

My Friend is Struggling With... Anxiety

Takeaway: Your diagnosis doesn't define you; the Father does.

Scripture: Psalm 94:18-19, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, 1 Timothy 6:12, John 10:10, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Isaiah 54:17, Philippians 4:6

Intro

Have you ever felt anxious before? Maybe you had a big test that you knew you weren't prepared for, and you were stressed about the outcome. Maybe if you drive, you've experienced a police officer pull up behind you and you started getting paranoid about whether you broke the law or not. Maybe you've experienced times where money was tight and you didn't know if your family could afford food, clothes, or the price for an activity you wanted to go on. Sometimes, the things that make us anxious are little things, and other times they are big things. No matter what causes it, it's a terrible feeling.

This type of anxiety is normal and is part of the human experience. It can be controlled and usually comes with an expiration date. You can pinpoint the origin of this stress and come up with a solution for it. Not only does the Bible talk about this anxiety, but the proper response to this type of worry is mentioned over 360 times. Fear not!

But the type of anxiety we are talking about tonight is different. Tonight, we're talking about anxiety disorder and all its cousins that wreak havoc on 40 million people in the U.S. alone. These include separation anxiety, social anxiety, generalized anxiety, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and more.

ANXIETY

Anxiety disorders can arise from your genetics, your brain chemistry, or a neurological response to trauma or your environment. This type of anxiety has a neurological origin that cannot be controlled; it can only be managed. Control and management are crucial in this discussion, because to tell someone to control something they have no say over is cruel.

So, what does clinical anxiety feel like? You may constantly feel irritable, on edge, and nervous. It feels like constant panic, danger is around the corner, and your doom is coming. Your body may go into a fight or flight response for no reason at all.

Your heart rate rises, your body starts to tremble and sweat uncontrollably, and you experience shortness of breath to the point that you may hyperventilate. This is called a panic attack because it feels like your own body is attacking you.

The mental battle of anxiety can leave you tired and weak, and yet it will keep you awake at night, unable to dismiss plaguing thoughts and just rest. The fact that you are battling with your own mind and body makes it hard to focus on the present moment and concentrate. You can literally feel your insides twisting in response to your anxiety to the point that you can't eat.

But before we continue, two disclaimers that are important:

1. If those symptoms describe you, the most dangerous thing you can do is to self-diagnose yourself and not seek professional help. We believe in God, and we also believe in trained professionals that have the experience to help explore these symptoms to figure out what is happening. The Bible tells us to seek wise counsel, and this includes trained specialists.

2. The point of tonight is not to solve the issue of anxiety. I am not equipped to do that, and if someone could solve anxiety, it would have been done by now. Tonight, is not the end of a discussion but the start of a conversation that needs to be ongoing. Anxiety grows in isolation. If we are not aware that our friends are struggling, then we allow them to struggle alone.

GOD LOVES YOU

The Bible offers insight into how we can approach the topic of struggling with mental illness. Remember, the Bible gives a front row seat to the messiness of humanity. In it, we don't find stories about perfect people that got it right. There are stories of people like you and me that struggled, but God still used them. Even though the Bible never calls out the diagnosis itself, there are practices that we can find in the Word of God that can help us manage our mental health in way that offers hope and life.

God the Father loves you because you are His child. When God sees you struggling, it breaks His heart. He doesn't see you as a project that is failing. He sees someone worth dying for, and He wants you to experience the best of this life. It's possible to let your mind go to a place where you think God doesn't care, doesn't love you, or sees you as something broken that needs fixing. But that just isn't true.

Psalm 94:18-19 pg. 286

18 When I thought, "My foot slips," your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. 19 When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul.

God wants to catch us when we are falling, and He wants to comfort us when we are overwhelmed with anxiety. Because He is our Father, and He loves us.

ANXIETY IS A SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Struggling with mental illness is a vulnerable battleground for spiritual attacks. The shame and guilt you have felt are not from God but from the accuser. *The enemy likes to take beautiful things and make them broken, but we serve a God who takes the broken and makes them beautiful.*

There was a moment in the Apostle Paul's life that he described as a direct attack from the enemy on his physical health. It crippled his effectiveness and caused enough pain for him to cry out to God three different times. This was God's response:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 pg. 564

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul had no control over his circumstances in the same way that we don't have control over mental illness. *The only thing we have control over is how we respond to our struggles with mental health.* We do get to choose to have a plan of action that includes healthy coping techniques to help us manage our anxiety. Paul's response was to turn to the Father, and he found that God's grace was enough. Paul witnessed that in his weakest moment, God's grace and strength was most visible.

There are moments where it feels like your diagnosis defines who you are. But you are not defined by the struggles you face. You are defined by the Maker of heaven and earth. Your diagnosis doesn't get to own you or rule you. Your diagnosis doesn't have authority over your outlook. Run to the Father in the moments where you feel weak and are attacked by shame. He wants a say in how you see yourself because you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

When Paul was attacked, prayer was his first response, not his last resort. He knew that if it was important enough to worry about, it was important enough to pray about. In the same way, when we run to God, we allow Him to shape our response.

THE FIGHT OF FAITH

1 Timothy 6:12 pg. 577

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Anxiety is not a fight of fear but of faith. It takes faith to believe that you are valued and loved when your own thoughts attack you at night. It takes faith to run to the Prince of Peace when your own thoughts create chaos. It takes faith to choose to the joy of the Lord when your mind can only see danger. It is a fight of faith, and it is not easy.

When Paul talked about taking hold of eternal life, he didn't describe something you get when you die. He was talking about life that is available now. It's the kind of life that is overflowing and brings vibrant joy. It's the life that Jesus describes:

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Yes, this refers to your spiritual life, but that's not all. God wants you to experience fullness in every aspect of your life, and that includes your health and thought lives. Some of us have to choose to fight our way to a full thought life. That doesn't make you wrong or sinful any more than having any other illness would.

GOD TAKES SOMETHING BAD AND TURNS IT GOOD

You are not disqualified or discounted because of a diagnosis. God wants to use you to be a force for good in this world. He wants to take what the enemy meant for evil and turn it into source of hope.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 pg. 561

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Your anxiety may feel like a curse if you let it define you. But because of the grace of God, your anxiety gives you the opportunity to develop a supernatural compassion for the people around you. You've been comforted with His strength. You are now stronger and more capable to care for others who are struggling with it. Anxiety can be crippling, but it can also enable us to be comforters to the suffering.

You didn't choose to have anxiety, but you do get to choose what you do with it. What we do with anxiety matters. We can let it ruin our lives, or we can allow God to make something beautiful out of it.

Isaiah 54:17

no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their vindication from me, declares the Lord."

This is the life that God has for His children with anxiety: a people with a spirit of power and not fear, and victors on the mental battlefield; not victims of a diagnosis.

APPLICATION

What do we do if our friend is struggling with anxiety?

1. **Treat them like a person, not a project** – listen to them, affirm them, love them. Compassion is the act of seeing and feeling another person's hurt. Empathy is the act of stepping into that hurt with them. These are the ways that Jesus would respond.
2. **Pray for them and with them** – pray for understanding, peace, and joy. Pray affirmation over them. Pray over them when you are not with them. Let them know you are praying for them. This is our first response not our last resort.
3. **Check Up on Them** – Send a text asking how they are managing with their anxiety. Celebrate with them when life is going well. Show compassion and grace when it isn't. If they are isolating themselves, keep checking in.

What Do I Do When I am Struggling?

1. **Seek Counseling** - You need to find a counselor to get the necessary help if you haven't done so. Never self-diagnose yourself and try to get through it on your own.
 - *Proverbs 12:15 - The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.*
2. **Find Community** - find a group of people that you can share your burdens with. Anxiety grows in isolation. You were made to do life together. That includes life's good moments and the ugly ones. We need people to help carry our burdens.
 - *Hebrews 12:1 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*
3. **Meditate on God's Word** - Find a verse to anchor your mind on when life feels hopeless. I'd suggest: Psalm 46:10, Psalm 23, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Matthew 11:28, Matthew 6:25-34.
4. **Honor Your Physical Health** - Your physical health is tied to your mental health. We typically punish our bodies as we deal with our minds. Get sleep, take a shower, eat healthy, foods and work out. Exercise is proven to help with anxiety.
5. **Start Small** - Anxiety can feel like a mountain. You don't have to solve everything at once. God gives grace and so should you. Take small steps to improving mental health.

LANDING

Everything we have talked about is not easy to do. It is a struggle to find hope in anxiety. But know this: you are not alone, and you will never have to carry this alone. God sees you, He values you, and He notices when you are hurting. You matter to God, and you matter to us.

Anxiety can feel lonely, but it doesn't have to be. It doesn't matter how big or how small your hurt is, God wants to be near his kids and love on them. I love this verse because it gives me the freedom to run to God about everything.

Philippians 4:6

do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Small Group Questions

How to Talk About Anxiety with Students:

Identify the Struggle: If a student shares about their experience with anxiety, let them know that you see it as difficult. It's easy to feel alone in a struggle, so when we identify that struggle we can let students know they are not alone. It sounds simple but it is powerful. The key phrase would be: "I am so sorry you struggle with that. That must be really difficult to handle."

Avoid Self-Diagnosing: After tonight, a student might hear what anxiety feels like and they might communicate "maybe I have anxiety as a diagnosis." They may be right, but they also could be wrong. Self-diagnosing can be dangerous because they might have something else going on, or they may try to get through an actual diagnosis on their own. The only way we can know for sure if we have a mental diagnosis is if we seek professional help. If a student tries to self-diagnose, a helpful response could be: "Have you ever seen a counselor before about that? Maybe you should try it if you haven't. Everybody should try counseling because it helps us identify what is affecting us."

Helpful Responses: The following are some key phrases that are helpful in response to what a student shares that show empathy and security: "Thank you for sharing," "What can we do to help?," "I'm sorry you are dealing with that," "How can we pray for you about that?," "Do you have anyone that you can talk to when you struggle?," "Can we be the people you talk to when you struggle?"

Small Group Questions:

- What surprised you, or what did you learn from tonight's message?
- What is the difference between anxiety as a feeling, and anxiety as an emotion?
- When you feel anxious, how do you usually respond to that emotion?
- How did Paul respond when he felt spiritually attacked? How do we respond when we feel our identity being attacked?
- In 2 Corinthians 12:10, Paul talked about delighting in weakness saying that when he is weak, Christ is strong. Why do you think he said that?
- What do you think would God say to someone with an anxiety diagnosis?
- Here some ways we can respond when we have anxiety: Seek counseling, find community, meditate on God's word, honor your physical health, and start small.
 - Which of these sounds the hardest? Why?
 - Which seems the easiest? Why?
- When our friends struggle with anxiety we can: Treat the like a person not a project, pray with them and for them, and check up on them.
 - Which of these sounds easiest? Why?
 - Which one sounds hardest? Why?