

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

WHEN ANXIETY ATTACKS



CIRCLE 01/03: **THE PATHWAY TO PEACE**

We live in a stressed out society. According to the American Institute for Stress, About 33% of people report feeling extreme stress, 77% of people experience stress that affects their physical health, 73% of people have stress that impacts their mental health, 48% of people have trouble sleeping because of stress, and stress is the leading health concern for people ages 12-18¹. Can you even wrap your mind around these mesmerizing numbers?

The statistics are staggering, but we must also remind ourselves that each statistic tells a story. Every percentage point represents thousands of real people just like you. They're struggling to sleep at night, they're feeling overwhelmed, and they don't know when relief is going to come. Truly, the tragedy of anxiety has consumed our world.

Together, we are about to embark on a practical study about a persistent problem — stress and anxiety. First things first, let's define some key words. The National Institute of Mental Health defines stress as “the physical or mental response to an external cause,” such as managing responsibilities, meeting expectations, or dealing with sickness. Stressors are usually one-time, real-life occurrences that consume your emotions. People often use the words stress and anxiety interchangeably, but they are distinct. Different than stress, NIMH continues to explain that anxiety is known to occur without a current threat or stressor in place. Basically, stress is triggered externally and anxiety is triggered internally.

An Important Disclaimer

Anxiety is a loaded topic as it can range from manageable anxiousness triggered by stressors to an actual mental illness that needs professional help. For the sake of this study, we are discussing everyday stress and anxiety, not an anxiety disorder. If you fear you may have an anxiety disorder, then please seek support. We have attached a “Mental Health Checkup” to this document to help you evaluate if you should reach out to mental health professionals.

Some people need to work through life with the help of Jesus and a doctor. That's okay. Some people need both prayer and prescriptions. That's okay too. Some of us can deal with our anxiety and stress with healthy spiritual and physical habits. Others have an actual chemical imbalance within their body where their stress messengers are constantly sending false signals to their brain. They need people on their team to help fight that battle. Anxiety and depression go much further than nervousness and sadness.

¹ [The American Center for Stress](#)

For some people, these feelings can be debilitating. If that's you, then please don't try to fight this on your own. Seek support.

Anxiety is a bully. Using the magic of your imagination, anxiety can make your heart race and your palms sweat. It makes simple tasks feel like mammoth responsibilities. It encourages us to procrastinate for months until even starting the task seems impossible. It makes us lie awake all night thinking about past mistakes or the worst-case scenario for the future.

Anxiety rears its ugly head when we face stress at school, conflict within personal relationships, pain from past experiences, fear about a future event, or even just a general sense of uncertainty. We know how it starts, but how do we make it stop? Over the next few weeks, we are going to unpack the fourth chapter of Philippians, coined as "Paul's Pathway to Peace."

READ: Philippians 4:6-7

"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."

Let's go back in time to ancient Rome. Gladiators, soldiers, and colosseums surround the most congested corners of every metropolis. At the corner of Rome's empire sits the thriving city of Philippi. Christians in this city received a deeply personal letter from their pastor, friend, and mentor — the Apostle Paul.

Philippians is one of Paul's most personal writings, as he longs to visit his church family. The Philippians are experiencing emotional turmoil as the culture around them dramatically shifts. Emperor Nero went on a violent rampage with one single goal — exterminate the Christian movement.

Because of this, the church was working through a collective trauma. They were suffering, scared, and unsafe, so Paul wanted to help his hurting friends. You can sense the sorrow in this Scripture as these dear friends may never see each other again. Why? Because Paul is writing this passage from a prison cell.

It's staggering to recognize that Paul gives us the pathway to peace while he's imprisoned. His advice is two-fold. When anxiety tries to derail you, you have two pathways to peace.

Prayer: It Connects Us to the Present

Wait, is Paul just saying to pray the pain away? This verse can come across as an oversimplification of a complex problem. While it may seem too easy or obvious,

prayer is a pivotal step towards peace. Lay your burdens, concerns, and fears before God. Give God the pain of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

Prayer is powerful because it brings you into the present moment. It's not just theologically sound— it's psychologically sound too. In counseling textbooks, this is called "grounding." This process allows us to stabilize our stress reaction by connecting with the present moment. It brings us out of our heads and into our current surroundings.

Here is a powerful, practical, and prayerful grounding exercise to try next time your stress skyrockets. It's based on the popular 5-4-3-2-1 grounding tactic used in clinical therapy.

- Take a deep breath. Then name 5 things you can see around you.
- Take a deep breath. Then name 4 things you can hear, smell, or touch.
- Take another deep breath. Then name 3 things you are thankful for today.
- Take a deep breath. Then name 2 character traits of God.
- Finally, ask God to bring you peace into this 1 present moment. Don't get caught up in the future or the past. Just focus on connecting with God here and now.

Thanksgiving: It Gives Us Confidence for the Future

Thanksgiving is way bigger than a holiday with turkey, football, and pie. It should be a daily rhythm within your routine, especially when facing anxiety. When stress strikes, count things you're thankful for. Some days you may only be able to come up with a roof over your head and some snacks in your cupboard, but that's a great place to start.

Thanksgiving reminds us that God provided in the past, and He'll continue to provide in the future. Gratitude will help you contextualize the past, connect with peace in the present, and cultivate optimism for the future.

Prayer and thanksgiving offer us a path to inner-peace. It's something every human craves, but few actually encounter. Authentic peace is life-changing. Peace happens when we are set free from our stress, worry, and uncertainty. It's not based on our surroundings. It's based on our standing with God. Prayer connects us to God's presence, and God's presence is our source of peace.

With God, true peace is a present. Just like any gift, you must be open to receive it. Invite God into your stress and your mess, He will give you peace.

IMPORTANT:

If you're suffering from severe anxiety, seek professional help. It's okay to walk through life with the help of Jesus and a counselor. For more information, turn to pages 13-14.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Introduce yourself and share one thing you are thankful for.

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: How do you usually respond to stress or anxiety?

Q3: How can prayer help you battle anxious feelings in your mind?

Q4: How can thanksgiving help you battle anxious feelings in your mind?

Q5: What has been causing you stress or anxiety? When those feelings begin to arise, what can you do to remind yourself to pray and be thankful?

Application: Determine your first step on your pathway to peace and put that into action this week.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

John 9:13-34

1 John 5:1-12

1 John 5: 12-21

Psalms 71:15-16

Mark 5:1-20

Psalms 22:19-31

1 John 1:2-3

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present.

Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/03: **PROTECTING YOUR MIND**

Do you constantly worry about the worst-case scenario?

Do you often feel nervous or worried for no apparent reason?

Do you judge yourself harshly?

Does making a decision send you into a downward-spiral?

Do you completely avoid something to the point where starting again seems staggering?

If you answered yes to any of these, then you're familiar with stress and anxiety. That's okay. It's natural. However, severe stress has the power to become debilitating and life-altering. We all deal with anxiety to some degree, so it's pivotal that we learn how to recognize, reset, and redirect our anxious thought patterns.

Anxiety is how our brain deals with danger. Your endocrine system creates dozens of different hormones designed to serve as chemical messengers to your brain. There is a powerful little hormone called cortisol. It's released when your brain senses danger. Ultimately, cortisol is good at keeping you alive. It makes your heart rate rise, injects glucose into your muscles, pinpoints pain, and heightens your senses. Cortisol prevents you from walking into oncoming traffic, eating a flaming marshmallow, climbing onto a dangerous cliff, or playing with a poisonous snake.

Except, here is the problem: stress isn't supposed to be our default setting. You can't live off cortisol. God doesn't want these stress chemicals surfing through your body all the time. It's harmful. However, constant negative thinking makes these chemicals flow freely. Our brains are not great at distinguishing authentic threats over imaginary threats. Thus, our thoughts can trigger the same reaction as a real life-or-death situation. If you imagine a threat, then your body will react like it's real. This is why stressful thinking can make you sick, and negative thoughts can keep you in bed all day.

God doesn't want that for you, so it's important that you transform your thinking.

READ: Philippians 4:8-9

"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. 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."

As Paul lays out the pathway to peace for his friends in Phillipi, he encourages them to break negative thought patterns. He encourages them to replace negative thoughts with positive virtues. **"Whatever is true, noble, pure, right, admirable and lovely —**

think on these things,” Paul elaborates. This passage offers a replacement for mental torment. We stop stressful thoughts by focusing on virtues. We can’t just reject them; we must redirect them. The virtues listed in Philippians Four should make up a filter for a healthy thought life.

Here is a breakdown of the virtues to use as a filter:

True: This means reliable and honest. We often fill our minds with lies, accusations, and worst-case scenarios. Paul encourages us to focus on what we know to be true and that alone. Stress is a waste of imagination.

Noble: This means something that’s worthy of respect. Don’t disrespect yourself and fill your mind with self-destructive thoughts. Focus on what’s noble and respectful— of others and yourself.

Right and Pure: These focus on honoring God and others. Actively fight the urge to fill your mind with unrighteous and impure thoughts. Rather, think on what’s right and pure. If you wouldn’t want someone to read it, don’t think it.

Admirable and Lovely: These are things that are pleasing or enjoyable. This simply means to think of things that make you happy. Don’t sweat the small stuff; rather, focus on all the amazing things around you. From sunrises to seasons, there is so much wonderful in our world.

It’s easy to blame stress on outward circumstances like relationships, school, or money. However, those things didn’t cause your stress. They merely triggered it. Your stress started between your ears. A positive life starts with positive thoughts. Notice Paul didn’t just say, “Stop negative thoughts.” He suggested that we redirect them. Don’t just reject negative thoughts; redirect them.

Reject the chaos of worry, and redirect your thoughts to the peace found in God. Be still. Reject critical self-talk, and redirect your thoughts to the love and affirmation of God. Show yourself the same compassion God shows you. Be kind. Reject negativity, and redirect your your thoughts to all the amazing blessings God has put before you. Be thankful.

If you want to change your life, change your thinking. Center your thoughts on God. Reject the negative, and redirect towards the positive.

IMPORTANT:

If you’re suffering from severe anxiety, seek professional help. It’s okay to walk through life with the help of Jesus and a counselor. For more information, turn to pages 13-14.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Introduce yourself and share one thing you are thankful for.

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: Over the past week, have your thoughts been more stressful or virtuous?

Q3: How do your thoughts impact other aspects of your life (words, actions, relationships, etc.)?

Q4: Why do you think God cares so much about your thought life?

Q4: Why is it important not only to reject negative thoughts but also to redirect them?

Q5: What are repeating negative thoughts in your life or the lives of your peers? What virtue can you remember to redirect those thoughts in a godly direction?

Application: What can you do this week to begin rejecting and redirecting negative thoughts?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 28:18-20

1 Timothy 2:1-6

Philippians 3:4-17

Philippians 4:12-13

Matthew 6:9-13

Matthew 6:25-27

Exodus 16:1-3

Esther 4:14

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present.

Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/03: **THE SECRET TO OVERCOMING STRESS**

Kentucky Fried Chicken has over 24,000 locations all over the world. The company is worth over 7.3 billion dollars. What's the secret to their success? Well, it is a secret recipe. Colonel Sanders' handwritten secret recipe can only be found in one place -- locked away in a high-security vault. The secret script touts eleven confidential spices and herbs. It's such a secret, that the seasoning mix is created in different factories and sent to restaurants in separate batches.

We have been working through the fourth chapter of Philippians together. Paul saw the pain, trauma, and suffering of his friends in Philippi, so he wanted to share how he overcame similar situations. In his pathway to peace, he taught them about the power of prayer, gratitude, and a positive perspective. In the closing of the letter, he shared his secret recipe for overcoming stress.

With chains bound to his bruised wrists, Paul should have been stressed, discouraged, and anxious. However, he wrote a surprisingly optimistic closing of Philippians to tell his friends how he overcame stress and continued to stand strong. What is his secret recipe for overcoming stress? Let's investigate together.

READ: Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last, you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

As you'd expect, Paul's incarceration proved to be miserable. Twenty-four-hour surveillance stripped him of any shred of privacy. Spoiled food ensured he was constantly sick and suffering. Heavy chains caused his skin to bruise and blood to flow from his cuts.

Behind maximum-security prison bars, Paul penned a quirky sentence. He wrote, "I have learned the secret of being content" (Philippians 4:12). His use of the word "secret" is strange. Interestingly, he only uses this word a few times in his library of letters. I find it curious because he could have phrased this in many ways. He didn't proclaim, "I've found the principle" or "I want to share an idea." Paul proudly explained, "I have learned the secret to being content."

"Psst, I have a secret," Paul whispers. What is a secret? By definition, it's when something is "not known or seen or not meant to be known or seen by others." Paul

wanted to share a secret with his friends at Philippi and with you, so what is it? What's Paul's secret?

Just like KFC's famous secret recipe for chicken, Paul has a recipe for our lives. In the context of stress and anxiety, this is your secret recipe for overcoming stress. These are the three things you need that set you free from the cycle of stress.

Contentment

If your happiness depends on where you live, whom you date, or where you work, then you are dealing with discontentment. A lack of gratitude remains the perfect breeding ground for stress because it makes us focus on what we perceive as "missing." Why is that dangerous? Stress blinds us by making us fixate on what we lack instead of what we have.

Materialism is like a mouse trap. It's enticing while simultaneously harmful. There will always be a better job, a more gifted athlete, or a fancier car. You cannot win, my friend. Since this process is impossible, it's a setup for stress.

Paul proposed a new strategy for anxiety - be content with where you are, what you have, and whom you have become. Paul learned how to be grateful for what he had which is impressive when you realize how little it was. He used to be a wealthy man, but now he lived in a filthy jail cell. He used to travel the world preaching, but now he was chained to a desk. He used to have friends and family, but now he had an armed guard breathing down his neck. How could he seem so happy? That brings us to our second point.

Christ

Paul's peace was not dependent on what he had. It was dependent on Christ and Christ alone. If he looked at his physical benefits, the inventory would be dismal. Fortunately, he looked at a different source for contentment. He was given the love of Jesus, the acceptance of the Father, the forgiveness of sins, and the confidence of salvation. Simply put, Paul had Jesus and that was enough.

Want to know something interesting about the book of Philippians? In this short book, Paul mentions Jesus in over forty verses. Keep in mind, that the whole epistle only has 104 verses. This means that Paul averages a Jesus-centered verse every 2.4 lines.

Most people assume the path to peace is the pursuit of happiness. Who doesn't want to be happy? The thought is especially captivating in the context of an anxious mind. I'd like to suggest, that there is something more important than happiness though. It's joy. Happiness is great, but it is based on the word "happen." Thus, it's all built around

things that happen to us. Joy comes from within. It's based on what's happening within us, not around us.

As we recover from stressful thoughts, this proves something powerful for all of us. Joy is found in Jesus. Happiness will come and go, but Joy stays. Why? Since Jesus refuses to leave you, joy is always within you.

Certainly, there will be days when you don't feel joyful. That's based on your mental energy, not your actual identity though. Your joy is certain because Jesus is certain. Can failure deny your joy? No, because Jesus picks us up in His loving arms. Can stress steal your joy? No, because God's presence persists. Can tragedy take your joy? Surprisingly, no, not at all. Because Jesus draws closest to the broken. Can death destroy your joy? Nope, not even death. Why? Because Jesus is greater than the grave.

Thanks to Christ, we can move onward in confidence, which takes us to the final item on Paul's recipe for overcoming stress.

Confidence

The closing thought of Paul's teaching on the "pathway to peace" is Philippians 4:13. This mass-quoted verse reads, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Isn't Paul's confidence contagious? We can do all things with Jesus on our side.

This verse's context is often lost when quoted by itself. Fortunately, we just studied this whole passage, so you can see the overarching theme of this feel-good message. Paul is talking in the context of our thought lives, stress, and uncovering contentment. Doesn't that make this phrase all the more encouraging? Sure, this verse isn't a free pass to try dangerous things, but it's a reminder that God can bring you through anything. Paul realized something that all of us should, true contentment isn't related to your current situation, it's anchored in Jesus.

Your circumstances are forever changing, but God never changes. Paul was able to find true peace because his joy didn't rely on his situation. This passage contains a peaceful promise. You can have complete victory over any circumstance because Jesus will give you the strength to succeed.

Why would this be our closing message in a series on stress and anxiety? Allow me to answer your question with another question. What is the opposite of anxiety? Maybe you'd guess it's "calm, stable, or happy." All of those are acceptable, but they're actually opposites of symptoms. Life Coach Renee Jain, in her article titled The Opposite of Anxiety, suggested that "confidence constitutes the exact opposite of

anxiety, and so represents the ultimate remedy for overcoming it." Since anxiety is uncertainty, then confidence proves to be the opposite. How do we overcome anxiety? Confidence.

You can have complete confidence in all situations because Jesus is on your side. Embrace that truth. When anxious thoughts come knocking at your door, remind yourself that you can do all things through Christ. This simple God-inspired phrase gives us the confidence boost we all need.

When burnout tries to keep you in your bed, remember that you can do all things through Jesus. When uncertainty about the future consumes your mind, remember that you can do all things through Christ. Whenever worry sweeps you away, remember that you can do all things through Jesus.

You have confidence in Christ. Allow that confidence to be daily energy on your path to overcoming stress.

IMPORTANT:

If you're suffering from severe anxiety, seek professional help. It's okay to walk through life with the help of Jesus and a counselor. For more information, turn to pages 13-14.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Introduce yourself and share one thing you are thankful for.

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: How much have you allowed your circumstances to steal your joy this week?

Q3: What's Paul's "secret" to being content in any circumstance?

Q4: What does it mean to have confidence in Christ?

Application: How can you begin to find contentment despite stressful situations this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 3:1 – 4:11

John 2:1–11

John 4:1–26

Luke 4:14–30

Luke 5:1–11

Matthew 9:9–13 7

Psalm 22 1-8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present.

Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

APPENDIX: LET'S HAVE A SERIOUS TALK

"It's okay to not be okay," my counselor recites while she slides me a box of tissues. I frequently find myself here, crying while visiting the office of my therapist. We sit together, talking about places where my present circumstances reverberate from past trauma. These sessions are both simultaneously challenging and freeing.

I am a huge advocate of working with psychology professionals. Some people might find this strange. Why would a pastor see a psychiatrist? Can't he just pray the pain away? Is his faith that weak? Why won't God just heal him?

All of these questions reveal a prejudice that needs to be destroyed. Struggling with your mental health doesn't have to mean you're struggling with your spiritual health.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

We need to work together to stop the stigma associated with receiving professional help. Some people need to work through life with the help of Jesus and a doctor. That's okay. Some people need both prayer and prescriptions. That's okay too.

Some of us can deal with our anxiety and stress with healthy spiritual and physical habits. Others have an actual chemical imbalance within their body where their stress messengers are constantly sending false signals to their brain. They need people on their team to help fight that battle. Anxiety and depression go much further than nervousness and sadness. For some people, these feelings can be debilitating.

Which leads us to the critical question of when is it time to seek professional help?

The American Psychological Association suggests professional therapy when emotional anguish begins to cause distress and interfere with life. This is particularly important when: ²

- Your issues have caused a decrease in your overall quality of life.
- Your thoughts are negatively affecting school, work, or your relationships.
- Coping and grounding take a lot of time.
- You're using substances to help cope with pain or emotional turmoil.
- You're experiencing physical symptoms from emotional sources. These physical symptoms can include panic attacks, trouble seeing, or extreme fatigue.

If you fall into any of these categories, seek out professional health.

² *How do I know if I need therapy?* (2017, July 31). American Psychological Association.

OKAY. IT'S NOT THAT BAD. WHEN SHOULD I SEEK HELP?

The short answer is now. You don't just go to the doctor when your leg is broken. You go for physicals, follow-ups, and check-ups. Most of us don't need to see a professional, but that doesn't mean we don't require the occasional check-up. Get in the habit of talking to a counselor, trusted pastor, or mentor about your emotional health. Do this often and openly.

Here are some signs that you're long overdue for a mental health check-up:

- You are feeling less motivated.
- You're having a hard time getting excited about anything.
- You're still angry, sad, or hurt about something that happened a long time ago.
- You're staying in bed for extended periods of time.
- You've lost your sense of interest.
- You feel as though no one cares for you.
- You find yourself crying more often than usual.

You will face stress and anxiety in your life. Don't suffer in silence. Your first step is to speak up. No one should have to suffer depression alone. No one should have to walk through loss in isolation. God doesn't intend for you to go through your struggles solo. There are an abundance of amazing resources, pastors, and counselors that can help you.

Reach out. Speaking up is hard, but it's the first step towards healing.

IN A CRISIS?

National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

Mental Health Hotline: Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis counselor.