

The Four Spaces

Steve Cuss
Capable Life

This journey began for me when I was 24 years of age. For my first job out of college, I served as a trauma and hospice chaplain at a Level 1 hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee. My first day on the job was the last day of my honeymoon. So my brand-new wife dropped me off at eight in the morning, gave me a kiss, and prayed for me. Then she said, "I'll see you tomorrow at noon," because my first day on the job was actually a 28-hour overnight shift.

I walked in and there were several new chaplains that day. I was the first one doing the marathon overnight shift, so they put four beepers on my belt. Kids, you can ask your parents at home later, but back before there were cell phones we used to wear beepers - or pagers - and I had four of them for the different parts of the hospital.

We were touring through the hospital as the new chaplains. We were doing orientation, meeting doctors, nurses, and patients, when one of the beepers went off. Maybe I'd been at work for about an hour. I turned to Randy, the supervisor, and said, "Now which one is the blue beeper?"

Randy said, "That's the code team. You need to get going."

"What do I do?" I asked. I'd never seen a dead body before; I'd never had any experience with grief. I just assumed they would tell me what to do.

Randy looked at me and said, "Well, we're all about to find out, aren't we?"

I looked at Randy thinking he was making fun of me — but he wasn't. I realized, *Oh, that's all he's going to tell me.* And I said, "Well, what if I make a mistake?"

He said, "This year, you're going to make hundreds and hundreds of mistakes."

That little pep talk was my entire orientation into a whole new world of chaplaincy. About three minutes later, I was in an intensive-care unit waiting lounge, with twelve screaming people. One lady was head-butting the wall. I walked in and she was just pounding her head against the wall in a rhythm. One person was throwing up into a trash can and then dry heaving. One guy was wildly swinging at the air with his fists, and all twelve of them were screaming at the top of their lungs. I had no idea what to do.

The doctors and nurses had left and it was just me and these people, and I was supposed to do something. Any time I don't know what to do I feel really stupid, and any time I feel really stupid I feel really exposed.

So there I was not knowing what to do, and I was noticing this anxiety showing up in me, not just from in me but also from behind me. The family, the twelve people, were in front of me. But behind me there were forty or fifty people waiting for their loved ones, and they were catching the anxiety from the family. And I was catching anxiety from *them*, because one of the things that's true about me is I take responsibility too much. I'm over-responsible. It's what's called *overfunctioning* — I tend to be more responsible than God asks me to be. I was feeling responsible for the experience of these people as well.

Right about that time, the nurse came barrelling in and she beckoned me out of the room. She was clearly very irritated with me, and she actually smacked her hands and told me off. “Come on, Chaplain, let’s get this family in to visit the dead body. I’ve got patients waiting, I’ve got to turn the sheets, I’ve got to get the bed ready. Let’s get on it!” She then turned on her heels and walked away.

Now, another thing that’s true about me is I’m a chronic people pleaser: any time I let someone down I get really anxious. So I don’t know what to do and I’m feeling stupid. I’m feeling responsible for the other people in the room, and I’ve disappointed someone. I’m now what’s clinically known as *flooded*. When you are clinically flooded you are no longer in reality, you are no longer able to see what the situation requires. You’re just acting out of your own reactivity.

So I went back into the waiting room — and I’m not proud of this — but I hustled this grieving family in to visit their dead mum two or three hours before they were ready.

Now, if we fast-forward that quick story just a month, which is how long it took me to be experienced, here’s what it would have looked like. I would have gotten the page, and I wouldn’t have known what to do. That feeling never went away. But rather than that feeling flooding me, I would have noticed it, I would have named it to God, and I would have died to it so it wouldn’t have me in its grip.

Rather than catching the anxiety of the people behind me, I would have put the anxiety back where it belongs. I would have called a meeting with those other families and said, “Hey everyone, I’m sure this is very uncomfortable. This would be a great time to go get a shower or a meal.”

By my doing that, they would have been responsible for themselves, and I would have carried the level of responsibility God was asking me to carry.

When the nurse had come barrelling in, rather than catching her anxiety, I would have done my job as a chaplain, which was to be a connected presence in the worst moments of people’s lives. I would’ve noticed *this lady is under a lot of pressure and my job is to help her*. I would have defined myself by saying, “Now, ma’am, I know you’re under pressure but I’m not going to bring this family in. They’re not ready yet.”

Now, maybe she would’ve been grateful for that moment of breath, maybe she would’ve been very angry at me, but either way, she would have been responsible for herself, and I could have walked into that room *connected, aware, and present*. That’s the difference between being managed by anxiety, tossed around by it, and managing it.

Now, obviously that’s a long deep journey but it all begins with noticing. That’s the thing about reactivity and anxiety: it shows up and it has you in its grip, and you don’t even know you have it.

The first thing we learn to notice in anxiety management is The Four Spaces of Anxiety:

1. The Space in Me
2. The Space Between Me and the Other
3. The Space inside the Other
4. The Space Between Others

These are the Four Spaces of Anxiety that you can begin noticing today.

1. The Space in Me

I've talked about that quite a bit. That's what's going on under the surface in ourselves. There is so much bubbling just under the surface that gets triggered and activated, and if we're not managing it, it floods us and it puts us in a false reality.

2. The Space Between Me and the Other

If you've had any kind of relationship of love — maybe a spouse or a partner, maybe a child, maybe you were a child once — you know what it's like to catch anxiety from each other. This second-space anxiety often becomes a pattern of behavior between you and the other person. Maybe you have young kids at home and you try to get them out the door to school on time. What you can do is notice the pattern, the predictable pattern, where you both end up playing the same role every morning. That's second space.

3. The Space inside the Other

The third space is the space inside the other person. That's any time your brain has crossed into someone else's brain. When that nurse was disappointed in me, when she left, my brain went with her. And I was thinking *Oh no! What is she thinking? What is she thinking of me? What is she telling other people?* — because I'm a people pleaser.

For some of you, you're not so much a people pleaser. Maybe people really irritate you, and it's not so much *What are they thinking?* For you it's like *WHAT were they thinking?!* You just find people frustrating. Or maybe you have a relationship with an addict, and you find yourself trying to worry your way to their sobriety. That's third-space anxiety.

4. The Space Between Others

Fourth-space anxiety is the space between others. That's what's going on in a group of people before you show up. Every one of us infects every space we walk into. Now, sometimes the easiest way to notice fourth-space anxiety isn't so much when you show up, but paying attention to when you're in a group and somebody else walks in. Maybe Jim walks in, and there's just this unspoken agreement that if Jim is having a bad day we're not allowed to have a good day. That's fourth-space anxiety, the way one person can infect a group.

The Space in Me, The Space Between Me and the Other, The Space inside the Other, and The Space Between Others. These are the four spaces where anxiety spreads. The good news is these are also the four spaces where God resides, and where we relate to God. If you can go from being managed by anxiety to managing it, your capacity to notice God in the moment goes through the roof.

This all begins with noticing anxiety. Where are you seeing anxiety work? This week or this month, you can pay attention to the Four Spaces of Anxiety and you can ask yourself three simple questions:

1. Where is the anxiety coming from?
2. Who's catching it?
3. How do I know I'm catching it or I'm spreading it?

Noticing anxiety all begins with first space. The temptation — we always feel this temptation — is to focus on other people. But the counter-intuitive move is to pay attention to yourself. The next time you're in a fight with a spouse, the next time you're trying to hustle a child out to

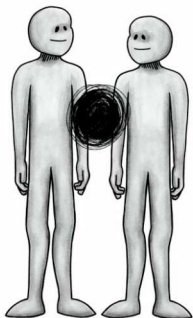
school, and the next time you're in a staff meeting and your boss is going on and on (and on), pay attention to the anxiety in you. Am I catching it? Am I spreading it? Noticing, noticing, noticing. That's where the anxiety-management journey begins, and I'll encourage you to do some active noticing of the Four Spaces, and particularly the space in you, this week.

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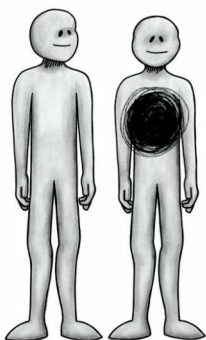




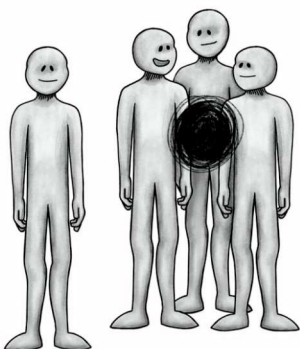
THE SPACE INSIDE YOU. What triggers you? What types of people irritate you? What assumptions do you have about yourself that you cannot live up to? 90% of all anxiety management is first paying attention to what is going on in you.



THE SPACE BETWEEN YOU AND THE OTHER is where you catch and spread anxiety, often in a conversation. Second space anxiety often turns into predictable recurring patterns. You each play a 'role' that is the same. If you've ever tried to get kids out the door for school in the morning, you've noticed predictable recurring patterns.



THE SPACE INSIDE THE OTHER is when your brain has crossed into someone else's brain. You are thinking about what someone else is thinking about. This is the one space that you cannot change. Only God can change a person. The difficult skill is to learn when you've crossed into third space, pause, and give that person to God. You cannot worry another person into change, and thinking about what they are thinking about cannot lead you to peace.



THE SPACE BETWEEN OTHERS is the space that already exists before you walk into a room OR the space that changes when another enters the room. Most of us infect every space we enter, so learning to be aware of the existing space and how a person changes it, can be powerful.

PRACTICE NOTICING

Noticing chronic anxiety is the simplest way of diffusing its spread. You can begin by noticing it on a television show or in your next team meeting. You can notice it in your family too, but that is harder to do. Pick a couple of events this week and walk into those events paying attention to the anxiety. Just by noticing you will be more immune to catching and spreading it.

THIS WEEK YOU CAN NOTICE

- **Yourself.** It is tempting to focus on others, but focus on reactivity in you. 90% of anxiety management is working on yourself.
- **The Four Spaces.** Where is the anxiety? Who is the primary spreader? Who is catching it? How do I know I've caught it?

FINALLY NOTICE GOD'S PRESENCE

Anxiety can be insidious. It makes you think it is all on your shoulders, it can numb you to God's presence.

Pause, breathe, connect to what is going on in you, name it to God, relax into God's presence.

"You can be a connected presence. Curious. Non-reactive. Keeping anxiety from spreading to others, sifting assumptions and false expectations. Connecting to self, others, and God. This is difficult and life-giving work."
-Steve Cuss

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