

THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS SERIES

ANXIETY

Calming the Fearful Heart



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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, when my friend Ellen and I were discussing the challenge of anxiety, she suddenly disclosed something intensely personal—*“I’ve never told anyone this. I can hardly believe it myself . . . but I’m deathly afraid of the dark.”*

“Oh, Ellen, how difficult! When was the first time you remember being afraid in the dark?”

Hesitantly, she answered, “I don’t know. Nothing comes to . . . Wait!” Suddenly, a memory emerges from long ago. She’s just six years old. One night while her parents are away, her three older siblings pull a prank on “Ellie.” In a small dark bedroom, they string invisible sturdy thread from one side to the other, repeatedly back and forth, then suspend her favorite doll from the middle of the ceiling.

They yell, “Hurry Ellie! Thumbelina’s been captured by evil fairies! You’re the only one who can save her!!” She rushes through the door as they rapidly flick the light on and off. The strobe effect makes the doll seem to float in mid-air. She lunges toward Thumbelina . . . gets caught in the unseen thread . . . caught like a fly in a web . . . ensnared, trapped, and terrified. She cries out loud for help . . . she’s abandoned and ignored . . . left sobbing in the darkness. No one comes to her rescue. No one.

Undeniably, our past can severely impact our present. I can think of numerous situations in my own life where painful memories, past abuse, and previous cruelty impacted me in the present. Regarding Ellen, I easily saw the connection between her terrifying memory and her present anxiety about being in the dark. Thankfully, no matter our past, the Lord can help us in the present and give us hope for the future.

Now decades after her past terror, I’m hearing about her present terror. *“And it happens every night when I walk into my apartment, or into my garage or even my own bathroom.”* I ask, “Driving home, when do you first feel anxiety about the darkness?” *“When I’m about a mile from home.”*

After listening to Ellen, I suggested she apply the Lord’s living Word to her situation. I shared Psalm 56:3, *“When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.”* I comment, “Notice this verse doesn’t say, ‘if I am afraid, but ‘when I am afraid.’ At times, both you and I *will* have anxiety and fear. That’s normal.”

“Every time you begin to feel fearful anxiety, say Psalm 56:3 out loud. Think about each word as you say it. Say it over and over, as many times as you need to until you feel your peace returning.” I call this “spiritual soaking.”

Two weeks later, I asked Ellen about her spiritual soaking project. She felt amazed at the results. “I can’t even say for sure when it began to happen—or how—but, little by little, my fear of the dark is fading. I’ve been saying Psalm 56:3 every time anxiety begins welling up inside me. At first, I felt a little silly, talking aloud when I’m alone in my apartment. But honestly, it’s amazing how saying that one scripture has had such an impact. The fear is losing its grip!”

Later I added, “Now I want you to take Deuteronomy 31:8 to heart, and personalize it, *‘The Lord himself goes before me and will be with me. He will never leave me nor forsake me. I will not be afraid, I will not be discouraged.’* Read it each morning, in the afternoon, and before bedtime. Immerse yourself in His truth to set you free.” Ellen has this scripture taped to her bathroom wall. That’s spiritual soaking!

What a blessing to see God’s powerful Word at work! We need to let the Lord’s truth be a part of our healing. Notice, the Bible says, *“He sent forth His word and healed them”* (Psalm 107:20).

Years before, I began spending time with “authentic Christians,” who knew the Bible. I had never read the Bible. Then I saw Philippians 4:6, *“Do not be anxious about anything.”* That seemed impractical. Then I heard a song five nights in a row. Each time I had tears:

“All your anxiety, all your care
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there
Never a burden He cannot bear
Never a friend like Jesus”

After I came into a life-changing relationship with Jesus, He gave me His mercy and His peace. It’s true, for all my anxiety, He gave me His peace.

Realize, when you’re feeling anxious, the Lord’s plan is to give you peace—His supernatural peace that passes *“all understanding.”* Yes, *“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:7). What a gift from God!

June Hunt
Founder, Hope For The Heart

ANXIETY

Calming the Fearful Heart

You see it in the little toddler as Mommy drops her off at day care . . . or in a student who's always silent, afraid to speak in class. You see it in the child who's waiting for a flu shot . . . or a patient who's waiting on test results. You see it in a speaker who hesitantly stands up to give a presentation . . . or in a fearful friend who repeatedly declines your invitation to see a movie or go to a party.

You *see* it in the shaky hands, tapping feet, tense shoulders, or endless pacing of a loved one. Or you *hear* it in the short breaths, constant questions, irritable tone, and irrational fears expressed by a neighbor.

You may *feel* it yourself—the pounding heart, the sweaty palms, the abdominal pain, the pressure in your chest . . . even hot flashes and cold chills. Then there's the mental impact of racing thoughts, trouble concentrating, wide-eyed insomnia, persistent nightmares, or fearful unknowns accompanied by the ongoing stress and strain in your mind . . . and in your body. What is it?

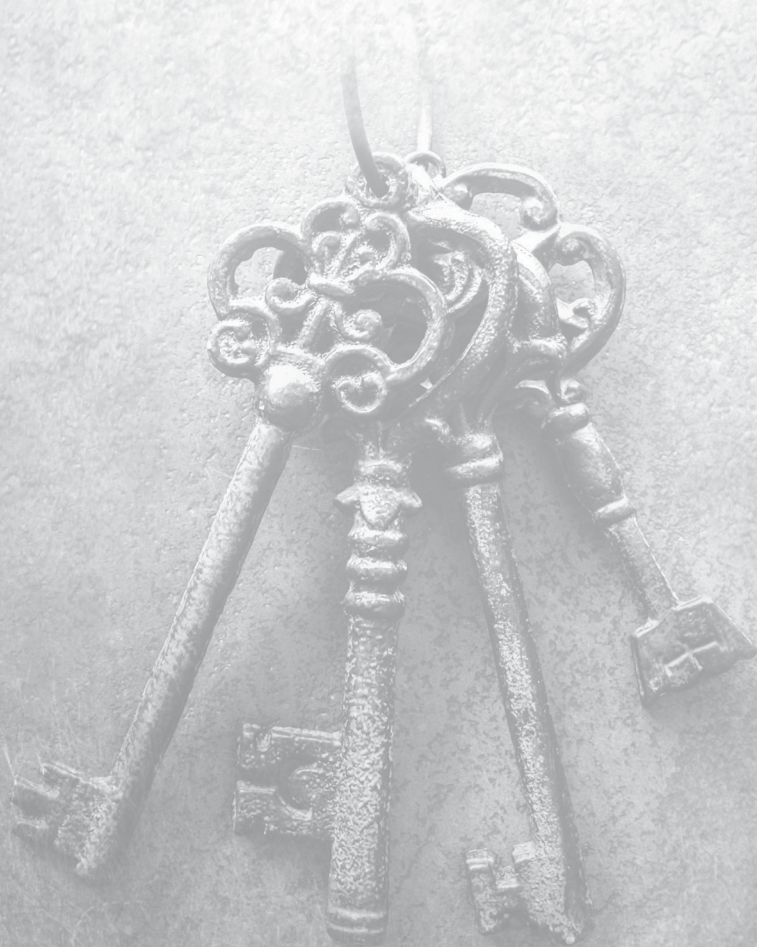
Anxiety!

For some, anxiety comes and goes as a temporary visitor that occupies only one small space of life. For others, anxiety makes itself right at home. It's a lifelong guest that settles into every area of your life, constantly disrupting your day and affecting your loved ones.

Whether anxiety is a temporary visitor or a lifelong lodger, you also have a constant companion—a faithful friend—who promises never to leave you. He is your strong Savior who walks beside you every day, helping and upholding you each step of the way. He is the Lord. And He says these words to calm your anxious heart:

*“Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*
(ISAIAH 41:10)

DEFINITIONS



*“Anxiety
inaccurately
judges reality.”*



We live life on the run. Under constant stress and unyielding strain, most people today live at too fast of a pace. Adrenaline has become our “high-octane” energy source of choice as we live increasingly hurried, hassled, and harried lives. The pace at which we live stretches us beyond our limits, and we pay a high price in the form of stress and anxiety.

In fact, did you know that anxiety is the number one mental-health problem among American women, and is second only to alcohol and drug abuse in men?¹ In the second decade of the 21st century, an estimated 264 million people worldwide experienced an anxiety disorder, making it the most prevalent mental health disorder around the globe.²

Witness anxiety in action: Today’s technology is often as frustrating as it is productive. Traditional values appear to have done a vanishing act, worldviews clash and compete, and a 24/7 news cycle constantly reminds us of the chaos, crisis, and calamity in our world. Is it any wonder that anxiety is on the rise on such a massive scale?

For many, anxiety is equally debilitating and destructive, beyond the reach of a peaceful balance. But anxiety is much more than an isolated response to the troubles of our time. Anxiety invades unexpectedly to grasp a person’s heart and mind, amplifying fear and imprisoning people in its frightening grip.

For those caught in this emotional snare, the Lord offers help and hope to calm anxious hearts:

*“Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the LORD.”*

(PSALM 31:24)

What Is Anxiety?

You're driving to work one day when the thought crosses your mind, *Did I close the garage door?* You begin to mentally retrace your steps, but don't recall with any degree of certainty that you actually *did* close it. You probably did, but what if you didn't? You feel the anxiety beginning to build as you imagine someone walking into your open house and stealing anything and everything of value to you. Just then, the car to your right starts to drift into your lane. You clutch the steering wheel tightly, lay on your horn, and hit your brakes to avoid being sideswiped. A surge of adrenaline pulses through your body putting you on high alert. Your heart is pounding, your mind is racing, your palms are sweating . . . but you're okay. You take a deep breath and heave a sigh of relief, "Whew—that was close!"

Anxiety is a normal part of life—it goes with being human and living in our high-stress world. Normal anxiety keeps us busy. It reminds us to pay our bills and pushes us to pursue success. In its pure form, anxiety can serve a useful purpose, but anxiety is only normal up to a point. As long as anxious feelings are short-lived and don't become excessive, they won't interfere with healthy living.

However, anxiety becomes destructive when it throws you into a state of distress and weighs you down sometimes to such a degree that you cannot function normally. The book of Proverbs accurately presents the weight of anxiety:

"Anxiety weighs down the heart."

(PROVERBS 12:25)

Anxiety is a feeling of nervous apprehension, usually over something imminent which has an *uncertain outcome*, affecting a person both *physically* and *psychologically*.³

Anxiety has its roots in the ancient Greek word *angh*:⁴

- The Greeks used this word to express the idea of being in anguish, being burdened or troubled.

- It was used primarily in reference to physical sensations such as tightness, constriction, or discomfort. *Angina* is a medical condition in which chest pains occur because of heart disease. The word *angina* comes from the word *angh*.⁵

Anxious in New Testament Greek is *merimnao*, meaning “to be anxious about, to have a distracting care.”⁶

- The same Greek word is used for *worry*, literally meaning “to have a divided mind.”
- *Merimna* means “to draw in different directions, to distract.” Thus the warning in Luke 21:34, “*Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with . . . the anxieties of life.*”

Anxiety stems from uncertainty and, therefore, is an uneasiness over an uncertain outcome.

- Hoping something will happen, but having no guarantee that it will . . . *or*
- Fearing something will happen, but having no assurance that it won’t.

Anxiety reflects an excessively negative presumption:

- Overestimating the probability of danger
- Overexaggerating the “terribleness” of something

Anxiety Disorders are intense, excessive feelings of helplessness and dread, even when the threat of danger is mild or nonexistent.

- Disorders impair “normal functioning,” or the normal living of life.
- Disorder sufferers organize their lives around attempts to avoid anxiety.

Based on the Bible, when the Israelites find themselves in captivity, they are described as having:

*“ . . . an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing,
and a despairing heart.”*
(DEUTERONOMY 28:65)

Fear and Anxiety

Question: “What distinguishes fear from anxiety?”

Answer: The words *fear* and *anxiety* can describe a range of emotions. In fact, there are more than 36 words in English that are either synonyms, variants, or aspects of fear and anxiety (i.e., scared, frightened, panicked, alarmed).⁷

While we often separate the concept of fear from anxiety based on the nature of the threat, in our daily lives fear and anxiety are often connected. (It’s nearly impossible to feel fear without also being anxious. As soon as we’re afraid of something, we begin to stress about what danger may lie ahead because of it.) Both fear and anxiety are typical responses to danger and thus interrelated.

What sets fear apart from anxiety:

- **Fear** is an emotional reaction to a clear and *present* danger. The threat is identifiable and specific in focus. For instance, if you are walking down the street and a big, growling dog suddenly breaks loose and comes racing toward you, that is a legitimate fear.
- **Anxiety** is less identifiable and often unpredictable. You have a *sense of danger* when experiencing anxiety. The threat is anticipated rather than a fact. Suppose you’ve been told there is an overpopulation of snakes in your neighborhood. One night as you’re taking a walk, you see something dark, slender, and curved—is it a stick or a snake? All of a sudden, the feeling of anxiety flushes through your body . . . because you’ve been warned about snakes.

To experience fear is to know you are in danger. To experience anxiety is to *feel anguish* about a future danger that could harm you.⁸

The Lord offers these comforting words to those overcome with fear or anxiety:

“I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, ‘Do not fear; I will help you.’”

(ISAIAH 41:13)

What Are Anxiety Disorders?

Brooke was a freshman when it happened for the first time. She walked into her English class and had a massive anxiety attack that left her speechless—literally. Brooke felt as if she was choking on her very words. In fact, the mere thought of talking out loud overwhelmed her.

Later, Brooke learned that her inability to speak in one or more social settings (at school, in public places) despite being able to speak comfortably in other surroundings (at home with family) was a childhood social communication anxiety disorder known as *selective mutism*—a condition that can prevent children from participating in class, asking for help when they need it, and even forming relationships with peers.

The National Institute of Mental Health explains anxiety disorders in this way:

Occasional anxiety is an expected part of life. You might feel anxious when faced with a problem at work, before taking a test, or before making an important decision. But anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worry or fear. For a person with an anxiety disorder, the anxiety does not go away and can get worse over time. The symptoms can interfere with daily activities such as job performance, school work, and relationships.⁹

Several types of anxiety disorders exist that disrupt daily routines (at home, work or school), including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and various phobia-related disorders. Anxiety evolves into a disorder when it becomes so intense that it takes over a person's thoughts, feelings and actions, preventing the anxiety-controlled person from living a normal life. Generally, those who experience an anxiety disorder feel isolated, alone, and different—like the only one in the world trapped by “this terrible thing.” Obviously, there is a reason. But the Bible says,

*“Do not be anxious about anything,
but in every situation, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

(PHILIPPIANS 4:6)

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Most Common Anxiety Disorders:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)—An ongoing state of anguish, concern, and heightened anxiety over everyday events for six months or more.¹⁰

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** is excessive angst about *what if*, *what might*, and *what could* happen with no discernible solution, no end, and no peace.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** sufferers anguish over everyday things every day. They know they fight the stress often but can't seem to gain control.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** is accompanied by at least three of the following symptoms:
 - ♦ Feeling tired for no reason
 - ♦ Having trouble falling or staying asleep
 - ♦ Startling easily
 - ♦ Unable to relax for any length of time

- ♦ Experiencing muscle tension and aches
- ♦ Trembling or twitching
- ♦ Being irritable
- ♦ Having difficulty concentrating

Panic Disorder—Sudden and repeated attacks of overwhelming fear with physical symptoms lasting several minutes or longer.¹¹

- **Panic Attacks** are extraordinary episodes of terror over nothing discernible. They become a “disorder” when the problem persists longer than a month.
- **Panic Disorders** sometimes run in families and often begin in the late teens or early adulthood.¹²
- **Panic Disorders** are characterized by these symptoms:
 - ♦ Feeling out of control
 - ♦ Fearing death or having a sense of impending doom
 - ♦ Pounding or racing heart, sweating, breathing problems, tingly or numb hands, chest pain
 - ♦ Fearing when the next panic attack will happen
 - ♦ Fearing going to places where prior panic attacks have occurred

Specific Phobias—Persistent, marked irrational fear of an object or situation that leads to the avoidance of that object or situation.¹³

- **Phobias** must be an excessive and incapacitating fear to be considered a phobia.
- **Phobias** can trigger a severe anxiety reaction or even a panic attack.
- **Specific Phobias** are varied and diverse. Some include:
 - ♦ Agoraphobia—fear of crowds, open area, or public spaces (literally, fear of the marketplace)
 - ♦ Aviophobia—fear of flying
 - ♦ Bacillophobia—fear of germs
 - ♦ Coulrophobia—fear of clowns
 - ♦ Cynophobia—fear of dogs
 - ♦ Nomophobia—fear of being without access to a working cell phone

Social Anxiety Disorder (also called *social phobia*)—An intense, persistent fear of being watched, judged, or humiliated by others.¹⁴

- **Social Anxiety Disorder** is a common type of anxiety disorder. Symptoms of this disorder must exist for at least six months and make it difficult for someone to do everyday tasks. Someone with this disorder is anxious or fearful in certain or all social situations (i.e., meeting new people, dating, eating or drinking in front of others, using a public restroom). The underlying fear driving this disorder is that of being judged or humiliated.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder** may reveal itself as *performance anxiety* when in social situations (i.e., giving a speech, singing, dancing or playing a musical instrument on stage).
- **Social Anxiety Disorder** presents with these signs and symptoms:
 - Blushing, sweating, trembling, feeling as if your mind is “going blank”
 - Feeling sick to your stomach
 - Making little eye contact or speaking with an overly soft voice
 - Being self-conscious in front of other people
 - Feeling embarrassed and awkward
 - Having difficulty talking to people you don’t know even when you wish you could

Anxiety can leave its victims feeling as unsettled as Job:

*“I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil.”
(JOB 3:26)*

Other Anxiety Disorders:

Separation Anxiety Disorder—Recurrent and excessive distress about the possibility of being away from home or a loved one, or away from someone to whom you are emotionally attached.¹⁵

- **Separation Anxiety** is a normal stage of development for infants and toddlers up to around age three, but it can become a disorder if the anxiety is intense or prolonged and interferes with school or other daily activities or includes panic attacks.

- **Separation Anxiety Disorder** can also occur in teenagers and adults and is diagnosed as such when exhibiting symptoms such as: having recurrent and significant difficulty leaving home or going to work; constantly and excessively worrying about losing a loved one to an illness or disaster; refusing to be away or sleep away from home without a loved one; frequently complaining of headaches, stomachaches or other physical ailments when separated from a loved one.

Selective Mutism Disorder—Occurs when someone is unable to speak in specific social situations in spite of having otherwise normal language skills.

- **Selective Mutism** generally occurs before the age of five and is frequently associated with extreme shyness, fear of social embarrassment, withdrawal, or clingy behavior.
- **Selective Mutism** is often diagnosed with other anxiety disorders.

Substance-induced Anxiety Disorder—Nervousness, restlessness, or panic caused by taking a drug or by stopping or withdrawing from a drug.¹⁶

- **Substance-induced Anxiety** generally becomes apparent during or within a month of taking a substance or medication known to cause anxiety, or withdrawing from it. Some of the inducing substances include: alcohol, amphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants, and phencyclidine (PCP).
- **Substance-induced Anxiety** is only diagnosed as such when the anxiety symptoms are above and beyond what would be expected during intoxication or withdrawal and are severe.

Anxiety Due to a Medical Condition—Nervousness, worry, or anxious thoughts due to a medical illness, diagnosis, or prognosis.

- **Anxiety** can be brought on by changes to the balance of chemicals in the brain. These chemicals affect thoughts, emotions, and actions. Without the right balance of these chemicals, there may be problems with the way someone thinks, feels, or acts. People with anxiety may have too little or too much of some of these chemicals.

- **Anxiety** can also come about when the balance of chemicals in the body are upset by medical or physiological problems such as: heart failure or abnormal heart rhythms, strokes, multiple sclerosis, hormone imbalances (pituitary, thyroid, adrenal gland), breathing problems (shallow breathing, pneumonia, chronic lung disease), head trauma, or tumors.

Those who have experienced the overwhelming terror of any one of these anxiety disorders understand the severity of pain expressed in the Bible by a godly man named Job:

*“Terrors overwhelm me; my dignity is
driven away as by the wind,
my safety vanishes like a cloud.”
(JOB 30:15)*

Childhood Anxiety Disorders

Question: “In what ways do children experience anxiety?”

Answer: Would it surprise you to know that the most common psychological problem of children today is anxiety, and that children with anxiety are often overlooked? Children can be anxious about many things: new situations, the well-being of their parents, being on time and prepared for school, abuse, being bullied, and social relationships. Anxious children often bother no one. Many sit quietly in class, do their work, rarely get in trouble, and faithfully obey their parents.

Yet, many times adult disorders carry over from undetected childhood disorders that have remained untreated. The problematic symptoms in these children are often mistakenly attributed to temperament or “growing pains”—symptoms that are expected to simply disappear with maturity. Fortunately, there are many children whose symptoms are recognized early by family members or school officials and they receive help in a timely manner.

Clearly, children not only need our attention, but they also need our prayers.

“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them.”

(MATTHEW 19:13)

Forms of Childhood Anxiety Disorders

Most common forms of childhood anxiety disorders:

Separation Anxiety Disorder—Excessive fear of being away from home or from those to whom the child is attached

Social Phobia—Excessive fear of social interactions

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder—Excessive recurrent thoughts, or ritualistic, repetitive, disruptive behavior

Generalized Anxiety Disorder—Excessive worry about a variety of things for an extended period of time

Other childhood disorders which can trigger anxious behaviors:

Autism Spectrum Disorder—Exhibits mild to severe deficits in social interaction and repetitive behavior

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—Exhibits a minimum of five inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity symptoms with onset occurring before age 12

Specific Learning Disorder—A developmental disorder in which a child has greater-than-average difficulty learning certain academic skills (often in math or reading).

Trauma and Stressor-related Disorders—Covers several diagnoses such as reactive attachment disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) specific to children age six and younger.

How important it is to gain the perspective of wisdom as an adult. Yet sadly, those with anxiety disorders as children are not always able to simply choose to set aside in adulthood the ways associated with these compelling patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting.

*“When I was a child, I talked like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
But when I became an adult,
I set aside childish ways.”*
(1 CORINTHIANS 13:11 NET)

What Is an Anxiety Attack?

By nature, you’re a bit of a worrier, but some days are worse than others. It’s Monday and you feel like you’ve already got too many irons in the fire. Work is stacked up just waiting to be done and on top of that, you wake up with a migraine. The kids are home from school due to an in-service day and your husband is out of town on business. You feel overwhelmed, out of control, all alone—like your carefully constructed house of cards is about to topple. You feel paralyzed—physically, mentally, emotionally. Your breathing becomes shallow. You can’t think. Anxiety has become your momentary captain.

This is an *anxiety attack*.

Someone experiencing an anxiety attack will gather strength from these words of the apostle Paul:

*“We are under all kinds of pressure,
but we are not crushed completely;
we are at a loss, but not at our wits’ end.”*
(2 CORINTHIANS 4:8 NTE)

What many people refer to as an “anxiety attack” isn’t something healthcare providers actually diagnose, and it has no official definition.¹⁷

An anxiety attack is a time-limited feeling of anxiousness that ramps up, producing feelings of being out of control, overwhelmed, and very much alone, but eventually settles down to a normal (for the person) level.

An anxiety attack means you are feeling more uneasiness than you can handle—you’re extremely stressed and “freaking out.”

An anxiety attack can produce symptoms similar to those of a panic attack, such as shallow breathing and trouble thinking clearly.

When anxiety attacks—when your strength is at low ebb and you’re feeling weary to the bone—remember this:

*“Those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint.”*
(ISAIAH 40:31 NLT)

Anxiety vs. Panic Attacks¹⁸

Question: “Is there a difference between an anxiety attack and a panic attack?”

Answer: Yes. Although there are differences, there are also some similarities.

Differences: Perhaps the most distinctive difference has to do with the suddenness of the feelings.

- Someone having an *anxiety attack* tends to maintain a low level of anxiety most of the time. The anxiousness builds but eventually settles down again to a normal level. With anxiety attacks you can’t just snap out of feeling the way you do.

- Someone who has a *panic attack* will generally feel fine before it happens and symptoms typically go away within 30 to 60 minutes. Symptoms are unprovoked and unpredictable, but they quickly end on their own, leaving the sufferer feeling exhausted and spent.

Similarities: Both *anxiety attacks* and *panic attacks* activate the fight, flight, or freeze reaction in the body where the sympathetic nervous system triggers the brain to release hormones that rev up the body.

- Two symptoms common to both anxiety and panic attacks are shallow breathing and trouble thinking. Both symptoms can be exacerbated by worrying about them.
- There is no real risk or actual danger in either scenario—it only feels like there is.

Treatment of these anxiety problems will likely differ, so check with a medical physician to determine both the cause and the cure for any attacks you may have as well as calling out to the Lord for help and healing.

*“LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.”*

(PSALM 30:2)

Hyperventilation

Question: “I have suffered several frightening panic attacks with hyperventilation. Is there anything I can do to stop them?”

Answer: Yes. If you experience panic attacks or hyperventilation, you should consult a physician or licensed mental health provider for professional medical advice. Those who suffer from severe anxiety often suffer from hyperventilation, which is shallow, rapid breathing

that reduces the carbon dioxide content of the blood, thus producing symptoms of light-headedness, dizziness, tingling of the extremities, heart palpitations, and feelings of faintness and respiratory distress. At the onset of rapid breathing (which serves as a warning signal), these symptoms can be stopped using any of the following techniques:

- **Learn breathing exercises** that help you relax and breathe from your diaphragm and abdomen, rather than from your chest wall.¹⁹
- **Learn to breathe through pursed lips** to eliminate carbon dioxide. This is done by puckering your lips as if you're blowing out a candle, then breathing out slowly through your lips.²⁰
- **Close your mouth**, close your right nostril, and breathe in through your left nostril. Alternate closing and breathing through each nostril until your breathing returns to normal.²¹
- **Practice deep abdominal breathing** by taking slow deep breaths and holding the air in your lungs for several seconds. Then slowly release the air. This stops the rapid breathing, increases the supply of oxygen to the brain and works as a natural tranquilizer. Practice this technique when you are not anxious in order to master it so you can use it to calm yourself when having an attack.
- **Practice relaxation techniques**, such as progressive muscle relaxation (see page 107) or Christian meditation (see page 132).
- **Exercise regularly** (walk, run, bicycle, etc.) This can help *prevent* hyperventilation.
- **In cases of severe anxiety** and frequent bouts of hyperventilation, always **seek medical attention**.

- **Put God’s Word to work in your life** by focusing your mind on Bible verses that remind you of His faithfulness to you. Take charge of your thinking by telling yourself the truth: God is with you and you are going to be okay; you can handle anything with the strength of the Lord.

Those experiencing a panic attack feel as though they will die. This is because their bodies are in a state of panic, pumping blood to muscles and lessening the flow to the brain. Therefore, knowing what to do at the onset of a panic attack has immense value. Likewise, *instructing* others about these practices and other techniques will help those who are suffering.

*“Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge.”*

(PROVERBS 23:12)

What Other Disorders Are Related to Anxiety?

Two mental health disorders related to anxiety but which no longer fall within the anxiety disorder spectrum of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5) are Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This change in DSM-5 (a resource medical and mental health professionals reference for diagnostic purposes) reflects increasing evidence that these two disorders have distinct, yet related, diagnostic validators. And while some overlap and even close relationships exist between anxiety disorders and OCD and PTSD, these disorders demand separate consideration.

It's estimated that six million people in the United States have OCD²² and about seven or eight out of every one hundred people will have PTSD at some point in their lives. (This is only a small percentage of those who actually have gone through some sort of trauma and struggle with the disorder.)²⁵

The Lord is attentive to the distress and suffering of those struggling with OCD or PTSD and He listens to their cries for help.

*"In my distress I cried out to the LORD;
yes, I cried to my God for help.
He heard me from his sanctuary;
my cry reached his ears."
(2 SAMUEL 22:7 NLT)*

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

A boy spends six hours a day washing his hands—and still doesn't believe they will ever be clean. A homemaker checks her stove hundreds of times during the day to make sure she's turned it off. And one woman, in an effort to ensure that her eyebrows are symmetrical, finally plucks out every hair. All of these people suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Everyone experiences intrusive, random, and strange thoughts from time to time, but most people are able to dismiss them from their conscious mind and move on. People with OCD cannot do this. After repeatedly failing to restrain their obsessive thoughts and resist their compulsive behaviors, many people with OCD choose to give in to them and may eventually even lose the *desire* to resist these impulses.

Those who give up fighting their obsessions and compulsions desperately need to experience the remedy of God's words spoken through the psalmist:

*"Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me."
(PSALM 50:15)*

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a common, chronic (long-lasting) disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) and behaviors (compulsions) that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over in response to the obsession.²⁴

- OCD sufferers try to hold obsessive thoughts at bay with compulsive rituals hoping to find temporary relief from the anxiety they feel.
- OCD sufferers use specific actions to mitigate, manage, or control their thoughts. The actions become imperative.

Obsessions are persistently intrusive thoughts, impulses, or images that bombard a person’s mind and are often dread-filled and not positive or uplifting.

- Obsessions can change in nature and severity and do not respond to logic.
- Obsessions can be triggered by physical objects, situations, smells, or something heard on television, radio, or in a conversation.

Compulsions are repetitive, purposeful, and intentional actions performed in response to an obsession. These compulsions are learned responses intended to reduce or prevent anxiety or discomfort associated with obsessions or urges.²⁵

- Compulsions are not realistically connected with what they are designed to prevent.
- Common compulsions include: excessive cleaning, counting, washing, avoiding, and checking.

The apostle Paul wrote of being *obsessed* with persecuting Christians prior to his life-changing encounter with Jesus.

*“Many a time I went from one synagogue
to another to have them punished,
and I tried to force them to blaspheme.
I was so obsessed with persecuting them that
I even hunted them down in foreign cities.”
(ACTS 26:11)*

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Seven-year-old Jillian and her 16-year-old sister Kaitlynn are walking from their car into the department store when an armed man comes out another door holding a female customer at gun point. The girls stop dead in their tracks terrified of what will happen next . . . and then the unthinkable occurs: The gunman shoots the woman who falls to the ground in a pool of blood. As the gunman flees from the crime scene, the girls run over to the woman hoping to help . . . but they're too late—she's already dead.

Imagine reliving this awful memory over and over again, each time as fresh and horrific as when it happened. This is the essence of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). With PTSD, the person's life is held hostage to the horror of a past traumatic event. PTSD sufferers stop living and start building a life intent on reducing the possibility of experiencing another trauma or to avoid having another flashback of the precipitating event.

Two truths PTSD sufferers need to know are: They are not alone, and there is hope. Our God is a God of hope as we're reminded by this New Testament passage:

*“May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*
(ROMANS 15:13)

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop after being exposed to a traumatic event that is beyond a typical stressor.²⁶

- **PTSD** can occur following any traumatic event (e.g., childhood sexual abuse, violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, combat, other forms of violence) in which a person comes to harm or believes harm will happen. It also can be caused by witnessing a traumatic event involving a stranger.

- **PTSD** is frequently associated with soldiers returning from war. While trauma actually occurs to about half of all U.S. adults at least once in their lives, most who experience trauma do not develop PTSD.
- **PTSD** sufferers often have persistent, frightening thoughts and memories of the event(s), causing them to startle easily, feel detached or numb, become aggressive, hostile, or even violent, or avoid situations that remind them of the trauma.
- **PTSD**, in severe forms of the disorder, can significantly impair a person’s ability to function at work, at home, and socially.

If you struggle with PTSD, there is wisdom in exploring and discovering the source of your pain, then sharing what you experienced with a trusted, mature friend or trained counselor. As Scripture reminds us, wisdom offers shelter to those who seek it.

*“Wisdom is a shelter . . . Wisdom
preserves those who have it.”*

(ECCLESIASTES 7:12)

Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Question: “What is the connection between stress, anxiety, and depression?”

Answer: Stress that goes on for too long or becomes chronic can lead to anxiety. Intense anxiety can impact brain (and body) chemistry, which in turn can lead to the onset of depression. Many people with anxiety also develop depression and vice versa.

Each of these mental health conditions manifest in different ways:

Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand.

- All different types of stress carry physical and mental health risks.

- A stressor can be a one-time or short-term occurrence, or it can be an occurrence that keeps happening over a long period of time.
- Not all stress is bad. Healthy stress can motivate people to prepare or to perform. It becomes unhealthy when the stress response goes beyond physical, mental, and emotional limits resulting in distress, danger, and destruction.
- Routine stress, called *eustress*, is probably the most difficult to notice. If this type of stress goes from being constant to acute, eventually it will cause the body to no longer get a clear signal to return to normal functioning. This can contribute to serious health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes, as well as mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

Anxiety is a reaction to stress and often comes from a place of fear, unease, and worry.

- While there is a definite overlap between the two, anxiety and stress have different origins. With stress, you know what's worrying you. With anxiety, you tend not to be aware of what is actually making you anxious.
- The terms anxiety and stress are often used interchangeably, but they're different experiences. Stress is associated with frustration and nervousness, whereas anxiety is more of an emotional reaction that *becomes* a problem.
- Anxiety and stressful situations can produce similar physical and mental symptoms such as stomach problems, muscle tension, rapid breathing, change in appetite, and trouble sleeping.
- Anxiety and stress that occur frequently or seem out of proportion to the stressor may be signs of an anxiety disorder and should be evaluated by a doctor.

Depression is a common but serious mood disorder that causes severe symptoms affecting how someone thinks, feels, and handles daily activities.²⁷

- Characteristically, someone struggling with depression generally lacks interest in enjoyable activities, experiences an increase or decrease in appetite, has low energy, trouble concentrating, and often feels worthless.
- To be diagnosed with depression, five or more symptoms must be present for at least two weeks.
- What distinguishes depression from anxiety is that a person who is depressed tends to move slowly and his or her reactions can seem flattened or dulled, whereas someone with anxiety is more likely to be keyed up and struggles to manage racing thoughts.
- Many people who develop depression have a history of an anxiety disorder earlier in life. No evidence proves one disorder causes the other, but there is clear evidence that many people suffer from both disorders.²⁸

A constant reminder we find throughout Scripture is that God is there to rescue those who are discouraged and have given up hope.

*“The LORD is there to rescue
all who are discouraged
and have given up hope.”*

(PSALM 34:18 CEV)

What Is God's Heart on Anxiety?

Anxiety inaccurately judges reality. It forgets the past and fears the future. It fails to remember how you've made it through past difficulties and focuses instead on potential threats in the future. Anxiety leaves you with a fight or flight response in the present, vigilantly preparing for possible outcomes or avoiding fearful situations altogether.

The Lord, however, sees all things clearly. He says, *"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please'"* (Isaiah 46:10). God has brought you through the past and holds your future in His hands. And in your present struggle with anxiety, He is with you. The Lord is at work in your life—your anxiety is not without purpose. God longs to be your refuge and help you walk through your fears and troubles.

*"God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble."*

(PSALM 46:1)

10 Biblical Truths When You Become Anxious

God wants you to remember that He is good and gracious—and compassionately cares about you.

"The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made" (PSALM 145:8–9).

God wants you to remember He is with you when you're fearful.

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (ISAIAH 41:10).

God wants you to pray and experience His peace when you're feeling anxious.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7).

God wants you to look to Him and His Word when you're filled with anxiety.

"When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy" (PSALM 94:19).

God wants you to align your thoughts with His truth when you feel anxious.

"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (PHILIPPIANS 4:8).

God wants you to trust Him when you're anxious—to have faith and not fear.

"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (PSALM 56:3).

God wants you to talk to Him about all that causes you to feel anxious.

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 PETER 5:7).

God wants you to talk to others about your fears and anxieties.

"Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory" (PROVERBS 11:14 NASB).

God wants you to take care of yourself physically and spiritually.

"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 TIMOTHY 4:8).

God wants you to encourage others who struggle with anxiety.

"Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up" (PROVERBS 12:25).

Overcoming Overwhelming Anxiety Rebecca Carrell's Story²⁹

God's grace saturates her life. She describes herself as a "joyful follower of Jesus," a loving wife and mother who co-hosts a morning talk show on a popular Christian radio broadcast in one of the largest cities in the United States. She's active in ministry, teaching Bible studies, singing in church, and on top of that, a student in seminary. Someone like her wouldn't struggle with anxiety, right?

Meet Rebecca Carrell. She battled anxiety since she was a teenager but wasn't diagnosed until age 30. Before learning she had generalized anxiety, she thinks anxiety is primarily a spiritual problem. Growing up in her church, anxiety isn't discussed. In implicit ways, she receives the message: if you're fearful, worried, or anxious, you just need to pray more, read Scripture more, and trust God more.

In her words, "Somewhere along the way, I had bought into the 'if you had more faith' narrative that assumed depression and anxiety were always a spiritual condition born out of doubt. Medicine was God's goodness . . . to the physically ill, but mental struggles showed faithlessness, spinelessness, and doubt."³⁰

During one difficult battle, her anxiety feels all-consuming, "I didn't care about my children. I didn't care about my husband. I didn't care about my job . . . nor did I care about the Bible study I led or the worship team I sang [in] at church. I just wanted the anxiety to stop."³¹

Though the anxiety feels overwhelming, God's grace isn't beyond reach. The Lord's care is evident as her husband consoles her as she cries during this difficult moment. His grace is further evident as she feels led to meet with a psychiatrist, who prescribes medication.

She finds relief through this medication, but about three years later, Rebecca tries to wean herself off of it—however, her plan doesn't work. One December day, she begins having shortness of breath. She tries to breathe deeply and “force” herself to relax but to no avail. With her heart racing, and her palms sweating, she scolds herself, saying “Stop it!” . . . but the anxiety doesn't subside. She attempts to smell a calming fragrance, but likewise, that doesn't help.

Eventually, she calls her mom, who races over to be with her within 20 minutes. Her mother, just like her husband, consoles her, hugging her, saying, “It's okay. I'm right here.” Again, God's grace—this time through the comfort of her mother—met her anxiety. The Lord says, “*As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you*” (Isaiah 66:13).

A few weeks later, anxiety builds up again with her mind racing, so she goes outside for a run to work it off. After a lengthy nine-mile run, she feels relaxed and relieved. However, not even two hours pass before she begins to feel anxiety coming back. As Rebecca reports, “the nervousness coiled itself around my chest and squeezed.”³²

Finally, Rebecca receives an epiphany. Realizing a run in the sun releases hormones that improve mood and counteract stress (dopamine and serotonin), Rebecca recognizes her anxiety has a biochemical component to it. So, she schedules an appointment with her doctor, who helps make sense of her anxiety. Their conversation becomes eye-opening . . .

“What would you do if one of your children didn't make enough insulin?” the doctor asked.

“I would make them take insulin shots.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because when the body doesn’t make enough of something, you need external help.”

The doctor explains, “Insulin is a hormone. So is adrenaline. So is cortisol. Your brain makes too much.” She then shows Rebecca a model of a brain, pointing to an area, saying, “This is where the brain makes serotonin and dopamine. These are neurochemicals that counteract your stress hormones. Your brain does not make enough serotonin or dopamine . . . Rebecca, you cannot help yourself. You did not bring this on yourself. Unless you fix your serotonin levels, you will continue to struggle.”³³

Upon hearing this, Rebecca feels relief . . . followed by tears. Understanding the complex physical components of anxiety leads her to get back on medication to replace the brain chemicals she’s missing. Rebecca has been managing her anxiety now for years with the help of this targeted medication. She explains,

I look at anxiety as a clinical disorder, one that really should be diagnosed by a psychiatrist. . . . I struggle with the clinical kind of anxiety. It’s caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain, and so that means no matter how perfect and happy and shiny the circumstances in my life are—because I don’t make enough serotonin or dopamine and because I do make an abundance of adrenaline—I can’t calm down. I can’t stop the anxiety. So I see a psychiatrist. I take medication for it. And that really, really helps me manage the anxiety.³⁴

What clarity.

By God’s grace, Rebecca also shares her struggles with others. The help she receives from doctors and medicine doesn’t diminish the grace of God, but are further evidences of His grace in her life. She tells people,

If someone says, “Well if you have enough faith, and if you pray more . . . the Lord will heal you.” I always gently say, “Well the Lord has been very gracious in healing me. He led me to a wonderful psychiatrist.” And through the common grace of good medicine, I am able to function. . . . So God is very much in the business of healing. Just because it’s through a doctor and medicine does not make it any less remarkable.³⁵

Rebecca’s story shows the importance of managing anxiety from multiple angles. Physically, she exercises, verbally she consults with doctors, and medically she takes medicine. (Medication may not be for everyone who struggles with anxiety, but discussing it with a doctor is important.)

From a mental, emotional, and spiritual standpoint—mentally, Rebecca stresses the importance of journaling our honest thoughts and filling our minds with the truth of God’s Word by reading it and memorizing it. Emotionally, these practices help process thoughts and emotions by meeting them with God’s truth. Spiritually, Rebecca prays regularly, shares her struggles with others, gives and receives comfort and encouragement, and stays active serving in ministry. All of these practices are God’s grace to help her (and help anyone) manage anxiety and move forward with hope.

Biblically, Rebecca stresses the importance of pointing people to the character of God when you are anxious. Passages such as Exodus 34:6 reveal God’s character, “*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*”

Rebecca emphasizes that the Lord is compassionate and gracious. He is not angry when we feel anxious. Instead, God looks at us with compassion as He extends His grace to us. We can freely come to Him with whatever we feel because He is

faithful to love us and will faithfully provide for our future. We can find rest and peace in His loving arms. Rebecca confidently assures us, “We can trust that everything we worry about, if or when it happens, the grace of God will meet you there.”³⁶

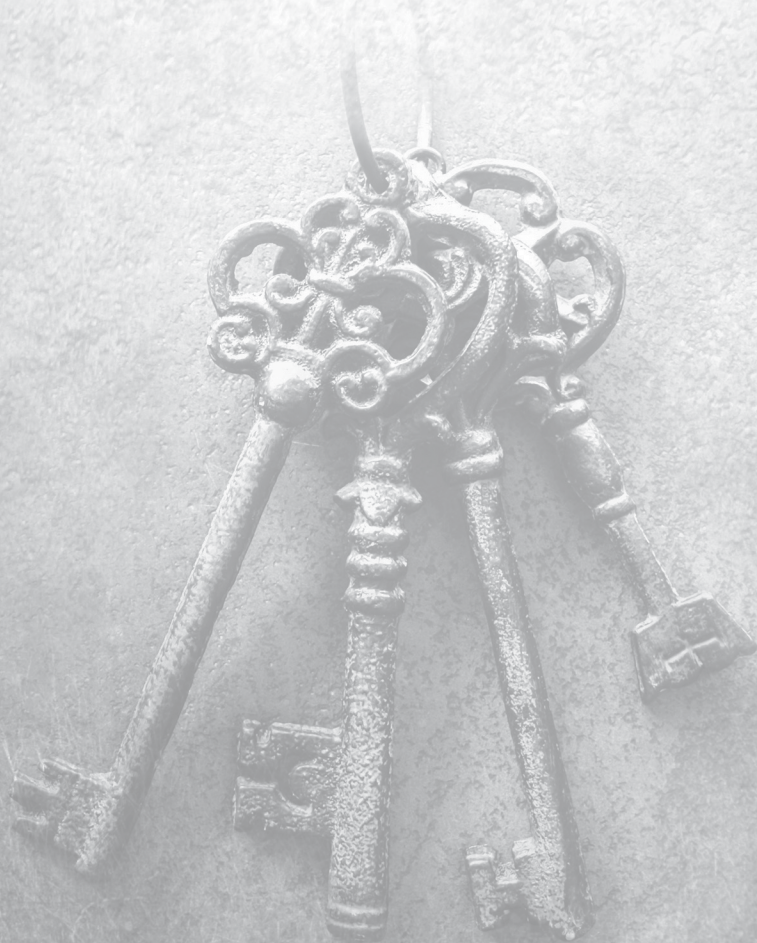
*“The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*

*The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.”*

(PSALM 145:8–9)



CHARACTERISTICS



“Some personality traits are inherently more prone to anxiety and some anxiety issues influence personalities.”



Picture an intelligent person, someone who exhibits kindness and compassion. Known to be extremely responsible, this person does a good job *well* (might even be a bit of a perfectionist).

Now imagine the same person in what most people might consider a mildly fearful situation. You see an individual who remains hypervigilant yet is easily startled. Making a decision on what to do next seems like an insurmountable obstacle. Negative thoughts intrude, then panic and paralysis take over. On the outside, this person who appears calm, cool, and collected is strenuously struggling with anxiety within.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of such internal turmoil. . . .

*“My mind reels and my heart races.
I longed for evening to come,
but now I am terrified of the dark.”*
(ISAIAH 21:4 NLT)

But these words in Scripture reassure . . .

*“Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him,
for he shields him all day long,
and the one the LORD loves rests
between his shoulders.”*
(DEUTERONOMY 33:12)

What Are Common Characteristics of Anxiety?³⁷

Anxiety shows up unexpectedly, uninvited, and unannounced. It presses on your chest making it hard to breathe. Anxiety steals your sleep, stifles your joy, and preys on your peace.

Few people want to admit they struggle with anxiety. Many dedicated and conscientious people who appear to “have it all together” discover they, too, are susceptible to becoming overworked and overwhelmed. When adrenaline infuses the body, the surge of energy can seem productive, but that same exhilaration that serves to fuel a “fight or flight” (or sometimes “freeze”) response in an emergency can also mask signs of overstress. In such cases, a seemingly “out of nowhere” panic attack could be a warning that anxiety is building and needs to be addressed.

The Bible recounts David’s plea for relief from distress, praying for joy, peace, and safety. . . .

*“Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer. . . .
Fill my heart with joy . . .
In peace I will lie down and sleep
for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.”
(PSALM 4:1, 7–8)*

Common Characteristics of Anxiety

Review these lists of symptoms. If you experience at least three symptoms in each category, anxiety might be developing into a problem, especially if occurring frequently. And if you are experiencing more than three symptoms from each category, consult a physician without delay.

Behavioral Symptoms

If you struggle with anxiety, these symptoms can alert you and others of the issue:

- Decision making impaired
- Irritability
- Fidgety

- Jumpy/on edge
- Heavy sighs
- Overly talkative
- Hyperalert
- Quivering voice
- Hyperventilation/dizziness/fainting
- Sleep difficulties

Cognitive Symptoms

If you struggle with anxiety, you can often think to yourself:

- “I can’t go on like this.”
- “I must be going crazy.”
- “I’ve got to escape and get out of here.”
- “I’m all alone and I can’t make it without help.”
- “I might make a fool of myself!”
- “I can’t go out because I’ll lose control.”
- “I must be having a heart attack.”
- “People are always watching me.”
- “I feel like I’m going to faint.”
- “I can’t remember things and that scares me.”

Emotional Symptoms

If you struggle with anxiety and experience emotional symptoms, you might think:

- “I feel consumed with fear.”
- “I feel isolated from others.”
- “I feel so uneasy.”
- “I feel rejected.”
- “I feel alone—and lonely.”

- “I feel deeply depressed.”
- “I feel embarrassed.”
- “I feel I’ve lost control.”
- “I’m angry and want to scream.”
- “I’m terrified something bad will happen.”

Physical Symptoms

If you struggle with anxiety, you can experience various physical symptoms:

- Abdominal pain, diarrhea or nausea
- Impaired concentration
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Memory disturbance
- Clammy hands
- Muscle tension
- Excessive perspiration
- Rapid heartbeat
- Headaches
- Ulcers

Those who experience these symptoms to the extreme can understand the words of Job:

“When I think about this, I am terrified.”

(JOB 21:6)

What Is the Continuum of Anxiety?

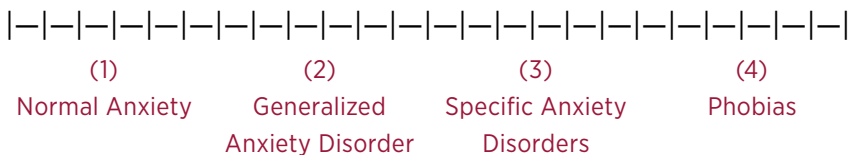
Some small measure of anxiety is normal—and can even be considered beneficial. Such anxiety registers as *concern*, which works toward finding a solution to the concern. On the contrary, increased frequent anxiety can become intrusive, and overwhelming anxiety can be detrimental. Much like running on a hamster wheel, energy is expended but you don't go anywhere.

Of course, we can experience high levels of anxiety when we perceive the situation we're in to be precarious. In fact, many people find themselves walking the tightrope from tension to terror . . . from unrest to extreme fear.

And when we find ourselves walking that tense tightrope, if we turn our focus from our fears to the Lord, we move toward walking in the Spirit . . . walking with peace and calm with Him. We can then say with assurance . . .

*“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life.
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.”*
(PSALM 138:7)

Anxiety Continuum



Anxiety ranges from normally mild and can increase to moderate, and from severe to severely debilitating. Depending on the type of anxiety experienced, it can stay at a manageable level or reach an intensity so tremendous, it interferes with daily life and makes living moment-to-moment a struggle.

We all experience times of anxiety—times of tension—but not all of us experience it in the same way, or for the same reason, or to the same degree. It can be a friend or foe. Typically, we want to avoid it. However, anxiety is not to be feared, but to be understood and managed as you trust in the Lord. To the trouble-hearted, Jesus said . . .

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled.
You believe in God; believe also in me.”*
(JOHN 14:1)

People who experience only a small measure of anxiety could ignore feelings of apprehension or even avoid a situation that makes them uncomfortable. Another who experiences a stronger sense of anxiety might address the situation causing angst, yet resent being in that position and fear dealing with a similar situation in the future.³⁸

Normal Anxiety—normal anxiety can be healthy and helpful when . . .

- It motivates and leads to increased efficiency.
- It forces you out of your “comfort zone.”
- It helps you avoid dangerous situations.
- It causes you to live dependently on the Lord.

Notice that the apostle Paul shared these words with the church in Philippi, whose concern for Epaphroditus caused Paul some measure of anxiety:

*“When you see him again you may be
glad and I may have less anxiety.”*
(PHILIPPIANS 2:28)

Mild to moderate anxiety—becomes limiting, impedes daily routines, and begins to interfere with daily living when . . .

- It makes concentration difficult.
- It causes forgetfulness.
- It hinders performance.
- It blocks communication with others.

Notice that Solomon—known as the wisest man on earth—said,

“Banish anxiety from your heart.”

(ECCLESIASTES 11:10)

A third example of more intense anxiety on the continuum is when a person becomes emotionally stuck, unable to cope or deal with a past or present problem or move forward into the future with confidence rather than fear.³⁹

Intense anxiety—abnormal fearful obsession is more profound and problematic when . . .

- It becomes a severe preoccupation with your fears.
- It requires tremendous effort to avoid triggers.
- It impacts your physical health to an alarming degree.
- It harms your relationships in many areas—professionally and personally.

Notice that the psalmist, who put these words to music, turned his focus to the Lord when feeling anxious. . . .

*“When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.”*

(PSALM 94:19)

Types of Anxiety⁴⁰

Anxiety can paralyze or mobilize depending on its frequency, its intensity, and how you respond to it.

Specific fear or anxiety can sometimes be avoided, such as a fear of specific animals or fear of driving.

Chronic, yet vague, awareness of anxiety and fear can be experienced by discomfort.

Out-of-the-blue anxiety comes on suddenly, without warning, and can quickly become overwhelming.

Incessant internal anxiety, described as negative self-talk where recurring images or an inner voice monologue predicts seemingly inevitable gloom and doom, assesses the worst possible outcome in virtually any situation.

All-encompassing fear and anxiety expands to impact essentially all aspects of life to the point a sufferer might not leave home to shop, visit a friend, or go to a doctor.

Levels of Anxiety

Tension: Unrest and stress resulting from being stretched emotionally, physically, or mentally

Concern: An interested or sometimes troubled state of mind

Unease: Emotionally uncomfortable

Caution: A disquieted state of mixed uncertainty

Fretfulness: Emotional strain that eats away at you

Worry: Mental distress or agitation

Apprehension: Overly cautious

Distress: Great mental strain and stress

Dread: Extreme unease and great fear of a disagreeable prospect

Anguish: Extreme pain, distress, or anxiety

Fright: Fear amplified by sudden danger

Alarm: Sudden sharp apprehension and fear of imminent danger

Paranoia: Delusions of persecution (persecution complex) or irrational suspicion and distrust

Panic: Sudden attack of overpowering fright

Terror: State of intense, extreme fear and doom

Those on the extreme end of enduring anxiety feel no sense of safety. Instead, they feel the frightening terror of this verse:

*“You will live in constant suspense,
 filled with dread both night and day,
 never sure of your life.
 In the morning you will say,
 ‘If only it were evening!’
 and in the evening,
 ‘If only it were morning!’
 —because of the terror that will fill your
 hearts and the sights that your eyes will see.”*
 (DEUTERONOMY 28:66–67)

Worry and Anxiety

Question: “What is the difference between worry and anxiety?”

Answer: People often use the words *worry* and *anxiety* interchangeably. However, there are key differences between the two:

Worry is typically understood to be a *mental* process—ruminating on what-if scenarios that may or may not come to fruition in the future. It is often anticipating an outcome, attempting to solve a problem or avoiding a deeper issue.

- Worry is not an emotion or a feeling—like joy, anger, or love. However, worry can reveal hidden fear.
- Although worry is not an emotion, it can lead to feeling anxious.

Anxiety is a present physiological feeling, usually an emotional response to a current or possible future threat (real or perceived).

- Anxiety becomes problematic when it is excessive or persistent (with individual episodes extending six months or more), known as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).⁴¹

- Excessive, obsessive worry can *lead* to anxiety. Likewise, stress can lead to worry or anxiety. Anxiety can also make an appearance all on its own.

Differences between Worry and Anxiety⁴²

Worry: Experienced through thoughts in the mind

- **Anxiety:** Experienced throughout the body

Worry: Specific object of worry

- **Anxiety:** Can be specific, but often is not

Worry: Most often is expressed verbally in the mind (thoughts)

- **Anxiety:** More emotional (images); felt throughout the body

Worry: Focused on linear problem-solving (in search of strategies to find a solution)

- **Anxiety:** Focus is more cyclical (like being on a hamster wheel)

Worry: Generally causes mild emotional distress

- **Anxiety:** Can create severe emotional distress

Worry: Often related to more realistic concerns

- **Anxiety:** Often based on unlikely occurrences

Worry: Can usually be controllable

- **Anxiety:** More difficult to control

Worry: Can be alleviated and dismissed once an issue is resolved

- **Anxiety:** Can linger for long periods of time and progress into other issues

Worry: Rarely interferes with daily living

- **Anxiety:** Can disrupt personal and professional function

Worry: Usually considered a “normal” psychological state
– **Anxiety:** Can be considered a disorder requiring treatment depending on intensity and duration

Like David, we can implore God,

*“Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.”*

(PSALM 25:5)

What Are Some Anxiety-Provoking Personality Traits?

People who struggle with anxiety often exhibit similar personality traits. Some of these traits would be considered admirable, while others can prove to be difficult for those with anxiety as well as those around them.

Some personality traits are inherently more prone to anxiety and some anxiety issues influence personalities. Certain components of anxiety could have a hereditary component while others possibly develop by incidental experiences. Children who grow up in homes where anxiety is prevalent could grow up to be anxious themselves, learning by example. So which comes first: the “chicken” of personality or the “egg” of anxiety? In the end, the chronology may not matter significantly in light of the overlap of people with anxieties presenting similar personality traits.

In either case, whether anxiety is related to nurture or nature, the Lord offers help and hope.

*“In my distress I called to the LORD;
I called out to my God.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came to his ears.”*

(2 SAMUEL 22:7)

Personality Traits⁴³

Perfectionism (excessive need to perform; the fear of failure)

- Holds unrealistically high expectations
- Reveals a tendency toward excessively high standards—especially for oneself
- Overly critical focusing on whatever is wrong and has difficulty appreciating what is right
- Often reverts to “should/must” thinking, “all-or-nothing” thinking, and overgeneralization

Excessive need for approval (the fear of rejection)

- Overly concerned with the opinions of others
- Feels flawed or unworthy
- Focuses on pleasing people
- Views criticism as confirmation of personal flaws and failures

Excessive need for control

- Unable to relax
- Feels safer when in control
- Difficulty relinquishing control
- Ties in to perfectionistic patterns

Ignores signs of stress and burnout

- Pushes harder and harder and often overdoes
- Strives to do more with less help for longer and longer periods of time

- Continues to keep pressing on despite signs of stress and strain
- Suffers from fatigue, headaches, nervous stomach, muscle tension, cold hands

The Bible cautions against taking on burdens which aren't ours to bear.

“Each one should carry their own load.”

(GALATIANS 6:5)

What Are Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

Severe physical symptoms accompany and readily identify a panic attack. Such attacks seem to come from out of the blue—with no warning—to rob their victims' peace of mind. During such times, it seems nothing can be done to ward off the horrific attack, but God alone is sufficient for the sufferer.

*“LORD, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished
you have done for us.”*

(ISAIAH 26:12)

A **panic attack** is characterized by at least four or more of these physical symptoms:

- Palpitations, pounding heart, accelerated heartbeat, sweating, or shaking
- Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering or a feeling of choking
- Nausea, abdominal distress, or chest pain
- Feeling dizzy, light-headed, “tingly,” chilled, numb, or faint

A **panic attack** is marked by these conditions:

- Occurs suddenly without warning and without any apparent way to stop it
- Produces a level of fear out of proportion to the present situation; in fact, it may be totally unrelated
- Passes in a few minutes (usually ten minutes or less)—the body cannot sustain the “fight or flight” response for much longer than that amount of time
- May repeatedly occur for hours, even when the initial stimulus is not present

Those who endure these attacks may understandably relate to the experience of the Israelites. . . .

*“As for those who are left,
I will make their hearts so fearful
in the lands of their enemies that the sound
of a windblown leaf will put them to flight.
They will run as though fleeing
from the sword, and they will fall,
even though no one is pursuing them.
They will stumble over one another
as though fleeing from the sword,
even though no one is pursuing them.”*
(LEVITICUS 26:36–37)

What Is the Personal Anxiety Inventory Checklist?

Most people prefer to avoid things that are unpleasant. We can choose to physically avoid what we find disturbing or uncomfortable. We can also choose to avoid thinking about issues and situations that cause us distress and unease. Avoidance takes many forms, so it can be simple to dismiss. But when does it become a problem leading to personal anxiety?

At times we need to directly confront those things in our lives which cause us discomfort. Perhaps the Lord wants to lead us into deeper maturity. When we walk the path the Lord has set before us, we need not fear, for He is with us. . . .

*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*
(PSALM 23:4)

Personal Anxiety Inventory Checklist⁴⁴

Assess the following list to determine if any of these trigger anxiety in you. Notice not only those that lead specifically to anxiety, but also those you tend to avoid. Place a check mark (✓) beside those that cause you anxiety and underline those you specifically try to avoid. Anxiety can be well hidden, but examining and addressing the elements that make you feel anxious is a first step in overcoming anxiety.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger of others | <input type="checkbox"/> Appearing nervous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being in charge | <input type="checkbox"/> Cats |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Closed places | <input type="checkbox"/> Confronting people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Criticism | <input type="checkbox"/> Crowds |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dead bodies | <input type="checkbox"/> Dental visits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dirt | <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproval from others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doctor visits | <input type="checkbox"/> Dogs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Driving automobiles | <input type="checkbox"/> Elevators |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Failure | <input type="checkbox"/> Fainting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fire | <input type="checkbox"/> Flying |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart skipping a beat | <input type="checkbox"/> Heights |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitals | <input type="checkbox"/> Injections |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of control | <input type="checkbox"/> Lovemaking with spouse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting new people | <input type="checkbox"/> Mice |

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mistakes | <input type="checkbox"/> Money |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Open spaces | <input type="checkbox"/> Paying bills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Rejection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sharp instruments | <input type="checkbox"/> Sight of blood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Snakes | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking on the phone | <input type="checkbox"/> Tests |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thunderstorms | <input type="checkbox"/> Water |

What Are Negative Effects and Reactions to Anxiety?

Some people fear even the prospect of becoming anxious and others are certain that experiencing a panic attack will be the end of them. However, for the vast majority of people, anxiety in itself isn't likely to lead to chronic, severe illness. Dealing with stress, tension, and anxiety is a common condition and normal for healthy people to handle. In fact, a life completely void of any and all stress or tension would soon become dull.

However, the body, soul, and spirit cannot withstand extended periods of virtually uninterrupted anxiety without suffering adverse effects and consequences—repercussions which find expression in negative reactions.

Nor can a person ignore the most commonly occurring consequence—also often a cause of anxiety—*avoidance*. This becomes a perpetuating problem. In most cases of anxiety, some type of stressor is avoided—whatever causes fear or distress. Then, being anxious leads to more anxiety and it becomes a downward spiral of despair.

God's Word addresses the danger of avoidance but also assures security for those who rest in Him.

*“The complacency of fools destroys them;
but whoever listens to me will dwell
secure and will be at ease,
without dread of disaster.”*

(PROVERBS 1:32–33 ESV)

Negative Reactions to Long-Term Anxiety⁴⁵

Physical Reactions

- Increased muscle tension
- Headaches, backaches
- Chemical changes in the blood
- Stomach discomfort, loss of appetite
- Inability to sleep, increased fatigue
- Shortness of breath, changes in blood pressure

Psychological Reactions

- Stifled creativity
- Limited originality
- Reduced productivity
- Hindered interpersonal relationships
- Hampered ability to think
- Diminished ability to remember

Defensive Reactions

- Blaming someone else
- Ignoring feelings of anxiety
- Escaping through alcohol or drugs
- Deciding there is nothing to worry about
- Slipping back into childish ways of coping
- Withdrawing into various kinds of mental illness

Spiritual Reactions

- Reduced desire for prayer
- Bitterness about God’s apparent silence
- Drawn to God or driven away from God
- Anger at God for letting bad things happen
- Decreased desire to read or study Scripture
- Reduced interest in church and other Christian gatherings

Those who are experiencing these reactions need the following words of encouragement from the writer of the book of Hebrews:

“And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”
(HEBREWS 10:25 NLT)

Anxious Christian

Question: “I am anxious all the time. Does my anxiety mean I’m not a good Christian?”

Answer: No. God doesn’t qualify or quantify your status as a Christian by comparing you with others. You may experience anxiety at the thought of speaking in public or face an irrational fear of snow even if you live in a desert, but God doesn’t expect everyone to have the boldness of Daniel facing the lions’ den or his three friends entering the fiery furnace. Can you imagine the anxious dread they may have felt? Even Jesus was “*deeply distressed and troubled . . . overwhelmed with sorrow*” as he was praying in the garden of Gethsemane before His arrest and betrayal leading to His death on the cross (see Mark 14:33–34).

Feeling anxious doesn't make you an inferior Christian. It simply means you are human.⁴⁶

Remember, the Bible says . . .

*“May God himself, the God of peace,
sanctify you through and through.
May your whole spirit, soul and body
be kept blameless at the coming
of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful,
and he will do it.”*

(1 THESSALONIANS 5:23–24)

What Are Myths and Misconceptions about Anxiety?

Why is anxiety such a fearsome foe? Isn't it just another feeling—similar to joy, anger, or love? But what if some of our anxious feelings originate from *nowhere*? What if our misbeliefs and misconceptions about anxiety lead to anxiety itself?

In the Psalms, David implores God . . .

*“Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.”*

(PSALM 25:5)

Common Misbeliefs about Anxiety⁴⁷

Some of the most common misbeliefs about anxiety include . . .

Anxiety is “unnatural” and should never occur.

Anxiety happens to other people—not Christians, who should never be worried or anxious.

Anxiety is always terrible because it is stressful.

Anxiety can cause death.

Anxiety results in a total loss of control.

Anxiety sufferers are strange people.

Anxiety sufferers will be rejected if people discover they are anxious.

Anxiety is the worst thing in life and must be cured.

Anxiety attacks can cause an accident.

Anxiety sufferers are the only people who can understand anxiety.

Myths and Misconceptions⁴⁸

Myth: “Because I have an anxiety disorder, I should always avoid whatever makes me feel anxious.”

Truth: Avoiding what makes you anxious can actually make you feel even more anxiety. Instead of alleviating the angst, avoidance can actually reinforce anxiety. You will likely find that you can ultimately work through an anxious situation when you face it.

“In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears” (PSALM 18:6).

Myth: “I’m afraid of passing out if I have a panic attack.”

Truth: Fainting is unlikely because it’s often caused by a sudden drop in blood pressure. During a panic attack, blood pressure doesn’t fall, it rises slightly.

“You wearied yourself by such going about, but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless.’ You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint” (ISAIAH 57:10).

Myth: “All medications for anxiety are addictive, so they should only be taken when absolutely necessary.”

Truth: The use of certain medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants taken when a serotonin imbalance triggers anxiety, are not addictive. Benzodiazepines (which can relieve certain symptoms in social anxiety) might help for a short period of time (two weeks or less), but prolonged use can lead to higher tolerance, dependence, and severe adverse reactions to withdrawal. Symptoms related to performance anxiety respond well to beta-blockers, but are not considered effective for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).⁴⁹ (Always consult with a physician or qualified, licensed practitioner about medical treatments.)

“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (PROVERBS 17:22).

Myth: “Medication is the only treatment available for anxiety.”

Truth: Research shows that medication is helpful, but cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) may be just as effective or produce even better results when used in conjunction with medication. One anxiety sufferer credits her own improvement to both her medication and therapy by stating it this way:

I definitely needed them both. . . . I started [medication] a while before I began therapy, and I’m not sure I could have done therapy without it. I was calmer and more able to focus. In the past, I might have gone into therapy with an attitude like, ‘This isn’t going to work. I haven’t seen any hope in the past.’ I had more faith in the whole process because the medication was working.⁵⁰

“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (PROVERBS 15:22).

Myth: “If I live a more healthy lifestyle (eating right, exercising, sleeping well, etc.), my anxiety will go away.”

Truth: Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is certainly beneficial, but treating anxiety disorders usually requires more than just reducing stress. Facing fears, learning about symptoms, ending avoidance, and learning tolerance of some symptoms can also change how you think, feel, and behave.

“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 TIMOTHY 4:8).

Myth: “My anxiety is not a problem because my family and friends understand and accept me as I am.”

Truth: Acceptance and reassurance is a loving offer of support, but compassion can also be expressed by encouraging a loved one with anxiety to bravely address the challenge of seeking solutions.

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (PROVERBS 27:6 KJV).

Myth: “Some people are just ‘naturally’ anxious, neurotic, or worrywarts. Nothing really makes a difference.”

Truth: While some people may have a predisposition to worry and exhibit anxious thoughts, regardless of temperament, beneficial therapy can reduce anxiety.

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts” (PSALM 139:23).

Finding Peace in the Midst of Anxiety

The J. P. Moreland Story⁵¹

At the end of the school year, the university professor looks forward to taking a nine-month sabbatical to write and rest, to travel and speak, and simply to spend time with his family. The graduation ceremony marks an end to a stressful year provoked by harsh professional criticism and personal attacks on his character. A welcome break from the strain and struggle of the daily grind cannot come too soon.

Instead, the most terrifying, traumatic time of his life begins. At 2:30 in the morning, J. P. Moreland instantly wakes from a deep sleep, startled and suddenly alert. His T-shirt clings to his body, wet with sweat. He feels his heart racing in his chest—electricity and adrenaline coursing through his body.

There must be an intruder . . . like a large tiger prowling in the dark. He searches room to room throughout the house, yet finds nothing. Hope, his wife, asks, “What’s wrong?” Baffled, he answers, “I don’t know. I’m terrified, but I’m not sure what I’m scared of. I’m going to take a walk.”

He circles his half-mile block over and over until the sun rises. The dawn of this day marks the first of many panic attacks occurring almost daily for months on end. He spends most of the month of June curled up in a fetal position on his couch.

Since he’s on sabbatical, he doesn’t drive to school, which is good because driving is too terrifying—the traffic has become too stimulating. He can’t answer his ringing phone . . . he can’t check his personal email. He’s trapped in the grasp of anxiety.

Although he never struggles with suicide, he doesn't care about living. Sinking so low, he prays for God to let him be killed in a car crash. Now this teacher, writer, speaker believes everything he has accomplished during his prolific career has been a waste. Life has no meaning—at least his life does not.

Finally, J. P. willingly seeks help; he gets on the road to recovery to lift the fog of despair. Once on the right medication, he receives therapy, reads God's Word, regularly prays and rejoins life. . . . then he experiences a measure of relief.

What could have caused this sudden panic and anxiety—could it be heredity or environment? Looking back, J. P. Moreland sees a pattern of anxiety in his family. His maternal grandfather was a “nervous wreck,” unable to sit still or refrain from fidgeting. Clearly, his grandfather's anxiety caused anxiety in those around him. Similarly, his mother and her siblings all received medical treatment (with one uncle self-medicating with alcohol). The same for his cousins who struggled with or sought treatment for anxiety. He sees this as a “genetic predisposition” toward anxiety in which certain family members can become anxious more easily than others.

Heredity could certainly be a contributor, but what about environment? Before the age of eight, J. P. experiences a number of traumatic events. While his mother is pregnant with him, his father is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. [Interestingly, a study discovered that mothers pregnant on 9/11 passed stress hormones to their babies and those hormones were still present in their babies six months later. Similar findings have been reported during war and other turbulent times.⁵²]

At the tender age of six months, his parents leave him with his grandparents while his father receives a risky, radical surgery. When J. P. is only age seven, his father dies, yet he isn't allowed to attend the funeral . . . or even to grieve.

Although his mother remarries, she remains a constant worrier. Environmentally, from his mother J. P. absorbs the habits of worry, fear, and anxiety. And for decades, anxiety simmers within J. P. just below the surface. Yet, in that 2:30 a.m. panic attack, anxiety appears in the form of a full nervous breakdown and no longer can he function.

Fast-forward 10 years. A counselor extends insightful help, then eventually J. P. is able to discontinue therapy. Life is going well. But then, he allows himself to become overcommitted and extremely stressed. In his last assignment that semester, he presents a controversial philosophical paper at a high-level academic conference—and tension fills the air.

Upon leaving the campus, he suddenly feels as if he steps on something shooting electricity through his body. The shock strikes him again and he recognizes the same sensation he experienced a decade earlier. He calls out, “Oh, God, please, not again.” Yet, he plunges headlong into another nervous breakdown of anxiety.

This time he cannot go to his granddaughter’s soccer games. He cannot tolerate his five grandchildren visiting their home. This hits his heart, but he simply cannot cope. Again, he knows he must find a way out of the depths of despair and dysfunction.

He does seek help and healing and toward the end of his search, he senses the Lord saying, “J., I want you to take the research skills I’ve given you and . . . thoroughly research anxiety and depression. I want you to boil down what you learn and put into practice the things you see are most important. Then I want you to write and share it with my people.” So he does.

His book, *Finding Quiet*, distills the essence of what he learns in his research. Interestingly, in his mind, anxiety is largely an ingrained, learned habit that can be unlearned with the right practices. He discovers four major practices which he implements in his life every day. But, how does he know they work? The proof of putting these practices to the test is proven in the lab of his own life, albeit unintentionally. (For more on these practices, see “Engage Your Emotions” in Steps to Solution on page 118.)

Understanding his own anxiety gives him immense hope. Although some anxiety is the result of a traumatic event, he recognizes his anxiety is primarily learned. And if he could learn it, he also could unlearn it. With the Lord’s help, he begins to unlearn anxiety.

What a time of testing when J. P. Moreland experiences a two-and-a-half year medical nightmare. He is diagnosed with three different life-threatening forms of cancer, undergoes eight surgeries, receives a pacemaker, and endures chemo and radiation. In one week, he sees seven different specialists and for most of 18 months, he has appointments with two to three doctors every week.

In the midst of this most challenging, uncertain time—when anyone would understandably feel tremendous anxiety—J. P. experiences this time as one of the happiest, most peaceful, most joyful periods in his entire life. He feels no fear, no anxiety about any of it! He isn’t afraid of surgery and not the least bit anxious about dying. Death simply doesn’t matter to him. He doesn’t focus on it . . . or even think about it. His wife, daughters, and closest companions confirm this. Ironically, one of his good friends asks, “Dude, what is wrong with you? You’ve got all these things going on and look at you—you’re just full of peace!”

J. P. Moreland has personal proof that his methods work. He spent 50 anxious years focused on the future. In fact, he lived so much in the future, he missed the gift of the present.

Praise God, J. P. Moreland doesn't do that anymore.

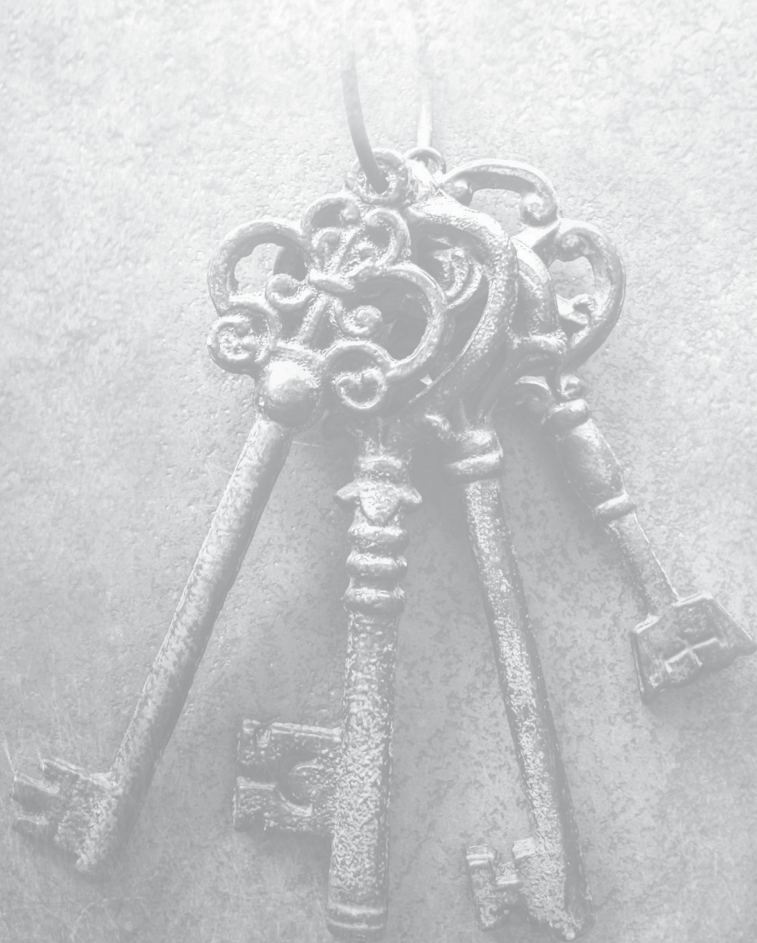
Philippians 4:7 says this about the peace God gives us,

*"The peace of God that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

(PHILIPPIANS 4:7 NET)



CAUSES



*“The Lord does not
want your heart
weighed down
with anxiety.”*



If you've ever seen an old tree or one that has been dug up—you know that roots can grow deep and are often intertwined. With some roots visible on the surface, others go down deep into the ground. Some are small, weak, and fragile while others are large, strong, and resilient (which explains why it's often difficult to pull a simple plant or weed out of the ground). And many times, roots overlap and interconnect so that it's hard to distinguish where one ends and another begins.

The causes of anxiety are much like the roots of a tree. Surface level causes (situational or environmental factors) exist, and so do deeply-rooted, complex causes that relate to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. These causes can overlap and interact in a variety of ways. Although the causes may be complicated, the Lord wants us to continue to look to Him and trust Him in every struggle—including anxiety.

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”
(JEREMIAH 17:7–8 ESV)*

What Are the Common Causes of Anxiety?

King David once pleaded with God, *“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psalm 139:23–24). What a remarkable prayer! After reading a few psalms, you'll understand that David frequently struggled with anxious thoughts. But here, we see David *inviting God into his anxiety*.

As you uncover the various roots and causes of anxiety, invite God into the process. He cares about your heart, your thoughts, your pain . . . He cares about *you*. He wants you to stay rooted in Him every step of the way.

*“And now, just as you accepted
Christ Jesus as your Lord,
you must continue to follow him.
Let your roots grow down into him,
and let your lives be built on him.
Then your faith will grow strong
in the truth you were taught,
and you will overflow with thankfulness.”*

(COLOSSIANS 2:6–7 NLT)

Common factors that play a role in causing or contributing to anxiety include:⁵⁵

Threats—Anxiety often occurs when a real or imagined threat appears. Threats can come from a variety of sources: new, unsafe, or unstable environments or social situations; being separated from loved ones and those who impart safety; experiencing loss (of a job, loved one, home, beliefs, values, etc.). Threats can make people feel fearful, uncertain, helpless, and trapped—all of which can contribute to anxiety.

Conflicts—Interpersonal conflicts or internal conflicts can lead to anxiety because they typically involve opposing ideas, interests, choices, forces, etc. This can create pressure, stress, fear, and uncertainty which can contribute to anxiety.

Stress—Accumulated stress over time from difficult life events, relationship troubles, major transitions, losses, trauma, or other stressful situations can increase the risk of experiencing anxiety—especially if stressors remain unresolved for long periods of time.

Fear—Closely related to anxiety, fear of certain objects, places, situations, activities, or people can gradually increase over time and

become more and more persistent. This increase also elevates anxiety. Some fears are real, but oftentimes many are imagined or based on an irrational belief. Fears frequently develop from traumatic experiences or being conditioned (learning to associate the feeling of fear and anxiety with a particular object, person, or situation).

Emotions—How well a person handles and expresses emotions—particularly negative emotions like anger, frustration, or sadness—can contribute to anxiety. Denying, repressing, or not being allowed to express emotions, especially over a long period of time, often serves to increase anxiety.

Unmet Needs—When basic, survival needs are not met, or even when deeper needs for purpose, meaning, significance, security, and identity are not satisfied, it can lead to feeling fearful, worried, insecure, uncertain, and anxious.

Biological Influences—Substance abuse (drugs and alcohol), medical conditions, certain medications, excessive caffeine or nicotine, diet, lack of sleep, muscle tension, genetic factors, gender, and brain chemistry are all influential factors for anxiety. Hypochondriasis (constantly worrying about your health) can contribute to anxiety.⁵⁴

Personality and Individual Differences—Perfectionism, people-pleasing, and procrastination are common characteristics of those who struggle with anxiety.⁵⁵ Other individual differences related to personality, such as emotional sensitivity, can also contribute to anxiety.

Family and Upbringing—Those whose parents struggled with anxiety are often more likely to struggle with it as well. Heredity may play a part, but witnessing and experiencing anxiety in other family members could be a learned response to becoming more anxious. Unhealthy coping mechanisms can contribute to anxiety. Those who grow up with critical, perfectionistic, abusive, neglectful, overprotective, or absent parents often feel a perpetual sense of unworthiness or insecurity, which can contribute to anxiety.

Coping Skills—How well a person copes with stress and fear, whether approaching problems directly or avoiding them—including the use of medicine, drugs, and alcohol—can increase or decrease anxiety.

Self-Talk—Constant negative (“I can’t”), fearful (“What if . . .”), and self-condemning (“I’m a failure”) thoughts can contribute to anxiety as they anticipate bad outcomes and train a person to feel unable to handle a situation.

Beliefs—Underlying beliefs about yourself, God, others, and the world at large can contribute to anxiety. For example, if you believe God is unloving and harsh, you will likely feel more fearful and worried. But if you believe God is gracious and compassionate, you will likely find more peace.

*“The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*

*The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.”*

(PSALM 145:8–9)

What Causes the Physical Reactions of Anxiety?

The human body is marvelously made with its parts working in harmony with one another. In the case of panic attacks, the brain perceives the body to be in danger and in need of protection. The brain methodically sends out a signal throughout the rest of the body to prepare for physical action . . . to be on the alert and ready to fight or take flight. That preparation includes all of the “symptoms” involved in a panic attack.

*“Distress and anguish fill him with terror;
troubles overwhelm him, like a king poised to attack.”*

(JOB 15:24)

Physical Reactions of Anxiety

Much like a security system, by God’s design the body quickly responds to potential threats. Once activated, the body makes physiological preparations. When your body is in *emergency response mode* these physical symptoms can seem frightening, but the reasons for them are so the body can respond effectively and efficiently. However, in anxiety, your “security system” becomes extremely or overly sensitive and the body may not distinguish between actual danger and a perceived threat.

Why the pounding heart—the rapid heartbeat?

Reason: The internal emergency response system switches on so the heart beats faster and harder pumping “fuel” (blood) to large muscle groups for rapid, powerful movement.

Why the rapid breathing—feeling of not getting enough air?

Reason: Large muscle groups need oxygen as well as blood so breathing increases to force the oxygen to muscles.

Why the perspiration, sweaty palms and skin?

Reason: Heat is created by muscles using up fuel so sweat is produced to regulate body temperature and also make it more difficult for an attacker to grasp and hold.

Why the tingling or numbing sensations in the skin?

Reason: Blood tends to flow away from the skin to deep muscle tissue.

Why the muscle tension or tightness?

Reason: Muscles tighten in preparation for “fight or flight” response.

Why the dizziness, light-headedness and poor concentration?

Reason: During extreme danger, blood may actually flow away from the brain.

Why the nausea or knots in the stomach?

Reason: Digestion is suspended as blood is directed to large muscle groups rather than to the digestive system.

Why the physical symptoms of danger when there is no danger?

Reason: Your brain has perceived danger or a threat and has triggered your internal emergency response system.

Truly, the psalmist was right when he said . . .

*“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”*

(PSALM 139:14)

What Are the Physical Contributors of Anxiety?

Many people become frustrated, even angry, with themselves for being anxiety-ridden. They try to talk themselves out of having anxious feelings—but to no avail. They have no idea that these feelings may be a result of something physical such as stress, an illness, medication, or a chemical imbalance in their bodies.

Because anxiety has so many physical components, anyone suffering from it should get a thorough medical check-up, especially if the level of anxiety interferes with normal functioning. Be specific in describing any anxiety symptoms to your doctor. Ask the doctor to evaluate all your medications. Find out if any of the medications could contribute to anxiety or fear. Talk with a counselor or someone who specializes in anxiety disorders for treatment options.

*“Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.”*

(PROVERBS 15:22)

Medical Conditions—Anxiety is a symptom of certain medical conditions such as hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism, congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, seizure disorders, and other conditions.⁵⁶ Talk with your doctor to determine if your anxiety may be due to a medical condition.

Substance Abuse—The classification called *Substance/Medication-Induced Anxiety Disorder* is so named because of its causal relationship to fearful anxiety. Substances such as alcohol, caffeine, cannabis, drugs, inhalants, medications, stimulants, and toxins can cause anxiety, and the withdrawal from certain substances can also cause anxiety.⁵⁷

Gender—Anxiety disorders occur more frequently (about twice as often) in women than in men.⁵⁸ They also occur earlier in women. This may be due to differences in brain chemistry, as “the brain system involved in the fight-or-flight response is activated more readily in women and stays activated longer than in men, partly as a result of the action of estrogen and progesterone [female hormones].”⁵⁹

Diet—Excessive caffeine can contribute to anxiety. Sugar levels can also play a factor (e.g., anxiety is a symptom of hypoglycemia, low blood sugar). Certain substances can stress the body (salt and preservatives, for example). Eating habits, such as consuming too much or too fast, can also contribute to anxiety, as it often serves to stress the body.⁶⁰

Sleep—Anxiety can contribute to difficulty sleeping, which can then make dealing with the condition even more troublesome. A lack of sleep can also heighten stress hormones like adrenaline.⁶¹

Muscle Tension—Muscle relaxation techniques are often used to treat anxiety because anxiety can cause physical tension all over the body. Calming the body often serves to calm the mind.⁶²

Genetic Factors—Some research suggests that anxiety disorders can run in families, indicating possible genetic factors that contribute to anxiety, but it could also be due to environmental factors in the home or learned behaviors from anxious parents.⁶³

Brain Chemistry—Some research suggests that chemical malfunctions or hormonal imbalances in the brain and/or body can cause anxiety. Having too much or too little of certain hormones can affect your mood and functioning. Biochemical causes may have further underlying causes, such as hereditary factors or stress. Talk with your doctor to address any concerns about hormonal or biochemical factors and possible treatments.⁶⁴

What Emotions Increase Anxiety?

It went from bad to worse.

Have you ever experienced that situation? Perhaps you are running late to work and then spill coffee all over yourself in the car—and that leads to a fender bender. Or maybe you have a big project due and your child starts running a fever. Or perhaps you hear about impending layoffs at your workplace—and the same week you learn that your father is being rushed to the hospital.

Emotions can often make anxiety go from bad to worse. They make a big difference in our experience of anxiety and how we respond. It's not clear whether certain emotions *cause* anxiety, but some emotions can make anxiety worse by increasing its intensity, extending its duration, or hindering the ability to cope. Another important factor is how emotions are handled. Anxiety can worsen when emotions are ignored or “stuffed,” or if they are not expressed.

Remember, for every emotion we experience, God is never surprised. He knows about our emotions, and He wants us to come to Him with everything we're feeling.

*“In my distress I prayed to the LORD,
and the LORD answered me and set me free.”*

(PSALM 118:5 NLT)

Fear—Fear relates to anxiety as a primary emotion. Both fear and anxiety perceive a threat. The DSM-5 explains that “*fear* is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas *anxiety* is the anticipation of a future threat.”⁶⁵ Whether a fear is real or imagined, it can trigger the fight-or-flight response and lead to anxiety.

A cycle can develop where the anxiety then produces more fear which in turn produces more anxiety. As long as the fear persists, the associated symptoms of anxiety will likely continue to exist.

Realize, the Lord cares about your fears. In fact, the most common command in the Bible is “do not fear.” As God walks with you, He wants to move you from fear to faith.

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (PSALM 56:3).

Depression—Anxiety is often a feature of depression. The two also share similar characteristics such as irritability, sleeping problems, trouble concentrating, and avoidant behavior.

The interaction between depression and anxiety can take numerous forms. For example, anxiety may cause you to avoid going out in public, and if that continues over time, it could contribute to depression. Then the depression may intensify anxiety when you have to go out in public. The interaction between depression and anxiety can create an increasingly dark and lonely situation. Remember, God is with you—even when you’re depressed or anxious—and He longs to give you light in the darkness.

“The LORD my God lightens my darkness . . . this God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him” (PSALM 18:28, 30 ESV).

Anger—Anger often emerges in response to an unmet need or expectation. Anxiety and anger share some common characteristics such as agitation, irritability, concentration difficulties, racing heart, and muscle tension.

Similar to anxiety, anger can be a response to a threat—a threat to your livelihood, your loved ones, your beliefs, or your goals. Anger and anxiety seem to respond to a threat in a similar manner . . . they propel you to take action against a threat, either to guard or attack something. For example, if you’re anxious about a test, you’re more likely to be “on

edge” and short with people or to become angry or lash out at others if they interrupt your studying. So anger can end up becoming one way to express or manage anxiety.

God instructs us not to be controlled by anger but to address it right away.

“Don’t sin by letting anger control you.’ Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry” (EPHESIANS 4:26 NLT).

Low Self-worth—If you often feel insignificant, invisible, or insecure, you might struggle with low self-worth.

Maybe you lack confidence and think that people will reject you, so you avoid others or never reveal your true self. This dynamic can increase anxiety. A cycle can develop where you avoid people or situations to manage fear and anxiety, but then feelings of low self-worth continue and so does anxiety.

To gain a healthy sense of self-worth, remember who you are in God’s sight. He created you in His image, so you have innate value and dignity. He loves you and accepts you in Christ.

“He made us accepted in the Beloved” (EPHESIANS 1:6 NKJV).

Guilt—There is *true guilt* (based in actual wrongdoing for not living according to God’s standards) and *false guilt* (based in self-condemnation for not living up to your own standards or someone else’s). False guilt (as well as misplaced guilt) arises when you blame yourself even though you’ve committed no wrong—or it occurs even after you have already confessed and turned from your sin.

Experiencing anxiety is common when we sin because the guilt we feel creates tension in mind, spirit, and body. David said this about his experience of sin and guilt: *“There is no health in my body . . . there is no strength in my bones because of my sin . . . I am faint and severely crushed; I groan because of the anguish of my heart . . . My heart races, my strength leaves me” (Psalm 38:3, 8, 10 HCSB).* David’s experience of guilt was all-consuming—throughout his mind, his body, and his emotions. His guilt led him to experience anxiety, *“So I confess my guilt; I am anxious because of my sin” (Psalm 38:18 HCSB).*

The anxiety associated with guilt may be due in part to the fear of judgment or of facing the consequences of wrongful actions. God wants you to relinquish any false guilt you feel and turn to Him when you experience true guilt so He can forgive you and remove your guilt.

“I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.’ And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone” (PSALM 32:5 NLT).

Grief—When we suffer loss, especially of a loved one, we normally experience grief. If you’re prone to anxiety, grief can intensify this condition.

You may start to worry and fear the loss of someone else, or that you might die soon. These fears and worries may lead to you becoming more cautious and closed off from personal relationships.

Grief, and the anxiety that can be associated with it, must be met with God’s comfort and truth. Dr. Linda Mintle says, “Loss that is unexpected, traumatic, or difficult can lead to future worry if it is not grieved or handled well. Loss must be grieved, with full emotional expression—the layers of emotions and thoughts associated with it must be worked on through the years”⁶⁶

Thankfully, the Bible is clear that God is with us in our grief, walking us through it, and comforting us each step of the way.

“I, yes I, am the one who comforts you” (ISAIAH 51:12 NLT).

What Are the Spiritual Causes of Anxiety?

If you’ve ever ridden on public transportation such as a bus, a train, or especially a plane—you know the anxiety that can accompany such a ride. You’re not in control of the driver’s or pilot’s seat, where you’re going, who’s going with you, or when you will get there. The whole experience can cause anxiety because you simply don’t know what’s going to happen. Yet, every day, millions of people get on buses, trains, and planes. They sit down and trust that the driver or pilot will take them where they need to go.

When we experience anxiety, we often don't trust that God is in control. We believe that we need to take control of the wheel—or simply avoid traveling altogether. What our anxiety actually reveals is distrust in God's goodness, sovereignty, and presence in our lives. How we think about and relate to God can impact our anxiety and our response to anxiety. Just as there are physical, mental, and emotional causes of anxiety, so too there are spiritual causes. In the midst of our fears and worries, God calls us to seek Him and trust Him.

*“Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD,
have never forsaken those who seek you.”*

(PSALM 9:10)

DISTRUST

(an acrostic for the word DISTRUST)

D—Distorted view of God

Pastor and author A. W. Tozer once wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁶⁷

If you believe God is harsh and “out to get you” or that He is not good, not in control, or simply doesn't care about you . . . then you will likely have fear and anxiety—that it's up to you to hold everything together in your life.

But if you believe God is loving and is *for you*—that He is good, in control, and does care about you—then you're more likely to experience peace in your life. You won't feel the need to control everything or believe that your well-being is completely up to you. Thankfully, God *is* good, He *is* in control, and He *does* care about you—even empathizes with you. When you're anxious, He welcomes you to come to Him to find help and hope.

The Bible says, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*” (HEBREWS 4:15–16).

I—Idolatry

Whenever we make something “ultimate” in our lives or make anything—either good or bad—more important than God, we practice idolatry.

No person, experience, or thing can meet our deepest longings except God. When we make someone or something into an idol, we can become fearful or anxious that we might lose them or fear being rejected.

But when God is at the center of our lives, we never have to worry about Him leaving or rejecting us because He accepts us on the basis of His mercy and grace (not because of what we do) and He promises to never leave us.

The Lord says, *“I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”* (ISAIAH 41:9–10).

S—Sin

When we sin, we often respond as Adam did in the garden—we run away *from* God in fear of judgment instead of running *to* God for forgiveness. This response to sin can create anxiety, which can increase if you believe something bad is now going to happen or that God has it out for you because of a particular sin you committed.

Sin can also lead to anxiety because of the guilt associated with sin. When King David sinned, he wrote about his crushing guilt in Psalm 38, *“My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear”* (Psalm 38:4).

Thankfully, God’s grace and forgiveness can break through sin, guilt, fear, and anxiety. We don’t have to fear or worry that God will withhold forgiveness when we confess our sin.

The Bible says, *“O LORD, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help”* (PSALM 86:5 NLT).

T—Trials

Any conflict or difficulty has the potential to create anxiety. When a trial threatens, you might worry about the outcome, feel under-equipped to handle the problem, or just be generally overwhelmed. The Bible repeatedly shows that God allows trials to test our faith and refine our character. Rather than presenting trials as occasions for anxiety, they are presented as opportunities: *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”* (James 1:2–4).

The Bible says, *“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed”* (1 PETER 1:6–7).

R—Response to suffering

The well-known hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” includes a line with a simple truth that speaks to our response to suffering: “O what peace we often forfeit / O what needless pain we bear / All because we do not carry / Everything to God in prayer!”⁶⁸

God cares about the suffering and anxiety we face. In fact, He tells us directly, *“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:7). Prayer, or any spiritual discipline, is not a catch-all fix to suffering and anxiety, but, as the hymn reminds us, we often forfeit God’s peace in the midst of suffering and anxiety because we don’t go to Him. We carry unnecessary burdens, sacrifice peace, and increase our worries when we don’t trust God.

But God, out of the infinite riches of His grace, continues to call us to pour out our hearts to Him and trust Him for rest and refuge.

The Bible says, *“Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. . . . Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge”* (PSALM 62:5, 8).

U—Unbelief

Jesus connected anxiety and unbelief when He said, *“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. . . . O you of little faith?”* (Matthew 6:25, 30 ESV). In short, Jesus says, *“Do not be anxious . . . O you of little faith.”*

Anxiety can sometimes reveal a lack of faith in God to meet our needs and take care of us. Jesus reminds us that God takes care of even birds and flowers, so He will certainly not overlook our needs but will take care of us.

When we’re anxious, Jesus calls us to faith—to put our focus on God and seek Him above all else.

Jesus says, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble”* (MATTHEW 6:33–34 ESV).

S—Satanic influences

Not all anxiety is traceable to the devil and demonic forces, but the Bible is clear about their work in the world and our lives. They stand in opposition to who God is and what He does.

Jesus said that the devil is a *“murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (John 8:44). Satan is also called the *“accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night”* (Revelation 12:10).

While God speaks truth and invites you to live in His love, grace, and peace—the devil speaks lies, accuses, and seeks to consume you with constant doubt, guilt, and fear. Satan wants anxiety to draw you away from God, but God wants you to stand firm on His truth and draw nearer to Him.

The Bible says, *“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil”* (EPHESIANS 6:10–11 NLT).

T—Temptation

Saint Francis de Sales wrote, “Anxiety is a temptation in itself and also the source from and by which other temptations come.”⁶⁹ In other words, when we experience anxiety, we are tempted with other things.

Suppose you’re anxious about not passing an exam you may then be tempted to cheat. If you’re anxious about how you will pay your bills, you may be tempted to gamble. If you’re anxious about a loved one, you may be tempted to abuse alcohol or drugs.

As you try to alleviate the discomfort of anxiety, you can be tempted to do so in unhealthy ways. When you feel anxious, look to God and remind yourself that He is faithful to help.

The Bible says, “*The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure*” (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 NLT).

What Is the Spiritual Root Cause of Anxiety?

God calls us to stand in *His strength* when we are filled with anxiety. Rather than being paralyzed and controlled by fear and anxiety, we can trust in and rely on God.

*“It is God who arms me with strength
and keeps my way secure.”*

(PSALM 18:32)

3 Inner Needs

We all have three inner needs: the needs for love, significance, and security.⁷⁰

Love—to know that someone is unconditionally committed to our best interest

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (JOHN 15:12).

Significance—to know that our lives have meaning and purpose

“I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me”
(PSALM 57:2 ESV).

Security—to feel accepted and a sense of belonging

“Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge” (PROVERBS 14:26).

The Ultimate Need-Meeter

What do our inner needs reveal about us and our relationship with God?

God did not create any person or position or any amount of power or possessions to meet our deepest needs. People fail us and self-effort also fails to meet our deepest needs. If a person or thing could meet all our needs, we wouldn't need God! Our inner needs draw us into a deeper dependence on Christ and remind us that only God can satisfy the longings of our hearts. The Lord brings people and circumstances into our lives as an extension of His care, but ultimately only He can satisfy all the needs of our hearts. The Bible says . . .

*“The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.”*
(ISAIAH 58:11)

All along, the Lord planned to meet our deepest needs for . . .

Love—“*I [the Lord] have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness*” (JEREMIAH 31:3).

Significance—“*For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’*” (JEREMIAH 29:11).

Security—“*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged*” (DEUTERONOMY 31:8).

Our needs for love, significance, and security can be legitimately met in Christ Jesus! Philippians 4:19 makes it plain, “*My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*”

Wrong Belief: “God is disappointed with me for having anxiety. He probably doesn’t care about me or my situation anyway. Nothing can be done about my anxiety. I have no control over my anxiety, so my only option is to avoid all anxiety-producing situations.”

Right Belief: “God loves me and cares about every aspect of my life. I can face my anxiety in the strength of the Lord. With God’s help, I can focus my thoughts on His truth and character. I will seek His wisdom to guide and direct me to whatever help I need. I will look to God for strength and peace to calm my fearful heart, and I will trust Him with my life and every anxiety-producing situation.”

*“The LORD is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.”*

(PSALM 28:7)

How Can You Find God's Peace Amidst Anxiety?

Is anxiety weighing you down? Is your heart overwhelmed with fear and worry? Realize, the Bible says *“Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up”* (Proverbs 12:25).

The good news is God has a kind word for you—a good word, a *life-giving* word to lift you out of the pit of anxiety. He wants you to know the *“word of truth, the gospel of your salvation”* (Ephesians 1:13 ESV).

The Lord does not want your heart weighed down with anxiety. Instead, He wants you to experience His peace, for *“a heart at peace gives life to the body”* (Proverbs 14:30). That peace comes through a personal relationship with Christ. Jesus says to you . . .

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled
and do not be afraid.”*
(JOHN 14:27)

4 Points of God's Plan

Whether you're trying to make sense of your past, trying to overcome something in the present, or trying to make changes for a better future, the Lord cares about you. He loves you. No matter what challenges you or your loved ones are facing, no matter the pain or difficult feelings you may be experiencing, no matter what you've done or what's been done to you, there is hope. And that hope is found in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan for your life, and it begins with a personal relationship with Jesus. The most important decision you can ever make is whether you will receive His invitation. If you have never made that decision, these four simple truths can help you start your journey together with Him.

*“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”*

(JEREMIAH 29:11)

1. God’s Purpose for You: *Salvation*

- What was God’s motivation in sending Jesus Christ to earth? To express His love for you by saving you! The Bible says, *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (JOHN 3:16–17).
- What was Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth? To forgive your sins, to empower you to have victory over sin, and to enable you to live a fulfilled life! Jesus said, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (JOHN 10:10).

2. The Problem: *Sin*

- What exactly is sin? Sin is living independently of God’s standard—knowing what is wrong and doing it anyway—also knowing what is right and choosing not to do it. The apostle Paul said, *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway”* (ROMANS 7:18–19 NLT).
- What is the major consequence of sin? Spiritual death, eternal separation from God. The Bible says, *“Your iniquities [sins] have separated you from your God”* (ISAIAH 59:2). Scripture also says, *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (ROMANS 6:23).

3. God’s Provision for You: *The Savior*

- Can anything remove the penalty for sin? Yes! Jesus died on the cross to personally pay the penalty for your sins. The Bible says, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (ROMANS 5:8).

- What is the solution to being separated from God? Belief in (entrusting your life to) Jesus Christ as the only way to God the Father. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (JOHN 14:6). The Bible says, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”* (ACTS 16:31).

4. Your Part: *Surrender*

- Give Christ control of your life, entrusting yourself to Him. Jesus said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”* (MATTHEW 16:24–26).
- Place your faith in (rely on) Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and reject your “good works” as a means of earning God’s approval. The Bible says, *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (EPHESIANS 2:8–9).

Has there been a time in your life when you know you’ve humbled your heart and received Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—giving Him control of your life? You can tell God that you want to surrender your life to Christ in a simple, heartfelt prayer like this:

“God, I want a real relationship with you.
 I admit that many times I’ve chosen to go my own way
 instead of your way.
 Please forgive me for my sins.
 Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross
 to pay the penalty for my sins.
 Come into my life to be my Lord and my Savior.
 Change me from the inside out and make me the person
 you created me to be.
 In your holy name I pray. Amen.”

What Can You Now Expect?

When you surrender your life to Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit who empowers you to live a life pleasing to God. The Bible says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life . . .”* (2 Peter 1:3). Jesus assures those who believe with these words:

*“Truly I tell you, whoever hears my word
and believes him who sent me
has eternal life and will not be judged
but has crossed over from death to life.”*

(JOHN 5:24)

From Drowning in the Dark to Finding Hope The Tommy Nelson Story—Part I⁷¹

He starts and shepherds a church, eventually ministering to thousands. He teaches and speaks at conferences, mentors men, and writes extensively. Because he loves the Lord, he loves impacting people. His passion is to share Jesus and God's Word to reach as many souls as possible. His dedication results in success, growth and expansion. But the discipling work he loves takes a toll on him personally.

Minutes before an evening service, Tommy Nelson chats with church members. Seated in a chair, his strength suddenly withers. His body goes limp, his heart rate shoots up, and his blood pressure soars so high his whole body begins to shake!

He excuses himself and retreats to his office where he lies down for 15 minutes, waiting for calm to return. He's able to preach the service, but afterwards his mouth feels incredibly dry. *What is happening to him?* Could he be overheated from an earlier run or from working in his garden?

Yet, just a few days later while visiting an elderly church member, he feels a strange sense of light-headedness. Then again in another few days, this new tension builds during an important meeting and he feels terrible. Something is wrong, but he doesn't know what it is.

Tests reveal he's in good health, but with this strange recurring fright, he asks to be hospitalized—primarily because the worst of his strange symptoms is an inability to sleep. The anxiety he feels makes sleep impossible, which creates more anxiety, and continues to inhibit sleep. This continuous cycle keeps him spinning around and around.

What compounds his confusion is feeling as if he's running with his foot flooring the gas pedal—while his emergency brake is also engaged. Nevertheless, he holds onto his faith in the Lord that somehow he's going to be okay. *“Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”* (Hebrews 11:1).

Medication in the hospital helps him sleep and he feels better—for a while. But getting rest doesn't resolve the core issue. He relaxes for a time, but the surging storm inside returns in wave after wave, threatening to pull him under.

After a trip to the zoo with his family, he feels as if something inside him collapses—something beyond his body and brain—something in his heart, soul, and spirit. Whatever it is, he knows it's an enemy he can't overcome alone. The “emotionless void and growing anxiety continue to engulf” him. Without a frame of reference to understand what is happening, his fear and frustration build.

Searching for answers, another hospital visit and medication help relieve the symptoms. He even feels safer in the hospital knowing someone else is searching for answers. This renowned pastor, teacher, speaker, and author receives a diagnosis: anxiety, panic attacks, and full-blown depression. Again, thinking he is finally getting better, finally under “control,” he leaves the hospital relieved. But only for a short time.

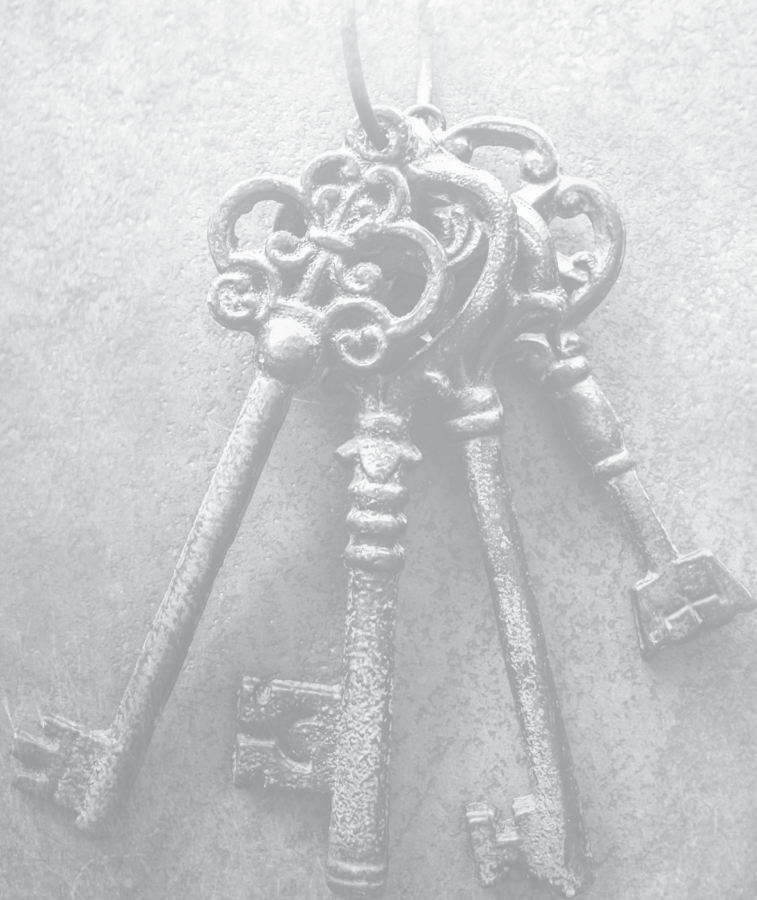
*“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.”*

(PSALM 4:1)

(For the rest of Tommy Nelson's story, see Part II at the end of the Steps to Solution section.)



STEPS TO SOLUTION



*“Your mind
matters
to God.”*



Scripture instructs us to cast all of our cares on the Lord . . . to commit and entrust our desires and concerns entirely to Him. But how do we do that?

In the Bible, God often describes His people as being like sheep. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and His sheep know His voice, we know He cares for us. He wants us to come to the end of our own resources so that we will depend on Him for our very lives. When we do, He gently picks us up and carries us in His arms. As the Bible says . . .

*“He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart.”*
(ISAIAH 40:11)

Key Verse to Memorize

A sheep that falls over and ends up on its back has a difficult time getting back on its feet. Its legs will flail and it may cry and bleat. Such a sheep is rendered helpless and will die from lying on its back too long. This position is referred to as “cast down.”

Sheep have an uncanny ability to lay there and do nothing. Without resources to remedy the situation, a sheep often just gives up and waits to die. When we are anxious, we are like cast sheep with no inner resources to affect our situation.

But we do have an incredible resource available to us: Jesus *wants* us to depend on Him. Rather than remaining “cast,” we can trust Him and cast all our anxieties on Him.

*“Cast all your anxiety on him
because he cares for you.”*
(1 PETER 5:7)

Key Passage to Read

Consider this remarkable truth: God, the creator of all things, cares uniquely about *you*. David, once a shepherd himself, was stunned by this truth, saying, “*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*” (Psalm 8:3–4). God not only cares about you and the specifics of your life, but He has also given precise instructions to combat anxiety. He speaks directly to this issue, and He speaks directly to *you*.

Philippians 4:4–9

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me— put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

God’s Answer to Anxiety

Find your joy in the unchanging God, not in changing circumstances. v. 4

Be gentle and gracious (with yourself and others) instead of harsh and condemning. v. 5

- Remember that the Lord is near you, and He will return to renew all things. v. 5
- Talk with God about anything and everything that causes you anxiety. v. 6
- Tell God about the situation and how you’re feeling, and ask Him to help. v. 6
- Thank God for who He is and what He has done for you. v. 6
- Receive God’s peace, which is given to you through Jesus Christ. v. 7
- Fix your thoughts on what is true and positive instead of what is false and negative. v. 8
- Recall the wisdom you have learned from others and practice it regularly. v. 9
- Remember, above all, that God is the God of peace and He is with you. v. 9

God’s Sovereignty

Question: “How can knowing that God is sovereign help me overcome fear and anxiety?”

Answer: The word *sovereign* means that God has ultimate authority over everything. As the creator and sustainer of everything, He has power and control over all things. His sovereignty also means that He is absolutely free to do whatever He wants within the context of His character to fulfill His will. For example, because God is completely holy, it is impossible for Him to sin—and His ways will always be perfectly holy, just, loving, and wise. The Bible shows God’s sovereign activity in a variety of ways:

— **He is in control of every outcome in life.**

“We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall” (PROVERBS 16:33 NLT).

— **He determines exactly how long each of us will live.**

“You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer” (JOB 14:5 NLT).

— **He can even use sin and evil to accomplish His good purposes.**

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (GENESIS 50:20).

When Jesus talked about worry and anxiety, He also talked about God’s sovereignty.

— **He providentially feeds** the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field (see Matthew 6:25–29).

— **He further hinted at God’s sovereignty** in saying,

“Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs” (MATTHEW 6:32 NLT).

— **He also knows** your every thought (Psalm 139:2), every word (Psalm 139:4), every action (Psalm 139:2–3), and every intention of your heart (1 Chronicles 28:9).

Realize, nothing that happens in your life occurs outside of God’s sovereign knowledge, ultimate authority, and providential care. Pastor and author Alan Redpath once wrote of this wonderful truth:

There is nothing—no circumstance, no trouble, no testing—that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with great purpose, which I may not understand at the moment; but as I refuse to become panicky, as I lift my eyes up to Him and accept it as coming

from the throne of God for some great purpose of blessing to my own heart, no sorrow will ever disturb me, no trial will ever disarm me, no circumstance will cause me to fret, for I shall rest in the joy of what my Lord is—that is the rest of victory!⁷²

When you're filled with anxiety, when it feels like your life is coming apart at the seams, the truth of God's sovereignty can give you hope, peace, security, and confidence. Rest in the knowledge that God is in control—*so you don't have to be*. Remember that He can use any circumstance for good (Romans 8:28), and allow that truth to calm your greatest fears and wash away your worries. Let His sovereignty drive you to Him—to cling to Him and rest in Him and praise Him.

*“Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of
Israel our father, forever and ever.*

¹¹*Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the victory and the majesty,
for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.*

*Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you
are exalted as head above all.*

¹²*Both riches and honor come from you,
and you rule over all.*

*In your hand are power and might,
and in your hand
it is to make great and to give strength to all.*

¹³*And now we thank you, our God,
and praise your glorious name.”*

(1 CHRONICLES 29:10–13 ESV)

How to Have a Transformed Life

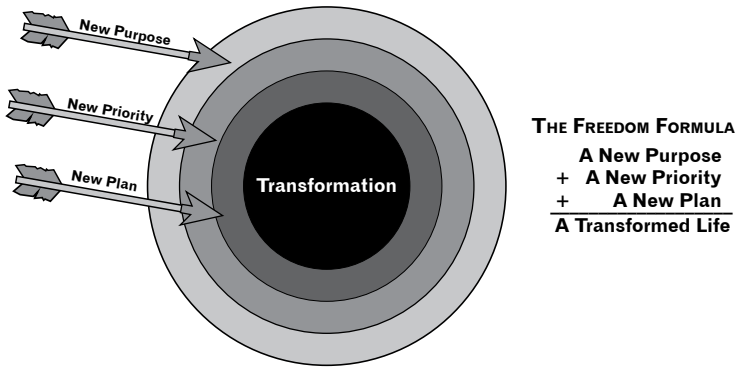
Anxiety can divide our attention and sap our energy. We often assume anxiety is a negative force—something to tear down and defeat. One therapist and author (who also struggles with anxiety) posed this question to a client and himself: “What if God put anxiety in your life for a purpose? . . . What if God is saying, ‘Pay attention to me. Don’t get stuck and buried in your fears.’ What if anxiety is God’s catalyst to help you grow?”⁷³

God did not remove Rhett Smith’s anxiety, but instead launched him on a journey to view anxiety as a tool for growth. “Anxiety didn’t feel safe. It brought up feelings and emotions that I didn’t like to deal with. . . . I slowly began to see that my anxiety was good and led me to pursue God more than I ever had. . . . God didn’t want me to stuff those emotions and feelings and so He used anxiety as a tool in my life to help me more radically pursue Him and who He wanted me to become.”⁷⁴

Our challenge as believers is to learn what God has for us to help us deal with our anxieties, to step out in faith, and through His empowering Spirit to live life as fully as He intended.

*“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and
to walk humbly with your God.”
(MICAH 6:8)*

Reaching the Target: Transformation!



Target #1—A New Purpose

God's purpose for me is to be conformed to the character of Christ.

"Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (ROMANS 8:29).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to be conformed to the character of Christ."

Target #2—A New Priority

God's priority for me is to change my thinking.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (ROMANS 12:2).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to line up my thinking with God's thinking."

Target #3—A New Plan

God's plan for me is to rely on Christ's strength, not my strength, to be all He created me to be.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (PHILIPPIANS 4:13 NKJV).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to fulfill His plan in His strength."

My Personalized Plan

As someone who wrestles with anxiety, the future can feel bleak—void of hope and joy but full of fear and misfortune. But God always offers me hope for the future and help for today. He comes alongside me and says, “*Do not fear, for I am with you*” (Isaiah 41:10). To my fearful heart, the Bible says, “*With his love, he will calm all your fears*” (Zephaniah 3:17 NLT). With God’s help, I can move forward today and have hope for tomorrow.

*“There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.”*

(PROVERBS 23:18)

As I seek God’s help with my anxiety, I will . . .

Remember God’s character

When I’m anxious, I’m tempted to think that God doesn’t care about me, He’s not in control, or He’s not powerful enough to change anything. This can lead me to believe that I have to hold everything together. I need to realize that my view of God amidst anxiety can either make matters seem worse or help me remain calm and see things clearly.

- I will seek to know God’s character by reading His Word and praying for Him to continually reveal Himself to me.
- I will believe that God is good, that He is with me, and that He will help me—and trust that He is in control and has my best interests at heart.

“The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. . . . The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does” (PSALM 145:8–9, 13).

Address physical issues

Anxiety is not just emotional or cognitive but also physical. It can be caused by or result in physical changes, so it is therefore important to address any physical issues that may be contributing to my anxiety.

- I will talk with a doctor about the symptoms I am experiencing and seek treatment.
- I will seek to maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating well, exercising regularly, getting plenty of rest, staying hydrated, avoiding harmful substances, and learning relaxation techniques to manage stress and anxiety.

“I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 CORINTHIANS 9:27 ESV).

Talk with others

Anxiety can consume my thoughts and emotions and impair my ability to work and go about my daily life. Given the impact it can have on me, sharing my struggles with others and receiving guidance can help me process my experiences and move forward.

- I will seek the help of a professional counselor, supportive group of people in my church or community, and/or talk with trusted friends and family members.
- I will be honest about how I’m feeling and what I’m experiencing.

“Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory” (PROVERBS 11:14 NASB).

Reorient my thoughts

Much of the experience of anxiety occurs in the mind. It can cloud my judgment and hinder my decision making. Anxiety can cause difficulty concentrating and lead me to believe the future is grim. Addressing my thoughts and thought patterns is critical to managing and even overcoming anxiety.

- I will keep a journal and write down my honest thoughts.
- I will seek to align my thoughts with God’s Word, identifying thoughts that are based on lies and replacing them with God’s truth.

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (PHILIPPIANS 4:8).

Be in community

Anxiety leads many people like me to avoid social interactions. Taken to an extreme, I can become isolated and alone. But God made me to be in relationships with others. Having supportive friendships and relationships can go a long way toward helping me gain a sense of wholeness, wellness, and normalcy amidst anxiety.

- I will regularly meet with friends and family members to talk, share a meal, or go out together.
- I will look into joining a local church, small group, Bible study, or community support group.

“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help” (ECCLESIASTES 4:9–10 NLT).

Stay active spiritually

God clearly states in His Word that He cares about me. When I’m anxious, He wants to hear from me. He provides help for me through His Word, His people, and most of all, His constant presence.

- I will maintain an active spiritual life by praying, reading God’s Word, and meeting with other believers to help me grow.
- I will constantly seek to grow in my relationship with Christ, who loves me and gives me grace each day.

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 PETER 3:18).

Hang on to hope

It’s been said that a person can live weeks without food, days without water, seconds without air, but not a moment without hope. Anxiety leads me to focus on the future, and often not a bright future. How important it is to maintain a hopeful outlook on life.

- I will remember that true, lasting hope is found not in my circumstances but in God and His Word.
- I will meditate on God’s promises in the Bible, remembering that I can always have hope.

“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (ROMANS 15:4).

How to Deal with Anxiety—An Overview

Anxiety can feel like an untamable beast because it can affect us in so many ways—physically, mentally, emotionally, behaviorally, socially, and spiritually. But consider this: “We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong” (James 3:3–4 NLT).

Here, James is talking about the power of the tongue, but the principle remains: You can take steps, though they may seem small, to get the “beast” of anxiety under control. And with the help of God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s people, you can make significant strides in managing your anxiety, calming your heart, and living in the strength and peace of the Lord.

*“The LORD gives strength to his people;
the LORD blesses his people with peace.”*
(PSALM 29:11)

Since anxiety affects the whole person, the key to disarming it is to deal with it on these levels:

Physically

Mentally

Emotionally

Spiritually

Behaviorally/Socially

*“For I am the LORD your God who
takes hold of your right hand and says to you,
Do not fear; I will help you.”
(ISAIAH 41:13)*

How to Calm Your Body—*Physically*

You are probably familiar with this scene: A furious storm arises on the Sea of Galilee and the disciples who are in the boat begin to panic. The winds are howling, the rain is pouring, the waves are crashing against the boat . . . and the disciples fear for their lives. Barely managing to stand up in the rocking boat, they make their way to their only anchor of hope, the Lord Jesus, who is “*sleeping on a cushion*” (Mark 4:38). In fear and disbelief, they ask Jesus, “*Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?*” (Mark 4:38). As Jesus awakens, He *speaks to the storm*, saying, “*Peace! Be still!*” . . . and the wind quiets, the waves cease, the water stills, and there is “*a great calm*” (Mark 4:39 ESV).

When the winds of fearful circumstances blow into your life and the waves of anxiety crash into your mind, it can feel like you’re drowning in chaotic waters. You can barely stay above the surface and catch your breath, let alone find peace and experience “a great calm.” But God has provided a way to find peace in the storm. He designed our bodies in such a way that we can calm ourselves down physically through a variety of techniques. Practicing these exercises can help you prepare for, and manage, the physical effects of anxiety.

*“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.
When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown.”
(ISAIAH 43:2 NLT)*

Breathing Techniques⁷⁵—Deep abdominal breathing is a natural sedative that can be used to calm your body when you’re experiencing anxiety. Here’s what to do:

- Sit comfortably in a chair or lie down on your back with your hands resting on your chest.
- Slowly breathe in through your nose to the count of five.
- Hold your breath for three to five seconds.
- Slowly blow the air out through your mouth to the count of five.
- Repeat this deep abdominal breathing for three to five minutes several times a day until you experience its calming effects and become comfortable doing it.

“He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need”
(ACTS 17:25 NLT).

Muscle Relaxation⁷⁶—Anxiety often leads to muscle tension, and feeling tense often leads to anxiety. By relaxing the muscles in your body, you can break the cycle and calm yourself. Do this one muscle group at a time throughout your whole body, for 10 to 15 minutes a day. Pair it with a deep-breathing exercise.

Go through the following exercises, holding each muscle group for five to 10 seconds, then relaxing and waiting 15 to 20 seconds before moving on to the next muscle group.

- **Face:** Tighten your facial muscles . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.
- **Neck and Shoulders:** Shrug your shoulders up, tensing your neck, chest and upper back . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.
- **Arms:** Make a fist with one of your hands and flex your biceps . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe. Repeat using the other hand . . . hold . . . relax, and breathe.
- **Core:** Arch your back, tensing your stomach and lower back . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.
- **Bottom:** Tighten your buttocks and pull in your abdomen . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.
- **Thighs:** Tense the thighs in both legs . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.
- **Calves:** Tense the calves in both legs . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.

- **Feet:** Stretch out one of your legs and point your foot and toes down . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe. Stretch out the same leg and forcefully point your foot and toes up . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe. Repeat both exercises using the other leg . . . hold . . . relax, wait and breathe.

“I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content” (PSALM 131:1–2).

Physical Exercise—Stay physically active and exercise on a regular basis (following a doctor’s recommendations) to build stamina and keep your body reasonably ready “to fight or take flight.”

- Briskly walk or jog a minimum of 10 minutes every day.
- Play handball, racquetball, basketball, tennis, ping-pong, soccer or some other sport.
- Join a fitness center, ride a bicycle, swim or do water aerobics.
- Exert physical energy when you anticipate a panic attack.

“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 TIMOTHY 4:8).

Nutrition⁷⁷—What you eat can stress your body and increase anxiety or have a calming effect and reduce anxiety.

- Limit caffeine and nicotine, which can make you jittery and increase anxiety.
- Limit simple sugars, sweets, alcohol, and fried/processed foods.
- Avoid foods you are allergic to that stress your body.
- Drink plenty of water each day (six to eight glasses a day).
- Eat plenty of fresh vegetables.
- Keep your blood sugar stable (hypoglycemia, low blood sugar, can increase anxiety).

“He gives food to every creature. His love endures forever” (PSALM 136:25).

Medication

Question: “What role, if any, does medication play in managing anxiety?”

Answer: Some people may be able to manage their anxiety and overcome it without medication, others might need medication temporarily to relieve severe symptoms, and still others might rely on certain medicines long term to make up for a chemical imbalance. In addition to stress, some physical conditions can contribute to anxiety. Certainly, the decision of whether or not to use medication—and for how long—is best made with the recommendation of a qualified physician who closely monitors and manages appropriate care.

Managing anxiety can feel like you’re on a boat in the center of a storm in the middle of the ocean. Medication may help calm the storm . . . but *you still need to get to land*. While medication can help, there are still things you can do to help further manage anxiety such as seeking counseling, adjusting your automatic thoughts and beliefs, addressing emotional and spiritual needs, etc.

Christians need not suffer for fear of being labeled “unspiritual” for seeking medical help when medication can help treat a biochemical imbalance. People often think if you have faith and pray more, the Lord will heal you. One anxiety sufferer explains it this way, “The Lord has led me to a good psychiatrist and good medicine. God is in the business of healing.”⁷⁸

If you’re considering using medication, do some research and talk with your doctor. Be sure to ask how long you will need to take medication and the potential short-term and long-term side effects (as well as potential interactions) of each drug your doctor might prescribe, as well as any

recommended supplements. Also, talk with others who have used medication to help manage anxiety and get their feedback.

The use of medication *is* biblical (see Ezekiel 47:12). However, medicine should *never* be used to avoid dealing with issues, to numb pain, or as an escape or “quick fix.” Rather, it can be a tool to help those who suffer from severe anxiety. Additionally, medication is most often a complement to other avenues of treatment.

Striking the right balance of treatment options is unique for each individual and should be explored in conjunction with ongoing counseling and medical supervision. Medicine can be a gracious gift from God to help ease our discomfort and improve our health, but it is never to be our sole source for healing—that’s God’s place.

*“Every good and perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”*

(JAMES 1:17)

How to Control Your Thoughts—*Mentally*

Take a short stroll through Scripture and you’ll see that God says much about the mind.

The Lord commanded Joshua to meditate on His Word “*day and night*” (Joshua 1:8). The book of Psalms begins by describing the blessing of the person whose “*delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night*” (Psalm 1:2). After the apostle Paul spends eleven chapters describing the wonderful news of the Gospel in the book of Romans, he tells his readers: “*Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think*” (Romans 12:2 NLT). Your mind matters to God.

When you're anxious, you might feel like your thoughts and emotions are running wild. "Automatic" thoughts occur when we're anxious, and those thoughts are typically negative, untrue, and full of fear and worry (also known as *Automatic Negative Thoughts* or ANTs). These thoughts need to be met with truth.

Realize, your emotions are highly influenced by your thoughts, so it is imperative to focus your thoughts and redirect them on what is true and positive. From a physical standpoint, by using the thinking and language centers of your brain, you'll minimize the parts of your brain that regulate emotions. Your thoughts are like a conductor guiding the orchestra of your emotions, so you can help manage your anxiety by controlling your thoughts. The apostle Paul saw the benefit of this. After telling the Philippians not to be anxious, he focused on the mind:

*"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right,
and pure, and lovely, and admirable.*

Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."

(PHILIPPIANS 4:8 NLT)

When you're anxious, think through the characteristics listed in Philippians 4:8:⁷⁹

What is true?

- This refers to whatever corresponds to reality. Jesus said that God's Word is truth (John 17:17), so identify passages from the Bible that speak to your situation and to God's character. Fill your mind with His Word and meditate on it regularly until it becomes an automatic response.
- Ask yourself: What is true and accurate about my situation? What does God say I should do (or not do)? What promises of God or attribute of God can speak to my situation?

"I have chosen the way of truth; I have set Your ordinances before me"
(PSALM 119:30 HCSB).

What is honorable?

- Also translated as “noble,” this refers to someone or something that is dignified or worthy of respect—the kind of character that leaders in the church should possess (see 1 Timothy 3:8, 11; Titus 2:2). Being honorable is connected with qualities of honesty, sincerity, integrity, faithfulness, self-control, and trustworthiness.
- Ask yourself: What is the respectful thing to do in my situation? Is there someone I trust and respect who I can talk to about my anxiety? What can I do that will honor the Lord?

“Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me”
(PSALM 50:15).

What is right?

- Also translated “just,” this refers to what aligns with God’s character, law, or standards. Anxiety can cloud our thoughts and intensify our emotions, so we may be tempted to do whatever “feels right” to relieve anxiety. But what *feels* right and what *is* right can be different.
- Ask yourself: What does God say is the right thing to do in my circumstance? What will happen if I do what is right—what will happen if I do what is wrong? Who can help me do what’s right?

“Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight” (DEUTERONOMY 6:18).

What is pure?

- This refers to whatever is holy or free from sin; whatever is uncorrupted and untainted by sin. God often uses trials and difficult circumstances to purify us and refine our character (see 1 Peter 1:6–7). Anxiety can lead us to God (running to Him for help and strength) or away from God (seeking to control things; seeking relief through escapism, busyness, drugs, alcohol, pornography, etc.). Let your fears and worries drive you to God.
- Ask yourself: Is my anxiety leading me to God—to His presence, His Word, His people? In what ways is my anxiety leading me away from God—tempting me to doubt God, control others, or sin?

“I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ’s return” (PHILIPPIANS 1:10 NLT).

What is lovely?

- This refers to whatever is beautiful or attractive; whatever promotes love and peace. When you’re anxious, you may be tempted to believe that God doesn’t love you, or you may be tempted to act unloving toward others. An accurate understanding of love begins with God’s love, and the Bible is not short on descriptions of His love. God says that He has *“loved you with an everlasting love”* (Jeremiah 31:3). His Word is clear that nothing in all creation *“will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:39).
- Ask yourself: In what ways has the Lord shown His love to me? What do I love about God? How can I show love to God, to others, and to myself?

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–8).

What is admirable?

- Also translated as “commendable” or “of good repute” or “good report,” this refers to things that are well spoken of or have a good reputation. When we’re anxious, our thoughts often run through a filter of fear, doubt, skepticism, and worry. We tend to see things that are bad, negative, or destructive instead of seeing what is good, positive, constructive—or commendable.
- Ask yourself: Who can I speak well of or compliment? What aspects of my situation are good or commendable? Who has helped me (or is currently helping me) and deserves to be thanked?

“When people commend themselves, it doesn’t count for much. The important thing is for the Lord to commend them” (2 CORINTHIANS 10:18 NLT).

What is excellent?

- The final two qualities listed in Philippians 4:8, “*excellent and worthy of praise*” act as a summary for the other qualities. Excellence refers to moral goodness or virtue. We are chosen by God to “. . . *proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9 ESV). We tend not to associate anxiety with morality, but anxiety can lead to immoral behavior if we seek to relieve our worries and fears through ungodly means.
- Ask yourself: Are there any immoral thoughts or actions I need to confess and change? What morals, virtues, or godly characteristics do I need to work on, with God’s help?

“Make every effort to respond to God’s promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone”
(2 PETER 1:5–7 NLT).

What is praiseworthy?

- Some things are worthy of praise, primarily related to God but also of others. When you consider God’s work in creating you, sustaining you, saving you, and giving you a hope-filled future, praise is the appropriate response. Praise often leads to joy, which is a positive emotion to battle the negative feelings of anxiety.
- Ask yourself: What am I thankful for in my situation? What things can I praise God for (relationships, spiritual and material blessings, knowledge, health, etc.)?

“I will praise the LORD at all times. I will constantly speak his praises . . . I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears”
(PSALM 34:1, 4 NLT).

When seeking to control your anxious thoughts, remember that Jesus is the greatest thought you can have. That is why God says to “*fix your thoughts on Jesus*” (Hebrews 3:1). He is the most true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy person in

the world. And the great news is that Jesus is for you, with you, and in you. When anxiety weighs you down, He can lift you up and raise your thoughts to Him and the glorious future He has for you.

*“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.
For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ, who is your life, appears,
then you also will appear with him in glory.”*
(COLOSSIANS 3:2–4)

How to Corral Your Feelings—Emotionally

God created our physical hearts with unique properties and functions. Interestingly, neuroscience confirms the biblical perspective regarding the heart as the core of a person, also seen in the physical heart as an organ of the body. Neuroscientists “discovered that the heart has its own independent nervous system, referred to as ‘the brain in the heart.’ In a real sense, the heart ‘thinks for itself.’”⁸⁰

With 40,000 neurons in the heart—as many as in important areas of the brain—the heart signals important information to the brain, especially the amygdala, which processes information with emotional significance. So, by God’s design, the brain works in conjunction with the heart, giving each person intellectual cognition (through the brain) and intuitive perception (through the heart).⁸¹

When anxiety intrudes, God offers us His peace to quiet our minds and soothe our hearts.

*“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*
(PHILIPPIANS 4:7)

Addressing Emotions and Feelings⁸²

Anxiety creates feelings of unease, apprehension, or nervousness. And it always has a trigger. As a surface feeling, anxiety “masks deeper feelings of embarrassment, fear, grief, helplessness, hurt, loneliness, and sadness.”⁸³

Unlike thoughts, feelings involve a reaction that resonates throughout the body via the limbic system in the brain and nervous system. When emotionally excited, you “feel it all over” through physical reactions (such as increased heart rate, faster breathing, perspiration, or shaking and trembling). Stress can also trigger a similar response.

Recognize symptoms of suppressed feelings.

Feelings are influenced by thoughts and perceptions. Some emotional reactions may originate subconsciously. What type of emotion you experience depends on how you view external events and what you think about them.

- Free-floating anxiety (vague, undefined unease) or depression (unexpressed grief or sadness over a loss)
- Psychosomatic symptoms (headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, and asthma can stem from suppressed emotions)
- Muscle tension (anger can result in stiff, tight back or neck muscles; grief and sadness are often held in muscles in the chest and eyes; fear typically tightens the stomach/diaphragm)

“What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me”
(JOB 3:25).

Tune in to your body.

Feelings are usually simple or complex. Basic emotions are typically simple: anger, fear, sadness, love, and joy. Complex emotions may include an assorted mix of simple emotions, but are also more unique in how long they last and what triggers them. For example, you may feel love, anger, and guilt all at once if you are arguing with someone close to you.

- Physically relax (progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or another relaxation technique for five to 10 minutes when your body is tense and your mind is racing).

- Assess what you're feeling in the moment (main focus of concern).
- Concentrate where in your body you feel emotional sensations like anger, fear, or sadness (such as heart, stomach). Observe what feelings or moods surface by waiting for them. Revisit the previous steps beginning with relaxation if thoughts continue to race.

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts"
(PSALM 139:23).

Express your feelings.

Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They simply are. Thoughts, judgments, and perceptions that lead to feelings may be right or wrong, true or false. Thus, feelings are an indicator of your own conclusions, but not of someone else's motivations or actions.

- Ask the Lord to reveal your feelings to you.
- Express your feelings by sharing them with someone or writing your feelings down in a journal.
- Release your feelings physically (by exercising or crying into a pillow).

"My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught" (PSALM 55:2).

Discharge sadness.

- When do you cry? When someone hurts you? When you're lonely? When you're afraid?
- Do you only cry when you're alone? Do you avoid letting someone else see you cry?
- If crying is difficult, try watching an emotional movie or read something emotionally moving to help surface sadness.

Address anger appropriately.

- Count to 10 slowly, breathing deeply as you count.
- Go for a walk, run, or lift weights.
- Write out your honest thoughts to God and talk with someone after your anger has subsided.

Examine the need underlying your emotions.

Feelings can be suppressed, but they tend to surface in one way or another . . . like bubbles that “rise to the surface or [turbulent] waves that you must ride out.”⁸⁴ You could be mad at your spouse, and take that anger with you to work. You might hold your feelings in or distract yourself to avoid them. Burying feelings can result in a later unplanned eruption or an unseen internal implosion. You can also experience numbness or emotional emptiness if you remain out of touch with your feelings.

- If you’re anxious because you’re afraid of what others think, a need for acceptance might be causing your fear.
- If you’re anxious when someone breaks a promise, a need for respect and appreciation could trigger your anger.
- If you’re anxious when your life seems dull or routine, a need for meaning and purpose might be driving your depression.

“It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose”
(PHILIPPIANS 2:13).

Engage Your Emotions⁸⁵

Freeze anxious thoughts that lead to troubling emotions and stressful feelings. Rather than continuing to allow a disruptive thought to race in your mind and fuel frantic feelings, stop, take a deep breath, cease striving, and refuse to fret.

“Be still, and know that I am God” (PSALM 46:10).

Refocus your attention on your physical heart muscle, located slightly to the left of your sternum, near the center of your chest. With your eyes closed, place one hand over your heart. From this direct focus on your physical heart, redirect your mind to turning your spiritual heart toward God. Emotionally rest and trust in Him.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight”
(PROVERBS 3:5–6).

Replace out-of-control emotions with positive feelings from your past. Recall a memory which brings to mind a time when you gave or received one of the following: compassionate care (love), forgiveness (removal of guilt and shame), appreciation (gratitude or joy), or acceptance (non-judgmentalism). Don't include all four at once. Simply remember a special moment, an image of beauty, or a glimpse of God in your life. Don't just picture the scene, feel the positive emotion this image evokes in your heart.

"Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound" (PSALM 4:7).

Remove any anxious thoughts by "melting" them in your heart: Rather than being overwhelmed by anxiety initiated in your mind, surround each thought in your heart with positive emotions reflected by past, positive experiences.

"As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart" (PROVERBS 27:19).

How to Correct Your Core Beliefs— *Spiritually*

Katie just received a failing grade on a college exam. She begins feeling anxious, fearing that she will fail her class and have to take it again. Then anxious thoughts flood her mind as she thinks about the financial costs of having to repeat the class. Dread washes over her as she anticipates the guilt and embarrassment of telling her parents. She imagines how upset they will be.

Katie believes she is a failure, and that God is disappointed with her when she fails. If left unchecked, Katie will continue to hold these beliefs about herself and God whenever she fails or makes a mistake. This belief only fuels more anxiety, lowers her sense of self-worth, promotes more unhealthy behaviors of escaping or ignoring problems, and likely continues to cause her to feel distant from God. But it doesn't have to be this way.

When we stop and examine our circumstances, thoughts, emotions, and actions, they can reveal the core beliefs we have about ourselves, God, and life in general. These beliefs can all too often be based on lies that need to be challenged and confronted with God's truth. What we say we believe doesn't always line up with what we practice or how we respond to stressful situations. We need to bring our thoughts, actions, emotions, and beliefs into alignment. To break free from the deeply held lies we believe, we need to know the truth. Jesus said . . .

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

(JOHN 8:32)

Base Your Beliefs on Truth

When you encounter anxiety-producing situations:⁸⁶

Identify the triggering event.

- Where were you?
- Who were you with? (Or were you alone?)
- What exactly happened?

"Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways'"
(HAGGAI 1:5).

Examine your unhealthy responses.

- What did you think? (What was your automatic negative thought?)
- What did you feel?
- What did you say?
- What did you do?

"Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD"
(LAMENTATIONS 3:40).

Evaluate your thoughts and beliefs.⁸⁷

- What does your response reveal about your core beliefs about you?
About God?

- What evidence is there for these core beliefs? Does the evidence suggest that your belief is true or not true?
- Is there another way to understand what happened? What factors haven't you considered?
- What effect does this belief have on you? Does it generally help you or harm you?

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (PSALM 139:23–24).

Confront your beliefs with God's truth.

- What direct passage of Scripture speaks to your belief, either to support or challenge it?
- If there is not a direct passage, is there a general principle or truth about God that speaks to your belief?
- Memorize and mediate on that passage or truth regularly.
- Write it down and read it often.

"I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes" (PSALM 119:59).

Plan for a healthy response in the future.

- What thoughts do you need to watch for and challenge the next time this situation happens?
- What passage from God's Word do you need to remember to help you in this situation?
- What do you need to pray for when you encounter this situation?
- What actions can you take that will be more helpful and healthy next time?

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you" (PSALM 32:8).

As you regularly go through this process with anxiety-producing situations in your life, you will more readily identify the lies or mistaken beliefs you have about yourself, God, and life in general. By confronting lies and false beliefs with God's Word, you will become more grounded in truth and be able to walk in freedom.

*“Since you have heard about Jesus
and have learned the truth that comes from him,
throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life,
which is corrupted by lust and deception.
Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.”*
(EPHESIANS 4:21–23 NLT)

How to Confront Your Fears and Phobias— Behaviorally and Socially⁸⁸

Just as it is important to keep your body calm, your thoughts controlled, and your beliefs correct, it is imperative that you *act* on your beliefs by planning and implementing behavioral changes to derail and dispel your fears. This can best be done by systematically confronting them one fear at a time, one action step at a time from one level of difficulty to the next until you have robbed them of the power they have in your life. Regular, repeated exposure to something that triggers a sense of fear, anxiety or danger can help to *desensitize* you to it as a result of simple conditioning. Repeat one action step day after day until you no longer have a strong physical or emotional reaction.

The procedure of *desensitization* in overcoming panic attacks is undeniably uncomfortable yet urgent. It involves standing up to your fears rather than covering before them or running away. It puts your faith into action . . . allowing it to work for you, which is what God intends your faith to do. He wants your faith to benefit you not only in the forgiveness of your sins, but also in helping you overcome anxiety.

Facing your fears in the strength of the Lord will show your faith not in yourself, but in God who resides within you. As Jesus’ brother James said . . .

*“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . . .
I will show you my faith by my deeds. . . .
[Abraham’s] faith and his actions were working together,
and his faith was made complete by what he did.”*
(JAMES 2:17–18, 22)

10 Common Specific Phobias

- Animal and insect phobias
- Blood/injection phobias
- Claustrophobia
- Dental phobia
- Fear of death
- Fear of disease (hypochondria)
- Fear of flying (aviophobia)
- Fear of heights (acrophobia)
- Fear of vomiting (emetophobia)
- Performance anxiety

Coping with Specific Phobias

To equip you to *confront your fears* . . .

Gradually increase your exposure to the object of your anxiety-producing fear.

Specific Phobia—*Example: fear of dogs*

- Look at pictures and read stories about dogs.
- Watch movies or television specials about dogs that are inspirational and uplifting.
- Spend time walking around inside a pet store where dogs are being groomed and boarded.
- Go to a site where obedience classes are being conducted and observe people interacting with dogs.
- Take a short walk with a friend who is walking a leashed dog.
- Ask a trusted, knowledgeable person about how to properly meet and pat a dog and then practice your new-found skills on a friendly, but calm, docile dog.

- Gradually increase the amount of time you spend interacting with a variety of dogs in various safe places.

As you increase your exposure to the thing you fear, remember God is with you every step you take. . . .

*“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged,
for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*
(JOSHUA 1:9)

Practice facing your fear with the understanding that avoidance may offer temporary relief, but it could also increase your level of anxiety with each subsequent exposure.

Social Phobia—*Example: fear of making a group presentation*

- Write out your presentation.
- Visualize yourself making the presentation to someone you know and trust. Then practice giving your presentation out loud in a safe, quiet place.
- Rehearse your presentation with a supportive, safe person.
- Repeatedly visualize yourself giving your presentation to one or two, then three or four, then five or six, then ten or fifteen people up to the number of individuals who will attend your actual presentation. Imagine yourself feeling confident and successfully giving your presentation.
- Practice your presentation in front of a few close, safe friends or relatives and listen to their feedback.
- Throughout this process, replace negative fearful thoughts with positive encouraging ones, and use deep breathing to calm your body. Constantly remind yourself that God is in you and surrounding you with His confidence, strength, and sufficiency.
- Draw courage and confidence from the fact that God will use this experience to strengthen your character and prove Himself strong on your behalf.

When facing your fears, commit yourself to the Lord, and He will strengthen you.

*“The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth
to strengthen those whose hearts
are fully committed to him.”
(2 CHRONICLES 16:9)*

Repeat each step over again until it evokes little reaction.

Agoraphobia—*Example of fearing a panic attack (fear of open spaces such as a mall)*

- Imagine yourself going to the local mall, parking your car, and going to the door. Then drive with a friend to the mall, park, and get out of the car. Walk up to the entrance to the mall, open the door, walk in, and then walk back out and return to your car.
- Imagine yourself walking into the mall and down the corridor, looking into stores as you walk. Then go with a friend to the mall, go inside and walk around.
- Visualize yourself going inside the mall, entering a store, and walking down an aisle.
- Go to the mall with someone, enter a store, and walk down the aisles while looking at sale items.
- Visualize yourself making a purchase, standing at the check-out stand and paying.
- Go to the mall, enter a store and make a small purchase.
- Throughout this process, practice deep breathing, positive thought control and reality-based beliefs.

In dealing with the behavioral aspects of anxiety attacks by practicing the skill of *confronting your fears*, you will be laying the fourth and final part of the foundation necessary for removing their power in your life. Jesus knew his followers would have to face fearful, and sometimes terrifying, situations head-on, but He also knew the Spirit of God would be their strength and sufficiency. The words He spoke to His disciples then can be an encouragement to you now . . . as well as the words Peter later spoke to the early church.

*“When you are brought before
synagogues, rulers and authorities,
do not worry about how you will
defend yourselves or what you will say,
for the Holy Spirit will teach you
at that time what you should say.”*

(LUKE 12:11–12)

Note: For serious phobic reactions, the process of desensitization is almost always used in combination with counseling or medical help.

How God’s Word Can Calm an Anxious Heart

Mary sits peacefully at the feet of Jesus, listening to Him teach. Martha, busy with and distracted by “much serving” starts to get agitated. Martha tells Jesus that He needs to tell Mary to help her out. Jesus’ reply is poignant, *“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things”* (Luke 10:41 ESV). Now substitute your name for Martha’s and read that line again.

Is this true of you? Are you anxious about many things? Certainly, there’s no shortage of matters to be anxious about in our broken world—health, money, job security, children, aging loved ones, the future, and the list goes on and on.

But amidst our anxiety, the Lord calls us by name, invites us to draw near Him, where He will calm and comfort us with His presence and His Word.

*“In the multitude of my anxieties within me,
Your comforts delight my soul.”*

(PSALM 94:19 NKJV)

If You Say: “I’m afraid that my situation is impossible.”

The Lord Says: I can make all things possible.

“What is impossible with man is possible with God” (LUKE 18:27).

If You Say: “I’m worried that I’m not wise enough.”

The Lord Says: I will give you my wisdom.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (JAMES 1:5).

If You Say: “I feel anxious over the cares of the world.”

The Lord Says: Cast all your cares on me.

“Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you” (PSALM 55:22).

If You Say: “I’m overwhelmed with fear.”

The Lord Says: I will give you my strength when you’re afraid.

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (ISAIAH 41:10).

If You Say: “I’m so worried and anxious over the wrongs I’ve done and I can’t forgive myself.”

The Lord Says: Let go of your worries and anxieties. I will forgive you.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 JOHN 1:9).

If You Say: “I’m anxious and worried that my loved ones might leave me.”

The Lord Says: Once you’ve come to me, I will never leave you.

“The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (DEUTERONOMY 31:8).

If You Say: “I’m anxious about dying.”

The Lord Says: I will give you eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (JOHN 3:16).

If You Say: “I’m anxious and I can’t rest.”

The Lord Says: I will give you my rest.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (MATTHEW 11:28-30 MSG).

The Lord helps you find rest and peace.

When you are overcome with fear, read Psalm 23. This psalm is one of the most beloved passages in the entire Bible, and for good reason. It is full of truth we need to focus on to experience comfort, restoration, and peace rather than fear. Every verse in this psalm reminds us of truth that can calm our hearts.

The Psalm 23 Strategy

“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

*² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,*

*³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along
the right paths for his name’s sake.*

*⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.*

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

*⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow
me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house
of the LORD forever.”*

Certain situations cause more fear and anxiety than others. Sometimes it is enough to read Psalm 23 once to settle your fears. At other times, you may need to move to a quiet place without distractions so you can repeatedly focus on each verse of the psalm and its promises.

Verse 1: *“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”*

Imagine a grassy, pastoral scene and the Lord there with you. Slowly say, “The Lord is my Shepherd” five times, each time emphasizing a different word:

THE Lord is my Shepherd.
The **LORD** is my Shepherd.
The Lord **IS** my Shepherd.
The Lord is **MY** Shepherd.
The Lord is my **SHEPHERD**.

Verse 2: *“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.”*

Imagine yourself lying down beside a soothing, calm pool of water.

Verse 3: *“He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.”*

Take several slow deep breaths and say, “My Shepherd refreshes my soul” five times. Say it slowly, each time emphasizing a different word:

MY Shepherd refreshes my soul.
My **SHEPHERD** refreshes my soul.
My Shepherd **REFRESHES** my soul.
My Shepherd refreshes **MY** soul.
My Shepherd refreshes my **SOUL**.

Verse 4: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*

Realize that you are not trapped. Say, “I will fear no evil, the Lord is with me” five times, repeating it slowly.

Verse 5: *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”*

Repeat the following statement five times, each time emphasizing a different word:

THE Lord is my Protector.
The **LORD** is my Protector.
The Lord **IS** my Protector.
The Lord is **MY** Protector.
The Lord is my **PROTECTOR**.

Verse 6: *“Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”*

Thank the Lord for the way He will use each anxious situation for good in your life.

“Dear God, I thank you
that you are my Shepherd.
You guide me, you protect me,
and you give me your peace.
You are the one who restores my soul.
You know my weaknesses and
the times I’ve caved in to fear.
Now, in my weakness, I will choose
to rely on your strength.
You are my Shepherd.
I am choosing to rely on your power
to move me from fear to faith.
As I turn my fear over to you,
use it for good in my life
to remind me of my continual need for you.
In your holy name I pray. Amen”

Mindfulness vs. Christian Meditation

Question: “A friend recently told me she has been using Christian meditation (mindfulness) to help reduce stress and anxiety in her life. Aren’t these practices non-Christian?”

Answer: *Meditation*, and more recently *mindfulness*, has received a lot of public attention. In today’s world filled with stress, anxiety, and depression, is it any surprise people are searching for ways to find peace and calm?

Some research suggests that practicing reflective techniques may offer physical and mental health benefits (i.e., reducing blood pressure, anxiety and depression, relieving insomnia), but some Christians recoil at the thought of meditation and mindfulness because of associations with mysticism or Eastern religious practices. But are they indeed the same?

Consider this information and make an informed evaluation:

Mindfulness

- In mental health and medical literature, *mindfulness* is often founded on some form of Eastern philosophy or religion. In fact, the mindfulness movement originated from the Zen Buddhist worldview.
- Mindfulness as practiced in the Buddhist-based model is an issue for Christians because it centers on emptying the mind or detaching from all thoughts, and those thoughts are not to be judged.⁸⁹
- Mindfulness varies significantly from the biblical notion of meditation—mindfulness is awareness, not transformational. Mindfulness focuses on a horizontal perspective, not a vertical relationship with God. Mindfulness is self-awareness, not God-awareness.

People in today's culture can find some relief in certain practices of mindfulness, such as breathing deeply and calming the mind.

Christian Meditation

- The purpose of Christian meditation is focused on deepening a relationship with God, cultivating spiritual growth and emotional healing, and growing in love toward others as well as yourself.⁹⁰
- Christian meditation is an active interaction between God and man. God is mindful of us (Psalm 8:4), and, as Christians, we have been given the mind of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).
- Meditation is mentioned both specifically and indirectly in Scripture.
 - Joshua 1:8 tells us to *meditate* on the Book of the Law day and night.
 - Philippians 4:8 instructs us to *think about* things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable.
 - Psalm 119:15 says we are to *meditate* on God's precepts and consider His ways.
- We mediate on God by reflecting on who He is, listening to Him as we pray, renewing our minds by the power of the Holy Spirit within us, loving God with all of our being (body, mind, and soul), and embedding God's Word in our minds.

In Psalm 77:12 (NASB), David's meditation does not focus on himself, nor does he seek to empty his mind.

*"I will meditate on all Your work.
And muse on Your deeds."*

How to Help Anxiety Sufferers

Imagine a warm, glowing campfire. If you remove one of the logs from the fire, it will quickly burn out and the fire will not be as warm or as bright. But if it remains near the fire, mixed in with other sticks and logs, it can provide warmth and light. Realize, those who battle anxiety need the warmth, light and comfort of a friend . . . or they could quite literally experience burnout. Anxiety can be an isolating experience, and many mistakenly feel they must manage it alone.

You probably know someone who struggles with anxiety. If anxiety has been a part of your life, then you likely recognize that it helps to have someone to comfort you, encourage you, and speak truth into your life. While God repeatedly says to fearful hearts, *“I am with you”* (Isaiah 43:5), He also uses people—just like you—to be a helpful support to others and show His love. You can be used by God to help those struggling with anxiety and be a calming, comforting, and encouraging presence.

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,
who comforts us in all our troubles,
so that we can comfort those in any trouble
with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”*
(2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4)

Do’s and Don’ts of Support

Don’t think that you cannot help or make a difference in the lives of others.

Do realize that God can use you to comfort and encourage others.

“God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus”
(2 CORINTHIANS 7:6).

Don't let them handle their anxiety alone, especially when they are in fearful situations.

Do be present with them and be a calming, encouraging support.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up" (ECCLESIASTES 4:9–10).

Don't dismiss, minimize, criticize, or belittle their anxious thoughts.

Do listen to their fears and worries and help them process their thoughts.

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (JAMES 1:19).

Don't ignore lies or irrational thoughts when you hear them.

Do lovingly speak truth and challenge the lies and irrational beliefs to foster healthy thinking.

"Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (EPHESIANS 4:25).

Don't let them be consumed by their worries and fears, believing there is no hope for change.

Do speak up and hold out hope for them and their future.

"There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off" (PROVERBS 23:18).

Don't provide pat answers or platitudes such as "Don't worry" or "You just need to trust God."

Do reassure them of God's love and care as well as your support.

"God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus" (PHILIPPIANS 1:8 NLT).

Don't use harsh or condemning words that show disapproval or disappointment.

Do express kindness, compassion, and encouragement.

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (EPHESIANS 4:29).

Don't engage in or encourage any unhealthy behaviors that will only increase their anxiety in the long run.

Do encourage them to care for themselves physically (go for a walk or exercise together, learn breathing or relaxation techniques together).

"Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 THESSALONIANS 5:11).

Don't ignore signs of stress or physical problems.

Do encourage them to talk with a doctor, counselor, or both.

"A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences" (PROVERBS 27:12 NLT).

Don't grow weary or impatient with them.

Do be patient, acknowledge progress, and compliment them on their efforts to overcome their anxiety.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (GALATIANS 6:9).

Don't believe that you can "fix" their anxiety or that you can "change" them.

Do know that you can support, encourage, help, and care for them, but ultimately God is the one who changes people .

"After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants . . . Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow" (1 CORINTHIANS 3:5–6 NLT).

Don't neglect to pray for them.

Do lift them up before the Lord regularly in private and pray with them in person.

"He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (COLOSSIANS 4:12).

**Focus on your fear,
and your panic will increase.
Focus on your Shepherd,
and your heart will be at peace.**

—June Hunt

From Drowning in the Dark to Finding Hope The Tommy Nelson Story—Part II⁹¹

Planning to address 800 people at a 12-session conference on the book of Romans (what would normally take a year of Sundays to preach), Tommy's done all the meticulous preparation in advance. Fulfilling his commitment is critically important to him. So it's all the more alarming when the now familiar feelings of overwhelming anxiety begin to creep in just a few days before the conference.

He feels as if he's losing his mind. When the panic initially attacks, on a scale of one to 10, it's a solid 10. But the lingering anxiety remains at a numbing six—like a persistent toothache. Then comes the sinking sensation of clinical depression, where all emotion seems to evaporate—even joy.

Another quick medical checkup reveals nothing out of the ordinary, and when Tommy's good friend Doug suggests they cancel the conference, it sounds like the right call. But after a good night of rest, he feels ready to go. However, when the paralyzing pain of anxiety resurfaces that night, he knows he's "toast."

Calling the church elders, this devoted and dedicated man of God admits he cannot continue and pulls back from serving. Not just from this conference, but others as well. Letting go of his duty feels like a failure, but foregoing the conferences lifts a heavy load. Eventually he retreats from the pulpit as well, taking a sabbatical in the hope of finding rest and restoration.

Natural sleep and simple naps are a thing of the past. For four months, he cannot fall asleep without medication. Nor can he stay asleep—fleeing his bed at three a.m., literally feeling "the anxiety crawl" onto him.⁹²

What is a pastor to do when he can't find the peace he has preached about for years? Even reading the Bible is a struggle because he can't concentrate or sit still. His physical strength is sapped and he goes from running four miles daily to barely being able to stay on a treadmill for 30 minutes.

Yet God finds ways to speak to Tommy, even when he can't focus on reading God's Word. Puttering in his garden—one thing that relieves his stress—he sings a hymn: “His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.” Glancing down at his feet, he notices a dead sparrow on the ground. He remembers that Jesus said God knows every sparrow that falls. He interprets the moment as God saying, “I know where you are. I know how you hurt. I'm right here with you.”⁹³

At times, Tommy retreats to a quiet place and cries out to God, wondering why God might have put him “on the shelf.” Is his theology off? Has he preached an incorrect message? He feels his church needs his perspective, but he can't see why he's been “sidelined.” With no joy in life, no taste for food, no love of beauty in nature—he views life through a dark lens. Flowers without fragrance, jokes without humor, and relationships without warmth. He feels as though he's failed.

Tommy discovers a few facts. Overwork and stress make his body run on adrenaline, which is fine for the short-term. But long-term, adrenaline produces cortisol which inhibits serotonin (a neurotransmitter that supports brain function). First, Tommy must recognize his problem of overwork, then eliminate it by “clearing the decks” and removing the source of his stress—his hectic schedule.⁹⁴

The symptoms of depression and anxiety continue until they have time to ebb away like flood waters, slow and steady. Imagine how terrifying it is when your mind betrays you by

becoming impaired in some way. But the brain housing your mind is a physical organ and just as much at risk as any other part of the body of being injured or impaired.

Each day Tommy pours out his heart to God, crying to heaven for relief. God sends an answer in a unique way. When a doctor friend calls to see how he is doing, Tommy's wife, Teresa, answers with desperation that something must be done because she knows her husband can't continue struggling through this dark abyss. Their physician friend seeks advice from a psychiatrist, who suggests treating what is clinically, scientifically, and medically wrong with Tommy. One medication to ease the effects of having "anxiety about anxiety" (which would also help Tommy sleep) and another medication will help rebuild his depleted serotonin levels.

Within weeks, Tommy suddenly realizes something is missing—the dark cloud of despair has lifted. When the load shifts off his shoulders, he tells his wife, "I'm me again."⁹⁵

Anxiety is a complicated condition involving mental, emotional, and spiritual components with physical and medical symptoms. Each must be evaluated and measured and treated as such. And they must be surrounded on all fronts. To try to medically treat the condition without addressing the cause, can result in symptoms lingering longer. And while counseling can help a person cope with stress, worry, and fear (and everything else that contributes to anxiety), if the physical and medical aspects are ignored and only a spiritual solution is sought, "deliverance" from debilitating anxiety could be delayed.

After his anxiety is properly treated, Tommy Nelson experiences occasional anxiousness, but not as strongly as before and not for as long a duration. Tommy regains his life and rediscovers the full measure of his hope, knowing that:

“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Romans 5:3-5 NASB).

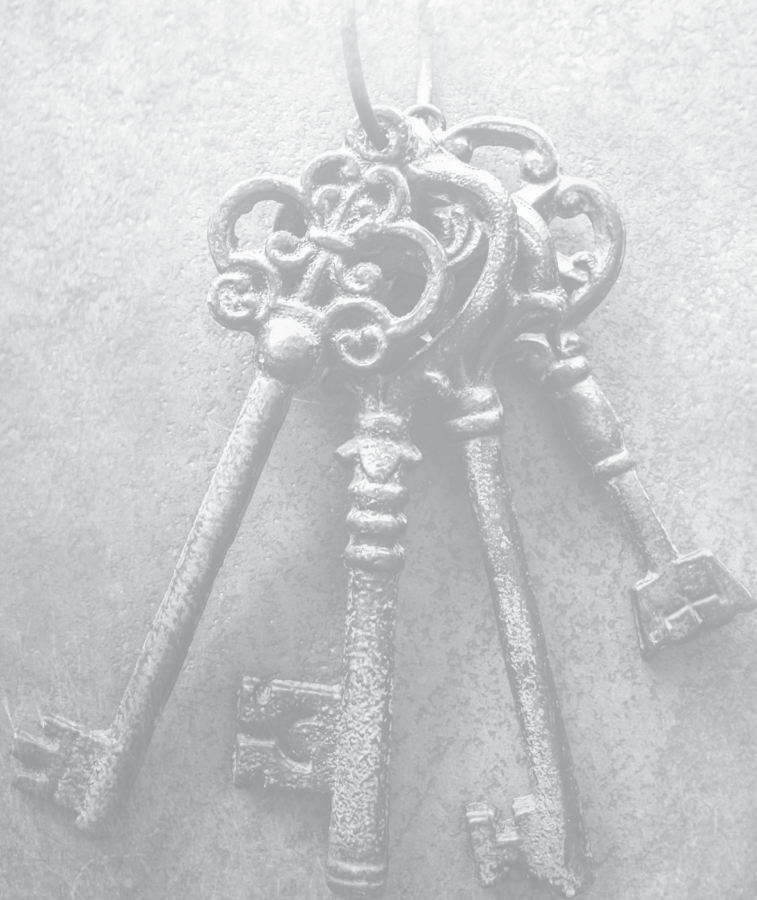
Tommy knows that an overload of anxiety can limit you from living your life to the full. But do not feel helpless or hopeless . . . unseen or unloved—because God sees you, knows you, and loves you.

Tommy Nelson echoes the wisdom of Corrie ten Boom who once said, “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.”⁹⁶

A man in Tommy’s church told him he understood everything Tommy had been feeling—because he had experienced the same ordeal. This man reassured Tommy that he, too, would make it through! The result of hearing this encouragement from someone who had successfully navigated such a difficult path gave Tommy a sense of renewed hope. Indeed, God can turn your pain into a promise of hope for others.⁹⁷



SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE



*“First seek the counsel
of the LORD.”*

(1 KINGS 22:5)



God's Word offers the hope and promise of a changed life. The Lord will renew your mind—transforming the way you think, act, and live—as you saturate yourself in His Word. In the following questions, the bold-faced words serve as prompts to help you more easily memorize the verses related to this topic. May God's truth come alive to you, flourish in you, and flow through you.

On whom should I **cast all my anxiety**?

*“**Cast all** your **anxiety** on him
because he cares for you.”*

(1 PETER 5:7)

If I am **not anxious about anything**, will I have **peace**,
and will that peace **guard my heart** and my **mind**?

*“Do **not** be **anxious about anything**,
but in every situation, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
And the **peace** of God, which transcends all
understanding, will **guard** your **hearts**
and your **minds** in Christ Jesus.”*

(PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7)

What can help me to **not be afraid** and **not be discouraged**?

*“Be strong and courageous.
Do **not be afraid**; do **not be discouraged**,
for the LORD your God
will be with you wherever you go.”*

(JOSHUA 1:9)

What can bring me **joy** when **anxiety** is **great within me**?

*“When **anxiety** was **great within me**,
your consolation brought me joy.”*

(PSALM 94:19)

Will I be **blessed** if I **trust in the Lord** and **not fear**,
but put my **confidence in Him**?

*“**Blessed** is the one who **trusts in the Lord**,
whose **confidence** is **in him**. They will be like
a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots
by the stream. It does **not fear** when heat comes;
its leaves are always green. It has no worries
in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”*

(JEREMIAH 17:7–8)

How can I ask **God** to **search me**, and
know my anxious thoughts?

*“**Search me, God**, and know my heart;
test me and **know my anxious thoughts**.”*

(PSALM 139:23)

Who is my **refuge and strength**, an **ever-present**
help in times of **trouble**?

*“God is our **refuge and strength**,
an **ever-present help** in **trouble**.”*

(PSALM 46:1)

What does **anxiety** do to the **heart** and what **cheers it up**?

*“Anxiety weighs down the **heart**,
but a kind word **cheers it up**.”*

(PROVERBS 12:25)

Where can I find **shelter** and **rest**, who is my **refuge**
and **fortress in whom I can trust**?

*“Whoever dwells in the **shelter** of the Most High
will **rest** in the shadow of the Almighty.*

I will say of the LORD,

*‘He is my **refuge** and my **fortress**,
my God, **in whom I trust**.’”*

(PSALM 91:1–2)

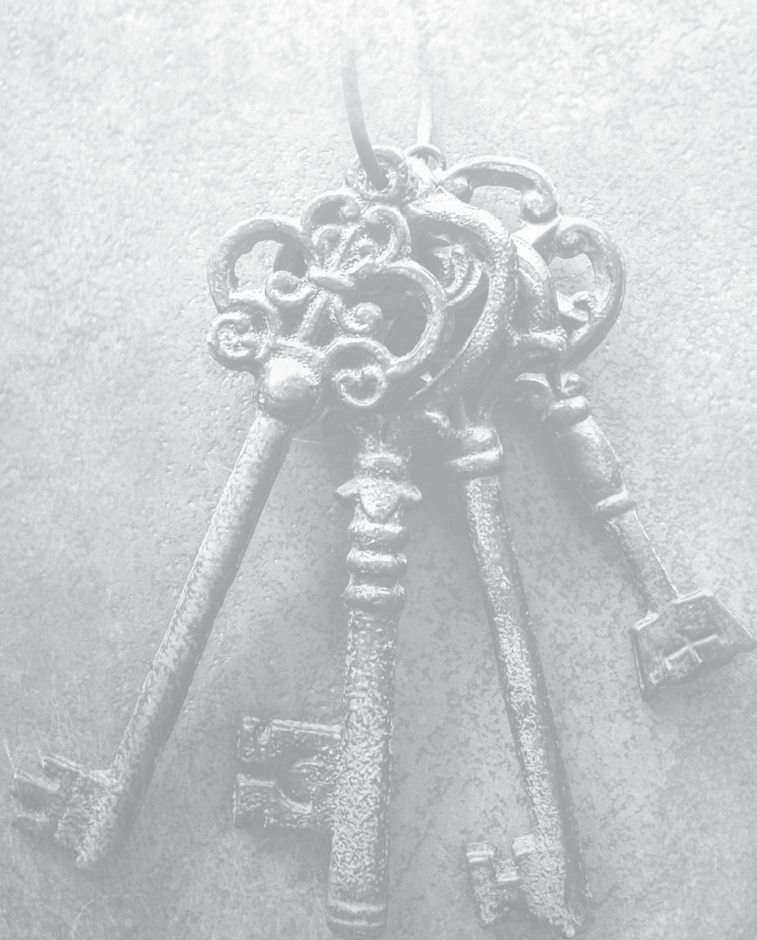
What **things** should I **think about**?

*“Whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
think about such **things**.”*

(PHILIPPIANS 4:8)



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*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,
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plans to give you hope and a future.’”
(Jeremiah 29:11)*

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Marriage and Family

Adoption
Adultery
The Blended Family
Considering Marriage
Dating
Divorce
The Dysfunctional Family
Infertility
Marriage
Parenting
Single Parenting
Singleness
Teenagers
The Unbelieving Mate
Widowhood

Counseling and Coaching

Aging Well
Alzheimer's & Dementia
Boundaries
Caregiving
Chronic Illness & Disabilities
Communication
Conflict Resolution
Confrontation
Counseling
Decision Making
Employment
Financial Freedom
Friendship
Intimacy
Leadership
Mentoring, Coaching, and Discipling
Procrastination
Purpose in Life
Reconciliation
Success through Failure
Time Management

To order additional *Keys for Living* topics or to learn more about the resources of Hope for the Heart, call 1-800-488-HOPE (4673) or visit HopeForTheHeart.org.

ANXIETY

Calming the Fearful Heart

The fearful unknowns, unending what-ifs, sleepless nights, and nervousness lead to a sense of impending doom. Then muscles tense, thoughts race, hearts pound, and breath is shortened—it's *anxiety*. And it affects an estimated 40 million adults in the U.S. alone. Anxiety is complex and multifaceted, affecting every area of life. The good news is God invites you to bring your anxiety to Him. In these *Keys for Living*, learn the types of anxiety disorders, common characteristics and causes, and ways to manage anxiety. Discover how God's Word can help calm the fearful, anxious heart.

KEYS FOR LIVING LIBRARY



"First seek the counsel of the LORD."

(1 Kings 22:5)

Life is full of challenges, but there is hope. The *Keys for Living Library* provides biblical truth and practical help for more than 100 topics to help you overcome difficulties, grow in maturity, and move forward in life. In each of the 100+ Keys, you'll discover God's wisdom and guidance in a simple format:

- *Definitions* help you understand the topic from God's perspective.
- *Characteristics* give insight into the different aspects of the topic.
- *Causes* shed light on the underlying issues related to the topic.
- *Steps to Solution* show you how to be transformed and walk in freedom.

Jesus said, *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). Our prayer is that God will use these *Keys for Living* to encourage, equip, and empower you with His life-changing truth.

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Because hope means everything.

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