the Lodge. I didn't even know what was going on! Yes, I said the same year! You did not misread that. The very next election, I was elected to be the Worshipful Master of the Lodge. A shocker, huh? I'll bet not for many who are reading this. As inexperienced as I was, there I stood, an upright and just Mason. Because I had been taught to never turn down a good opportunity, or, as a wiser person might conclude, I had established poor boundaries, I accepted that position. I stood proudly! Because, after all, I had been asked by the esteemed brothers of my lodge to move up quickly for the good of the lodge. They had fallen upon hard times and had no one to fill the seats. And, they assured me, I was the man for the job. As my ego swelled with pride that evening, all seemed good in the world, until it was show-time.

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Anxiety, stress and fear all followed me to my first meeting as Worshipful Master. Ill-preparedness and lack of experience were now shining through brightly and could in no way be hidden. At my first meeting, upon rapping the gavel as Master, it felt as if all of the members of the whole district had showed up to visit. As we know, feelings aren't facts! Actually, it was only about 10 people. But the pressure was still enormous, and it caused my brain to go into overdrive. There was no running and there was no hiding; and that's not what good Masons do, anyway. We persevere, we act, and we get through each meeting (while secretly longing for the year to come to a speedy end). You can rest assured that these circumstances caused an anxious feeling within me every time I led a meeting. And it made me want to not come back - every single time. Now, I know that not everyone is wired this way; but it made me take a deeper look at something that was within myself – Anxiety!!! "Could this possibly be occurring in others," I asked? Is this why some never advance, seldom show up, or just plain quit? It's worth examining, and, if that is the case, how do we fix it?

As I mentioned earlier, I know that anxiety is not the only reason that men don't return to lodge. As a Licensed Professional Counselor, I have seen the disastrous effects of stress, fear and anxiety. And, when you look at today's population, those issues don't appear to be going anywhere, anytime soon. Anxiety can, and does, debilitate some people. Although what I

experienced wasn't quite that intense, I still came to the conclusion that it was affecting me; and I further concluded that it was more than likely affecting others as well. I decided that if I had anything thing to say about it, anxiety wasn't going to beat me out of my Masonic journey.

Anxiety is something that is very treatable in most people. I would highly recommend a professional's help, but that's not the only means of treatment. I immediately started engaging in self-relaxation techniques such as guided imagery (a treatment used to envision an outcome that we desire, or what you might call your "happy place"), which allows the brain to create a scenario allowing you to side-step anxious thoughts and prepare your thoughts and emotions for a more effective response. Meditation and deep breathing exercises are another few tactics that were very useful in reducing my feelings of anxiety. But my most effective tool to date, has been what I refer to as "walking through the veil." (Yes, I know, it's another cheesy title, but I had to link it back to Masonry somehow, right?) For me, walking through the veil entailed taking my time, facing my fears, and not letting others push me into areas where I didn't feel I was yet ready to take on certain challenges. You see, as a person who is both anxious and a high achiever, I don't like to disappoint people. The word, "No," is not something I am comfortable using and it creates its own form of anxiety when I am forced to use it. But the older I get, the more that I realize that boundaries are a must for me. And, if I were a betting man, I would wager that they would be very useful for others as well. Our working tools actually affirm this.

The 24-inch gauge is a prime example of how we are to keep ourselves in check. A Mason is taught that the 24-inch gauge takes the 24 hours of the day and divides that for us equally into three equal parts to be used to allocate the distribution of our time. If we truly examine ourselves, most of us are not even close to using this tool on a consistent basis. This can throw our lives and minds out of kilter. By applying our working tools not only physically, but, mentally and spiritually too, we can find balance. This will allow us to control our thoughts, actions and emotions, which can reduce, if not entirely alleviate, anxiety within ourselves and greatly improve our Masonic experience.

Anxious or not, we know the show must go on. So that leaves us with the question, "As brothers, what do we do?" Do we continue to throw new candidates to the wolves, only to watch them dwindle away on a daily basis? Or do we start to look at retention issues, perhaps even asking a brother why he left. I think it only makes sense that we should have good data that can tell us why a Mason left his lodge. Knowing the nature of men, they will more than likely never tell you "I was nervous," so please take that into consideration. It's high time that we attempt to become aware of possible deficits that we may have overlooked within ourselves and others. Maybe we need to stop solely blaming the men who didn't come back by labeling them as lazy, not being the men we needed, or undedicated. Ask yourselves, "What can we do differently as Masons?"



Would it be possible for us to implement mentorship programs, or, perhaps, initiate consistent standards of practice for new brothers? Education can go a long way. By taking these (or similar) steps, it may ensure that Masons never have to perform in front of a crowd without being prepared; and Masonry may turn into Broadway instead of Improv. Let us develop and implement a plan of action to present to our new initiates concerning their Masonic responsibilities. This is a newfound journey for them, remember? Try to recall, if you can, your

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first job. Remember how nerve-wracking that was? Now, imagine that you had never been given instructions as to how to actually do the job, and were just thrown into action. Yeah, not fun, huh? This is exactly the equivalent of what most lodges are doing to our new candidates. By eliminating this tradition, we could see immediate effects with respect to reducing anxiety levels. It is highly unlikely that anyone wants to be put under this kind of pressure, and very few flourish under this level of stress.

Having a plan in place and making sure our members hold to it is key! It’s kind of like having a roadmap, so to speak. This could make a big difference in retaining new members and bringing them more closely into our brotherhood. Calling a brother on the night of a meeting and asking him to perform ritual (or other duties), does not work for everyone. As a matter of fact, I feel that it’s plain wrong in most cases. And it produces shoddy work for the candidate on whom we are performing it. It also has the potential to throw a young member into a state of anxious panic, which only leads to guilt and shame, and possibly, yeah, you guessed it, not wanting to return to lodge. Planning, practice and preparation can be a game changer if used consistently and properly.

In closing, my brothers, I hope by now you have a clearer view on what anxiety is and how it could be affecting our members. I ask you to think about how you are approaching the new members of your lodge. (And just maybe even how we are approaching the older members too!) We see many who aren’t really active and are just sitting on the side lines watching and refusing to do work. Are they anxious? Are they full of fear? Ask yourself, what am I doing to help them want to stay? What am I doing to allow them to take part? Am I causing stress and anxiety on my Brothers?

I implore you to take these following steps to reduce their anxiety and stress: take your time with them; give them small, achievable, non-overwhelming goals; be patient, be kind and build on this over time. You will see these problem-solving skills reduce anxiety and stress within your lodge. You will immediately be able to identify the fast-trackers, as well as the men who will need a little more time and patience. And it’s okay for those men to move more slowly, as long as they are moving. All the while have each individual engaged and becoming productive within your lodge. Be a teacher, a cheerleader, and a mentor. Set them up for success, not failure. This is one way we can ensure that anxious men, young and old alike, can learn the true meaning of the old adage we’ve all used, “Masonry takes good men and makes them better.”

**Notes:**

1. Oxford-Lexico, definition of anxiety, /<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en>, accessed 1 December 2020.
2. Kendra, Cherry, *How the Fight-or-Flight Response Works*, Very Well Mind, August 2019, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-fight-or-flight-response-2795194>, accessed 1 December 2020.
3. William O. Ware Lodge of Research/Characteristics of An Ideal Lodge, Survey Results, Analysis, and Recommendations, Research Committee Report, John W. Bizzack, Dan M, Kemble, October 2019, 16., <https://williamowarelodgeofresearch.com>, accessed 25 November 2020.
4. *Ibid*, 17.