



## Chronic Anxiety

These notes are taken from the course notes for 'Understanding How to Help'. Click for further details of the [Understanding Yourself](#) courses.

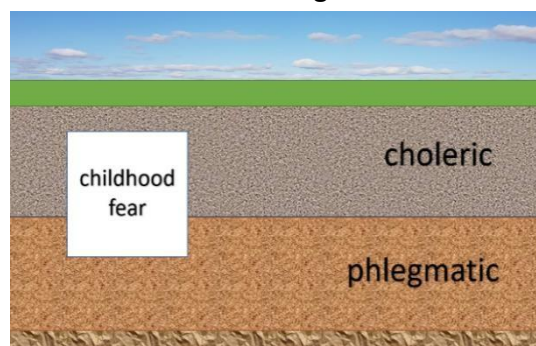
Understanding the [Phlegmatic](#) is the key to understanding anxiety – whether 'everyday anxiety' or chronic. We are not talking here about 'healthy anxiety'. You should be concerned if your child or a friend is balancing on the edge of a cliff! There is an anxiety that drives us to act and an anxiety that demotivates and demobilises. It is the latter that we are considering here.

### Why Phlegmatic?

He feels unsubstantial. This makes him vulnerable to fear, anxiety and guilt.

We are looking here at the Choleric Phlegmatic, but the principles also apply to a Sanguine Phlegmatic. There are numerous fear-producing situations that a Phlegmatic child can experience:

- the first day at school – will Mum be there to pick me up?
- heights
- phobias
- loud voices – shouting, anger, screaming
- uncontrolled emotion



If the child is unable to process his responses to these situations, then he only has one option – bury them and use his Choleric to make life work. The strength of the Choleric carries him forward, but the unprocessed emotions echo round deep within. The Choleric has to turn some of his energies into coping with these emotions and does so by becoming narrow, controlled and picky – trying to get everything right.

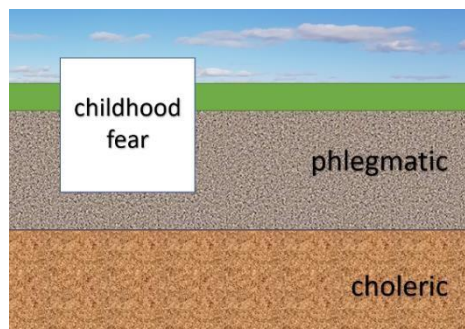
The Choleric pushes forward, but what is happening to that area of fear in the Phlegmatic? It travels beneath the surface, along the timeline of life. In order to cope with the everyday pressures of life, that empty space has to be kept sufficiently buried. Unfortunately, the same action that keeps the fear buried also keeps the Phlegmatic out of reach. This means that the normal fears and concerns of life may never be processed and add their weight to what is carried forward from childhood.



Put the Choleric Phlegmatic under sufficient pressure and that void of fear gets drawn nearer the surface and makes its presence felt. When the external pressures are significant and sustained the Choleric can no longer keep the anxiety in check. The crust breaks and he falls into the sinkhole.



What about the Phlegmatic Choleric? When the person is predominantly Phlegmatic, that area of fear can travel much nearer the surface, sometimes buried within the Phlegmatic but often breaking through and making its presence felt.



**Things to know as we prepare to help**

**1. No confusion**

Don't confuse Phlegmatic anxiety with Melancholic depression. There is a different feel and therefore, a different approach. It is difficult to quantify the difference but the path you take with a Phlegmatic is entirely different from the one you walk with a Melancholic simply because they are two very different people. That is why it is important to be clear as to which introvert you are helping right from the start.

**2. Push through**

You are on a journey to reach that lovely, inner tenderness. To do so may mean travelling through the minefield of defensiveness and self-pity and any other unrealities that he has allowed himself to fall into. You will only do that by being quietly and persistently stronger than his multiple defences. For your part, keep before you the goal of addressing his introvert. It is so easy, especially as this temperament can 'remove himself', to be drawn into discussing the extrovert with its various symptoms that have their roots in the malaise within the Phlegmatic.

**3. Answer the question**

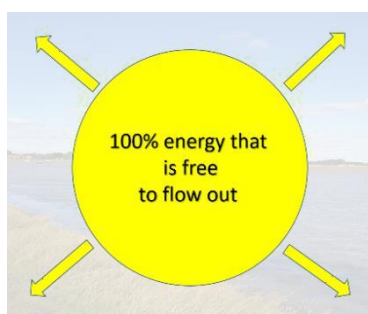
Remember the question that the Phlegmatic has from birth – is there anything solid about me? The problem is that if the Phlegmatic has been allowed not to engage then he will feel emotionally frail. Defensiveness, stubbornness, self-pity and victim mentality quickly become the norm.

Let's go back over these three 'things to know'.

**1. No confusion**

There are four helpful things to bear in mind when working with a Phlegmatic:

**a. Internal stance**



Imagine a circle that represents a Phlegmatic. The energy that goes with that temperament is present and available to be used to engage constructively. All the tenderness is there waiting to do its good work in the lives of others. Does he give that tenderness away or does he allow a sense of his vulnerability to take over? If the focus is on vulnerability, he will take some of his energy



and send reinforcements to the front line to defend himself against a possible invasion. The more he diverts his energy from self-giving to self-protecting, the more vulnerable he will feel. This becomes a downward slide



until he decides to reverse the process and become more aware of those around him, and their needs, and begins to give himself again.

The danger is in allowing the self-protection to become a deeply established pattern, and you may well find yourself helping those who have allowed themselves to live like this for many years.

### ***b. control***

Again, imagine the Phlegmatic as a circle. This time it is a small one representing someone who has shrunk his circle to try and feel solid and safe. However, around that circle is a much larger one representing the point at which he should engage with reality. An important key to understanding the Phlegmatic is that gap between the two circles.

It quickly becomes a breeding ground for fear, anxiety and guilt – and therefore the Phlegmatic will instinctively protect that area. To complete the illustration we can imagine a watchtower at the centre of the small circle, with a mounted machine-gun ready to mow down anyone who dares to cross from the outer circle to the centre circle. This is Phlegmatic control.



### ***c. tenderness***

We will build on the illustration of the two circles. At the heart of the Phlegmatic is a vulnerability but that vulnerability contains tenderness. If that tenderness couldn't be experienced, expressed and validated in a safe environment, then protections sets in. If he can't use his tenderness to connect with others, it feels, for him, as if the centre of who he is has been removed. So, he sets about trying to establish an alternative *raison d'être*. He will dig his heels in and become contrary. He will call black 'white' for the sake of it. Although wrong, it is important to remember that his tenderness is often at the heart of that 'cussedness.' The ability to be like that is there by nature but can be challenged, rather than reinforced, by nurture.

### ***d. guilt***

A Phlegmatic easily 'feels bad.' It is part of their vulnerability. Their challenge is to distinguish between true and false guilt. They can find themselves in the difficult position of feeling that something is wrong but not wanting to admit it because admitting it further diminishes them. They can experience a constant question over themselves because of that internal vulnerability, hence the ease with which they can turn something going wrong into guilt. They carry an internal processor that even turns pain into guilt. Feeling unsubstantial allows them to take the blame for anything going wrong or being wrong.

## **2. Push through**

We are committed to helping that Phlegmatic to reach that lovely, inner tenderness. We have already noted that this may well involve working our way through several hidden landmines. We will note a few here:



### ***a. defensiveness***

A Phlegmatic instinctively protects. It's there by nature. He will need to reach a point at which what the other person is feeling becomes more important than his felt need to protect.

### ***b. self-pity***

The tenderness and sense of vulnerability mean that the Phlegmatic becomes very aware of 'being hurt', 'how tough life is', and 'no-one understands me.' In short, they are the victim and it is high time everyone woke up to that and started being kinder! You will have to push through those positions by demonstrating that there is an alternative perspective while properly empathising with the genuine difficulties of life.

### ***c. fantasy***

This can take many forms, ranging from full-blown fantasy worlds to daydreaming or simply living in unreality. It will be important that he shares what goes on inside him so that it can be deconstructed, setting him free to engage with the much tougher real world.

### ***d. self-validation***

The more vulnerable and unsubstantial that you feel, the more you will try to construct something that gives you validity, even identity. If you feel fragile on the inside, you will drive a stake into the ground on the outside. The solidness of that metal stake contrasts with the candy floss you feel on the inside. It may take the form of having to be different, contrary or to be or do something special.

How do we push through the defensiveness, the internal stance, the control, the guilt, the self-pity, fantasy, and whatever form self-validation takes? We have to reach the tenderness and begin to answer the question, 'Am I solid?' At the heart of that question is value. Am I just candy floss that so quickly collapses into nothingness? Is there more to me than that?

## **How to Help**

You will have a number of aims, and God's Spirit will guide you as to the order in which you bring each of these to bear. Some of them will run simultaneously.

### **1. Create a context of trust**

That child needed to walk and talk with his Dad. Sadly, the lack of that is all too common, but that is part of what you are now offering as part of the family of God. The person has come for help so you are there to allow them a safe place in which they can express all that they were unable to up to that point in time. You are also providing the opportunity for present issues to be worked through.

It is your task to give the person the confidence to share what has remained hidden. He needs to know you are willing to embark on a journey with him and that you will, with God's help, do whatever it takes to bring him to that place of healing. It is no good trying to create an opportunity to talk if you are not walking alongside him on his journey.



It is a great advantage if you support the individual in the context of the family of God. A child growing up without mature relationships struggles to develop good perspectives. They not only needed parents they could talk to but teachers, good sibling relationships or grandparents. The introvert must do the talking and not just the extrovert.

Significant damage can be done simply by neglect. That is multiplied significantly where there is abuse. A high level of trust will need to be developed for that to be shared.

## **2. Validate past emotions**

It may involve going back into childhood and recalling the situations that caused fear:

- being alone in the house
- a troubled sibling
- distress in the family
- illness
- being let down by someone you trusted

If a child feels these things and there is no-one who connects with him, then he concludes that there must be something wrong with him. Those original fears echo round and multiply. Childish fear may seem irrelevant to us, but if left unresolved it lays open to be added to with other fears and exaggerated. It soon becomes a mess. Molehills become mountains.

The message you will give is that there is nothing wrong with him because he felt this. In fact, he felt everything because his feelings were functioning correctly. He may well have come to wrong conclusions about what he felt over the years, but the feelings themselves were valid.

## **3. Replace the wrong perspectives with God's truth**

We have seen that we need to answer the question, 'Am I solid?' 'Is there anything of value within me?' Steps One to Four emphasise God's view of us and the remarkable value that he puts on each of us. The 'Four r's' reminds us that this truth has to be applied to the heart of the introvert. The process by which those truths are brought to bear must be under the Lord's direction as we walk with him. Truth cannot be forced in! You will sense when it is right to challenge the negative view so that the door is opened to God's perspective.

## **4. Validate present emotions**

The process of validating present emotions is an important part of giving value and helping someone to change perspective. A person can feel something and quickly conclude, 'that's only me, that can't be right' – but they might be right and if they are then that understanding leads to an appreciation of their value. In other words, when our emotions are serving us well, they are a vital part of who we are and give us insight into our values and qualities. The more we properly use our emotions the more we believe our value for ourselves rather than because someone else tries to convince us.

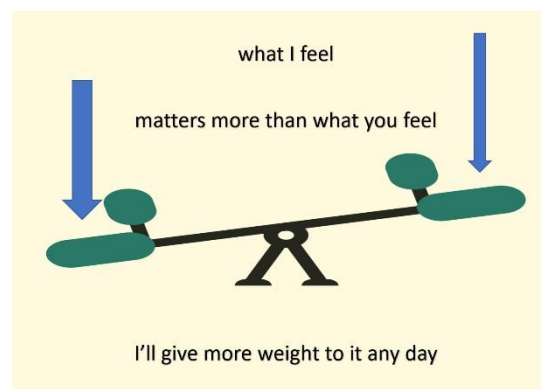
The Phlegmatic desires order, so validate that desire. Encourage him to express this in a healthy way and not by a 'tick-box' mentality or control. Creating order must not be an

attempt to compensate for a feeling of inner vulnerability. The Phlegmatic functions best when there is peace within and order without.

### 5. Deal with selfishness

As human beings, we are designed to function best when we are giving ourselves away in the service of others. The Phlegmatic's fear of being unsubstantial produces an instinctive defence designed to protect self-interest. That response can leave others feeling outside his circle. At some point in his healing process, he will have to recognise what it does to those who are shut out and what it feels like to be them in that situation.

Although he is aware of protecting his tenderness, the effect is cruel on others. It is only at the point at which he decides to genuinely put their feelings before his own that he begins to change for the better. Don't be afraid to describe to him what his self-protection does to you, with its power to devalue, or to others.



### 5. Build strength

There will come a point in this process at which the Phlegmatic will be faced with the choice of responding to his emotions or to the truth. We can bring understanding, but we cannot make decisions for anyone else. This is true of all the temperaments but especially for the Phlegmatic. Choice is his key. The handle is on the inside. We can encourage, urge and challenge but the person will come to that crossroads again and again and will have to decide for themselves to pursue the direction in which God points rather than the downward pull of powerful emotions. This is putting a backbone into the tenderness of the Phlegmatic. We can see it as sending reinforcements to the sweet spot at the centre of the tenderness rather than to the outer edges of the Phlegmatic circle where they would act as a defence. In other words, the tenderness is strengthened so it can be powerfully effective.

The theme of the proper use of the will runs throughout the previous courses. This is what steers the person away from destructive thoughts, allowing every thought to be taken captive 'to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:5). If a thought is not of the Spirit, then let it go. Initially, it may be that the extrovert takes the decision to not go back to old patterns of thought, or even specific things about which he feels bad or anxious. If he holds that position long enough, eventually the introvert will get the message because the truth surrounds it. You are there to encourage that positive perspective and to lift the person up when they fall and get into a muddle.

### 6. Don't be distracted by the extrovert

This has been left to the end because the extrovert does not have to be our focus. The Choleric might well have become narrow or picky in an attempt to 'get everything right' as a response to Phlegmatic anxiety. The Sanguine might have his lists that he can tick off or his activities or indulgences that are also an attempt to compensate for disturbance in the Phlegmatic but getting the introvert to a healthy place will deal with most of these issues.