



Battling Anxiety

WHAT GOD SAYS TO ANXIOUS
PEOPLE

KYLE EDWARDS

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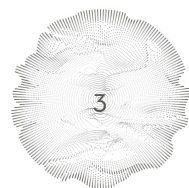
** Many thanks to Natalie Wellinghoff for her thorough editorial work to help turn what was originally a lecture into this booklet.*

Introduction

I'm speaking about anxiety as a pastor. I'm not a professional counselor. I'm a pastor, and an anxious pastor a lot of the time.

I'm firstly a Christian though. I have certain beliefs and convictions that have been shared by Christians for 2,000 years. Those beliefs and convictions inform what I say here. If you're a person who doesn't share those same beliefs and convictions, let me say first of all that I'm very glad you're reading this and are interested in what God says to your anxiety. I hope to be able to speak in genuinely helpful ways to encourage you regardless of your spiritual identity and experiences.

If you do share my beliefs you'll probably be the first to admit that you're just as anxious as people who don't. What we affirm in our faith and how we live that out don't always align. So I hope this will encourage you no matter where you're coming from.





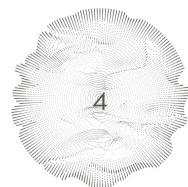
My Anxiety

One morning as I was waiting for a congregant to arrive for pastoral counseling, I received a long email from a person who was upset with me for how I had handled a recent issue. I just finished reading it when the congregant arrived. For the next hour, as he spoke about what he was struggling with, my mind kept running back to what I was struggling with: the email! Instead of listening well and offering compassionate counsel, I was anxious. I was anxious about the email author's anger. I was anxious about what my response should be. I was anxious about what the fallout might be.

I am an anxious person.

In the spring of 2019 my family vacationed with some extended family in southern Utah. We stayed at an AirBnB on top of a hill. Every direction you looked was sublime. Desert cliffs with shades of red and yellow and orange loomed on the horizon. I passed the hours reading, aiming a telescope at the mountains, and shooting hoops on the basketball court.

And it was quiet! My house in Chicago sits under the O'Hare Airport flight path a few blocks from the Kennedy Expressway. My downtown office is right next to the "L." I'm used to machinery screaming at me. But in Utah, it was quiet enough to hear myself think!



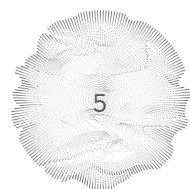
But I woke up one morning about halfway through that week in that peaceful place with a mounting sense of dread. My heart rate went up. I tossed and turned in bed. My imagination went into a perpetual repeat mode playing out scenes of conflict and burdens.

Like most people, there are problems in my family. Like most people, work can be stressful and discouraging. These problems and stressors can overwhelm me at times.

As I was lying in bed that one morning, it felt like there was a clock ticking down on my vacation ending and having to return to all these troubles. The desert was quiet, but my anxieties were screaming. The mountains were big, but my fears were bigger.

I am an anxious person. I battle anxiety.

I'm not alone. There are people in my family who struggle with anxiety. People in my church struggle with anxiety. I've sent a number of people to professional therapists because of their anxiety. And if you're reading this, chances are you're anxious too.



What is Anxiety?

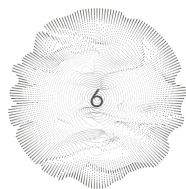
Anxiety is a very common experience with multiple forms of expression. Some people have panic attacks. Some people have particular phobias. I can get grumpy and irritable when I'm anxious. A lot of anxious people also have depression as a kind of tag-a-long companion to their anxiety. One person I talked to—someone who's successful, popular, and stable—told me that some days he can't get out of bed because of his anxiety.

We often use words like *anxiety*, *worry* and *fear* to describe an overlapping set of experiences. Todd Stryd defines anxiety as focusing on a hypothetical future (which may or may not be realistic) instead of being present in this moment where I actually exist.¹ Similarly, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition*, more commonly known as the *DSM-5*, the standard mental health manual, says that “Fear is the emotional response to real or perceived threat, whereas anxiety is anticipation of future threat.”²

And there are so many future threats to make you anxious! You can be anxious about money. You can be anxious about health. You can be anxious about relationships. You can be anxious about the future. Heavy rain can cause anxiety for one anxious person I know, because her basement leaks, despite having spent lots of money to fix it.

¹ https://www.ccef.org/conference/2019-national-conference/?mc_cid=a7f57e507a&mc_eid=12537603a2#ccef19v

² *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition* (2013), 189.



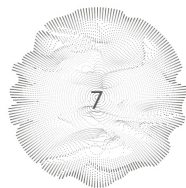
Who Suffers From Anxiety?

The National Institute of Mental Health says that 1 in 7 Americans are suffering from an anxiety disorder at any given point.³ The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), states that “The term ‘anxiety disorder’ refers to specific psychiatric disorders that involve extreme fear or worry, and includes generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder and panic attacks, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, selective mutism, separation anxiety, and specific phobias.” It puts the number of sufferers of such anxiety disorders at 18%—nearly 1 in 5 Americans.⁴

Whatever the exact numbers, millions of Americans will suffer from an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. For the rest of us who don’t have an anxiety disorder right now or who might be spared from one in the future, we still have anxiety. If you’re only anxious one day every two weeks (less than what would classify as an anxiety disorder), that one day can be miserable for you.

³ Scott Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 8.

⁴ adaa.org/understanding-anxiety



What Causes Anxiety?

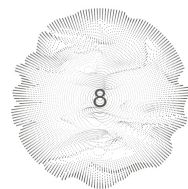
Scott Stossel, the editor of *The Atlantic* magazine, wrote a book a few years ago called *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind*. He talks about his own lifelong, crippling battle with anxiety, which landed him in the school nurse's office every day with a sick stomach as a kid, and compels him to take Xanax and drink vodka before public speaking or getting on an airplane as an adult.

So, he asks, why is he so anxious? What causes anxiety for people in general? Is it nature, nurture, or culture? The rest of Stossel's book is an exhaustive study of thousands of years of research on anxiety, including the most cutting edge psychiatric research.

Does nature, particularly the mysterious processes in our brains, cause anxiety? Or does nurture cause anxiety? In Stossel's case, his mother was a worrier, and his father's family were Jews who fled the Nazis. Did he learn anxiety from his family?

Or is something about our culture making us anxious? Is this an age of anxiety that we all live in? Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge, from NYU and San Diego State, respectively, wrote a recent paper asking the question, Is there an increase in adolescent mood disorders?⁵

5 Haidt, J., & Twenge, J. (2019). Is there an increase in adolescent mood disorders, self-harm, and suicide since 2010 in the USA and UK? A review. Unpublished manuscript, New York University.



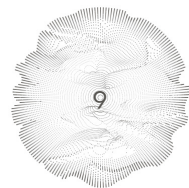
Yes, they say, but they're not exactly sure why. Maybe it's smartphones and social media. Maybe it's overprotective parenting. Maybe it's the global financial crisis and rising inequality. Whatever it is, there seems to be something in the water. The world we live in is making us anxious.


Stossel concludes that the answer to the question of anxiety's cause is that it's all three. It's nature, nurture, and culture. However, he thinks the lion's share of the cause is nature. Most of it is stuff going on in your brain.

The problem with the nature explanation though is that there's nothing approaching scientific confidence and consensus about what exactly is the cause.⁶ What part of your brain is to blame? Or what chemicals or neurons have derailed? We don't really know, as Stossel acknowledges.

Despite our lack of knowledge, though, it seems many people are afflicted with psychiatric conditions that likely have some biological roots for their anxiety. The last section in this booklet addresses anti-anxiety medication and related questions.

⁶ For example, Gary Greenberg writes, "At the risk of being polemical, let me suggest that Harrington's word disingenuous fails to describe the cynicism of Robert Spitzer, the editor of the DSM-3, who acknowledged to me that he was responding to the fact that 'psychiatry was regarded as bogus,' and who told me that the book was a success because it 'looks very scientific. If you open it up, it looks like they must know something'" ("Psychiatry's Incurable





Since the causes of anxiety are so slippery, Stossel's strategies to battle his anxiety have taken the "let's try anything to see what works" approach:

Here's what I've tried: individual psychotherapy (three decades of it), family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, rational emotive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, hypnosis, meditation, role-playing, interoceptive exposure therapy, in vivo exposure therapy, supportive-expressive therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, self-help workbooks, massage therapy, prayer, acupuncture, yoga, Stoic philosophy, and audiotapes I ordered off a late-night TV infomercial.

And medication. Lots of medication. Thorazine. Imipramine. Desipramine. Chlorpheniramine. Nardil. BuSpar. Prozac. Zoloft. Paxil. Wellbutrin. Effexor. Celexa. Lexapro. Cymbalta. Luvox. Trazodone. Levoxyl. Propranolol. Tranxene. Serax. Centrax. St. John's wort. Zolpidem. Valium. Librium. Ativan. Xanax. Klonopin.

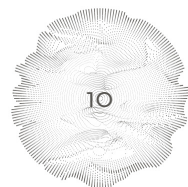
Also: beer, wine, gin, bourbon, vodka, and scotch.

Here's what's worked: nothing.⁷

Some medication takes the edge off, but nothing has cured him. By the end of his book, Stossel comes to the conclusion that anxiety is something he just has to live with.

We're all anxious, some of us desperately so. We're not always sure why, and sometimes the best medical breakthroughs don't help us as much as we'd like.

⁷ Stossel, 7.



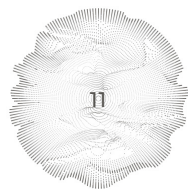
What Does God Say to Anxious People?

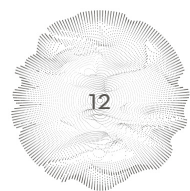
So what does God say to us when we're anxious? How does he help us battle anxiety?


The Bible has lots of encouragement for anxious people, but I want to focus on one passage in particular. The following are reflections from what Jesus says in Luke 12:22–35. I'll also make a few comments about the text that comes right before this one.

Here's what Jesus says about anxiety:

22 And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!"

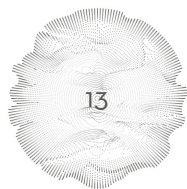






25 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! 29 And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. 30 For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

32 "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (ESV)





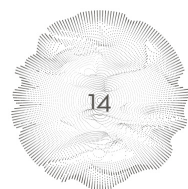
Four Reasons Not to Be Anxious

Let me summarize what Jesus says this way: 4-2-4. Four reasons not to be anxious. Two reasons why you might be anxious. And four ways to battle anxiety.

In the passage you just read, Jesus names four reasons not to be anxious—these rare four encouragements to anchor your heart when you worry.

Reason Not to Worry Number One: Your life is more than the thing you're anxious about.

Jesus says don't be anxious about food. Don't be anxious about clothing. Moreover, he's saying this to people who live in a subsistence culture where what you earn that day very much determines what you're going to eat and what you're going to wear. What I earn determines what level of gym membership I can have. But that's not the reality for Jesus' audience. Reality for them is the basics of survival like food and clothing. In other words, Jesus tells people with very big things to worry about, "Do not worry." Why not? Because your life is more than what you're worrying about.



Here's what happens when you worry: When you are anxious, whatever it is you are anxious about feels very, very big. It feels like the totality of your life. But it's not, Jesus says. Life, according to Jesus, has an orientation to God and his kingdom that's bigger than your life. It's "bigger than your body," as John Mayer would say. In the moment when you're anxious, it feels like that thing is so big that it masters you. It feels like you belong to it. But Jesus says, you don't belong to it.

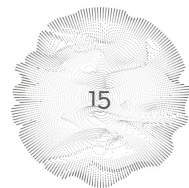
Reason Not to Worry Number Two: Worry won't help you.


This is what Jesus means when he says being anxious won't add a moment to your life. In other words, anxiety is an exercise in futility. It's like what the Bobby McFerrin song "Don't Worry, Be Happy" says:

In every life we have some trouble

But when you worry you make it double.

That's kind of what Jesus says! The irony is that we want help and rescue in that moment of fear, yet our fear itself cannot help or rescue us.





Now, of course, anxiety can be helpful when it compels us to do something that should be done. If I'm worried about this pain in my chest and I go to the doctor, and the doctor performs a surgery that saves my life, then that's obviously a good thing.

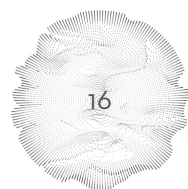
But I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about. The anxiety that Jesus is talking about is the kind of futility that asks, for example, when all you did was worry from morning to night, when you went throughout the day just stewing over it, did that day of worry help you? Did it give you clarity into the situation? Did it help you to be fully present with the people around you and the responsibilities before you?

Have you ever looked back and said, "I'm so glad I was so worried that I couldn't get out of bed that day"? I hope not! That normal everyday anxiety doesn't help us.

Reason Not to Worry Number Three: You matter to God.

Let that sink in. You matter to God.

This is getting to the heart of what Jesus is saying. Jesus starts by talking about not worrying for food and clothing. Then he gives two illustrations—one about food and the other about clothing.



He says, “Look at the birds. Look at the flowers.” They’re outdoors when Jesus is talking, so he’s pointing to objects within their field of vision. So look around you, Jesus says. If you’re worried about food, look at the birds. If you’re worried about clothing, look at the flowers.

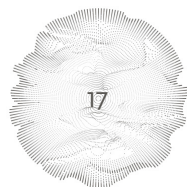
Jesus goes on to say in verse 24, “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!”


Now, it’s interesting that Jesus uses ravens as an illustration, since in the Jewish religion ravens were considered unclean. So we’re not talking about a sweet little bluebird on my shoulder kind of thing.

Here’s how one counselor David Powlison puts it (he calls them crows instead of ravens):

How does God feed them? Think about it for a minute with me. It’s not romantic in the least. A crow is a scavenger. Jesus isn’t painting a sweet little picture of God feeding the poor helpless birdies. These aren’t cute little babies looking up to momma bird to give them a worm. Crows are tough. They are dirty birds. They are aggressive. They are smart. They are savvy. They are noisy. They are obnoxious. They are pests. They are scavengers. How does God feed crows? Road kill. Trash picking. Raiding your crops. That’s why you have to have scarecrows. God feeds the crows by the fact that they steal your food and pick over your garbage!⁸

⁸ David Powlison, “Don’t Worry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21.2 (2003), 60.





To put it in an urban context: Look at the pigeons eating fries off the ground in the bleachers of Wrigley Field that were spilled by a drunk guy. God is feeding them! But Jesus says, if God feeds the scavengers, if God feeds the pigeons at Wrigley, then of course he'll take care of you, because you're so much more valuable to God than scavengers.

And look at the flowers, he says. He's talking about some kind of weedy wildflower. No one planted them, but they're beautiful. Before too long they're going to be cut down and thrown into the furnace and burned. Yet, short-lived as they are, God has made them beautiful.

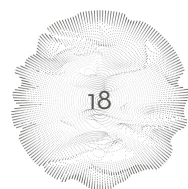
But if God gloriously adorns what will soon be headed for the furnace, then he will adorn you. He will clothe you in his glory, because you matter to him so much more than the flowers.

You matter to God.

Reason Not to Worry Number Four: God is your Father.

Now it needs to be said that Jesus is making this point to his followers. In other words, the comfort of knowing that God is your Father isn't extended to all people indiscriminately but to those people who've committed to trusting and following Christ.

That being said, the invitation to follow Jesus—and thereby to know the comfort of a heavenly Father—is offered to everyone. The way you come to know God as your Father is through trusting his Son, Jesus. It's not through any kind of performance. It's by grace.



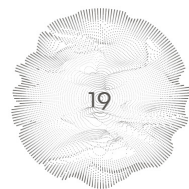
So when Jesus says that God is your Father who knows what you need, he means that in a particular way to people who have experienced that grace through faith. If you've trusted Christ, if you've come to the Father through his Son, God is your Father. That's why you shouldn't worry.

Now, this one can be tricky. Not everyone can find easy comfort in concepts of divine fatherhood. We've all seen the failures of our fathers in one way or another, sometimes tragically so. I've failed as a father plenty of times.

However, as emotionally complicated as this concept might be for some people, the central point that Jesus is making is that God is the one who knows you the best. God is the one who knows your needs and your weaknesses more deeply and intimately than anyone else. He is the one who is personally committed to your security and your flourishing more passionately and consistently than anyone else. He's your Father.

There are some days when my kids seem absolutely convinced that I'm planning on letting them starve to death. They're hungry right now! "I'm starving!" they'll say over and over again. And I say (on my best, most patient days, at least), "I know you're hungry. I'm not going to let you starve. I'm your father."

In your anxiety, when your mind is stuck on that one problem, and you're being consumed by that fear, it's like my kids thinking they're going to starve. God is your Father who knows what you need. So do not worry.



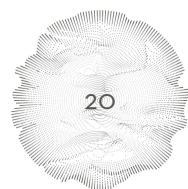


Two Reasons Why You Might Be Worrying

Jesus also gives two reasons why you might be anxious.

Before we get to those two reasons, however, there's one thing you might think is a reason for your anxiety: the circumstances. But that, according to Jesus, is not actually a reason. So you might be tempted to say that the reason I'm worried is because of what's happening in my life right now. I'm worried because the economy is going down. I'm worried because my kids are struggling. I'm worried because the doctor's report didn't look good. In other words, you're saying that the reason for your anxiety is what your anxious about.

But the problem with that—the problem if all you do is point to the circumstances—is that there will always be something to worry about. If you worry about money, you say, “I'm worried because I don't have enough money. So if I just get another job or if I get a raise then I'll stop being anxious.” But let's say you get a raise. And then all of a sudden your furnace goes out.



Or someone sideswipes your car and insurance doesn't cover all of it. Or someone gets sick and now you've got hospital bills that you hadn't planned for. Will you not then worry about money?

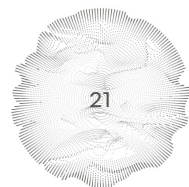
There will always be something to worry about. The circumstances of your anxiety are not the reasons for your anxiety. So what are those reasons? According to Jesus, there are two possibilities.

First Possible Reason: You have little faith.

After Jesus says that you're more precious to God than the birds and the flowers, he says in verse 28, "O you of little faith." A reason you might be anxious is that you have little faith. Perhaps you are a person who has sincere faith in Jesus, yet in that moment of anxiety, you have little faith. Your heart does not trust him to care for you in that moment.

Take that episode from my idyllic Utah vacation when I woke up worrying about all those problems waiting for me when the vacation ended. What was going on in my heart then? In that moment, as anxiety overwhelmed me, I didn't really believe that I mattered to God more than birds or flowers. I didn't really believe that God is my Father.

Of course, as a Christian I know these truths intellectually. I can read these words in the text. I know what Jesus says. I confess it. I affirm that God is my Father who values me. But in that moment, I didn't really believe that God's love was a reality in my life. I didn't trust that God's fatherly care was as real as the air I breathed. I had little faith. That's why I was anxious.



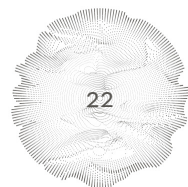
Second Possible Reason: You are seeking the wrong things.

Listen again to what Jesus says in verse 29 and 30 about seeking:

*And do not **seek** what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world [that's all those people who don't know God as their Father] **seek** after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, **seek** his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (emphasis added)*

So what you seek, what you desire, what you run after might be the cause of your anxiety.

The passage in the Gospel of Luke that comes right before this one is called the parable of the rich fool. The man in the parable wants more and more stuff so he builds more and more buildings to store all of his stuff. And then God kills him, and all his stuff doesn't do him any good now that he's dead. That's why he was a fool. Everything he lived for proved to be a deadend the moment he stopped living.

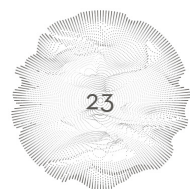



So Jesus tells a parable about coveting and greed. And then, without pause, he turns straight to anxiety. By putting coveting and anxiety side by side like that, he's showing how coveting and anxiety can be on the same spectrum.

If I covet something, if I greedily desire something, and I get what I want, what does that do to me? It makes me prideful. It makes me complacent. It makes me self-centered. But if I don't get what I want or if I lose it, then I get worried and anxious.

So why is my mind stuck on this fear? Maybe it's because there's a problem with what I'm seeking. I'm not seeking God and his kingdom. Instead, I'm seeking my comfort or my health or my status or other people's approval of me like that is the most important thing in the world. Because I'm seeking the wrong thing, it makes me anxious.

So why might you be anxious? Maybe Jesus is saying, "O you of little faith." Or maybe, you're seeking the wrong things.





Four Ways to Battle Anxiety

So how do you battle anxiety? How do you start to come out of anxiety?

When I was anxious about that email or anxious about returning from vacation, I was stuck in that fear and needed something to pull my head back above water. Here are four strategies, four methods of attack.

And I should say that these aren't four *cures* for your anxiety. There's no quick fix here. Depending on who you are, depending on how frequently and deeply you struggle with anxiety, maybe this is going to look like going from walking to running. Or maybe from crawling to walking. Or maybe from being completely stuck to starting to crawl. Or maybe from overwhelmed and drowning to still feeling stuck but now facing the right direction for the first time.

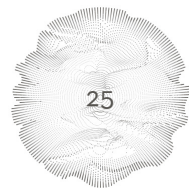
Strategy Number One: Go deeper than the situation.


This is the corollary to my earlier point about how your circumstances are not the cause of your anxiety. When anxiety comes, and you want to come out of anxiety, go deeper than the situation. To put that another way, resist the temptation to justify your anxiety.

Some people tell me (and it's something I feel often enough), "Don't you see why this is something to worry about? Don't you see how my anxious response is completely reasonable?"

And maybe your anxiety is reasonable at times. There's a difference between worrying about money during an economic downturn and the fantasy delusions of someone suffering from schizophrenia. You will always have reasonable justification to worry about something.

But if you want to battle anxiety, go deeper than that. What's going on in your heart? Do you not believe that you matter to God? Are you desiring the wrong thing? Are you desiring the right thing too much, as if it were the best thing?



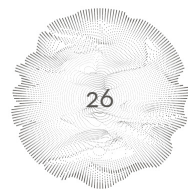


Go deeper than the situation. I'm challenging you to do a bit of self-counseling. Ask yourself these kinds of questions:

- When am I most anxious?
- Why am I anxious about some things (money, for example) but not others (health, for example)?
- Why am I more anxious than I used to be?

Then, after wrestling with these questions, the next questions are: What does this say about my heart? What does this say about my trust (if I'm not trusting God's love and fatherly care)? What does this say about what I desire (if I'm seeking the wrong things)?

Now you're starting to dig deep. Keep digging! Go deeper than the external events that are happening to you.



Strategy Number two: Preach to yourself.

This was a point that Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a pastor in London, used to say. Preach to yourself.

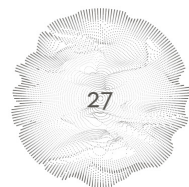
Preaching to yourself is the opposite of listening to yourself. When you listen to yourself, you hear all the reasons you have to worry. You hear all your doubts. You hear all your insecurities. But when you preach to yourself, you speak to yourself with truths that are external to your anxious heart. You speak God's Word to yourself.


In other words, if you have good reasons to be anxious, what better reasons does God give you not to be anxious?⁹ Remind yourself of those things. Meditate over them. Pray over them. Preach those things to yourself.

This is not the same thing as saying that you have nothing to worry about. What Jesus doesn't say is, "Stop being silly. You're making a big deal over nothing."

Jesus isn't saying that. Food is a big deal. Clothing is a big deal. Whatever you're going through might be a very big deal.

⁹ See David Powlison, "Do Not Worry," 58-63.





It's not that you have nothing to be worried about. Rather, if there are big reasons to worry, there are bigger reasons not to worry. So what are those reasons? Preach to yourself those things.

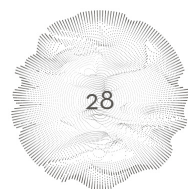
Say you're worried about money. What better reasons does God give you to not be worried about money? For starters there's what Jesus says here about food and clothing. But that's just scratching the surface of what God says to you. There's also, to mention another example, what the Apostle Paul says about contentment in any circumstance, even in financial deprivation:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.¹⁰

Even in material deprivation God strengthens me and meets my needs in ways that accomplish his purposes for me. That's a very good reason not to be anxious about money.

Or say you're anxious about an upcoming job performance review. You're even losing sleep over it.

¹⁰ Philippians 4:11–13, *English Standard Version*.



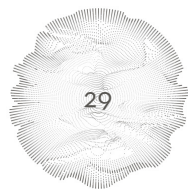
What better reasons does God give you not to be anxious about that review? How about this: Your value and your worth is never tied to what another person thinks about you. You are a child of your Father. Whatever comes out of that review, it doesn't get to define your identity. The reason your worried about it is because you believe it does. But it doesn't. God alone has the prerogative to tell you who you are.


Don't listen to yourself. Preach to yourself.

Strategy Number Three: Name your idols.

A number of years ago I was going through a stressful time. I was worried about the future, just like you might be worried about right now. I typically kept bourbon in the house and would have a nightcap while sitting and reading in bed.

But then I started doing something else. I would still limit myself to drinking before bed, but I started filling up the glass higher than before. It was becoming more than a nightcap.





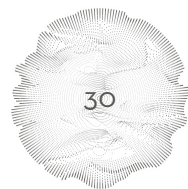
That went on for about two weeks. For those two weeks that drink was my refuge. It took away all my problems. I wasn't worried about anything. If I had kept going in that direction, it would have destroyed me. Thankfully, by God's grace I woke up to what was happening before it went too far. But it wasn't just a drinking problem. It was an idol. It was my god who gave me comfort and refuge.

Question 17 in the New City Catechism asks, "What is idolatry?" The answer follows: "Idolatry is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security."¹¹

Take Jesus' words in Luke 12 as an example. If he's saying that a reason you don't need to worry is that God is your Father who values you greatly, then he's inviting you to take refuge in your Father. When you're anxious, God is the one for you to take refuge in.

So when anxiety comes, what do you actually take refuge in? Where do you actually turn to? Food? Alcohol? Netflix? The hope of peaceful circumstances? Whatever that place of refuge for you is, you're treating it as if it were your god. That's your idol. An idol looks like a god. It's what you treat like a god. It's what you serve like a god. But it's not a god. It requires more and more from you and gives less and less. Eventually it consumes you.

¹¹ <http://newcitycatechism.com/new-city-catechism/#17>



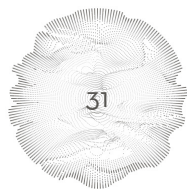
A few years after that season when I was tempted to find refuge in bourbon, I was again going through a lot of stress. My refuge this time was the pleasures of a good book. I craved the end of the day when I could escape into bed and read my book, whatever was on my Kindle at the time.


Reading a book is a lot healthier than drinking too much. But it was more than just enjoying a book. I would want to sneak away and find a quiet spot away from my family. And if someone interrupted me while I was reading I would snap at them in anger.

That book, that story, that isolation from other people, was my refuge. It let me escape my trouble. I could live in this other world—the world of this story that was so far away from all my problems.

This seemingly harmless activity (and I still read before bed!) was actually becoming an idol, a false god that I ran to in my anxiety. And like any idol, it didn't have my best interests at heart. It gave me temporary refuge; all it wanted in return was for me to turn away from my family.

So what do you run to in your anxiety? Where do you find refuge? That's your idol. So name your idol.





But don't stop with naming it. Put away that idol. Work through what it means for Christ to be your refuge rather than that drink, that book, that person, that vacation, that show on Netflix, that mindless hour on social media, that video game, that extra hour of work, that politician, that...whatever it is you run to for comfort and security when you feel most anxious.

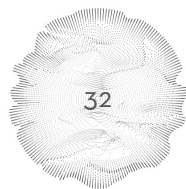
Strategy Number Four: Give yourself away in this present moment.

Jesus tells people who are worried about food and clothing to sell their possessions and give to the poor. Seek God's kingdom where you never lose your treasure. Give.

David Powlison speaks to how the anxious person can move beyond her own problems and give herself to other people in need:

Do and say something constructive. Care for someone else. Give to meet human need. In the darkest hole, when the world is most confused, when there are barbarians in the streets, when life's the toughest, there's always the right thing to do. There's always some way to give yourself away. The problem might seem overwhelming. You could worry, worry, worry, worry. But what you're called to do is small, just a little itty-bitty thing. There's always something to give yourself to, and some way to give.¹²

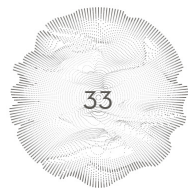
¹² Powlison, "Don't Worry," 65.



Todd Stryd makes a similar point. After focusing on his breathing (which helps focus his attention on the present moment) and praying through what's causing him anxiety, he says to "participate in the present." That could mean participating in the normal duties of marriage and parenthood. It could mean taking the next faithful, dutiful action in your work. You don't exist in a hypothetical future. You exist in a present where God is real now.¹³

So battle anxiety by participating in the present. Give yourself away to people in need. Give yourself away to people who exist in this present moment with you. Do the next right thing. Give.

¹³ https://www.ccef.org/conference/2019-national-conference/?mc_cid=a7f57e507a&mc_eid=12537603a2#ccef19v



Is There A Place For Anti-Anxiety Medication?¹⁴

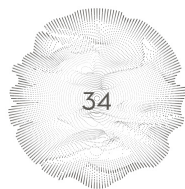
We are embodied creatures, yet we live in a fallen, imperfect world that waits with anticipation when all will be made new. God gave us bodies, but sometimes our bodies cause us lots of problems. He gave us brains, but sometimes our brains cause us lots of problems. We take painkillers for headaches and antibiotics for infections. Should we also take medication for our anxiety?

Mike Emlet, a physician and counselor, has a wonderful article in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* called, “Listening to Prozac ... and to the Scriptures: A Primer on Psychoactive Medications.”¹⁵ I cannot improve on his expertise and counsel, so what follows is a condensation of his article.

After summarizing the various classes of psychoactive medications (i.e., medications that treat anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, insomnia, and so forth)

¹⁴ This section is indebted to a couple of conversations with a psychiatrist (and fellow church member) who challenged me to take more seriously the presence of neurological factors in anxiety for many people and the usefulness of anti-anxiety medication for those same people.

¹⁵ Mike R. Emlet, “Listening to Prozac . . . and to the Scriptures: A Primer on Psychoactive Medications,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26.1 (2012), 11–22. He also has written on the topic at book length in *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017).



and the research into their effectiveness, he offers the following conclusion:

So, what should we conclude from all this information, particularly with regard to antidepressants? They do seem to work—that is, improve mood and other symptoms of depression—in some people, some of the time, but they certainly are not the “silver bullet” that some make them out to be. Even if we conclude that medications are or might be effective for a particular person, they comprise only a part of the total approach to the person. Secular research shows the critical importance and efficacy of psychotherapy as well.¹⁶

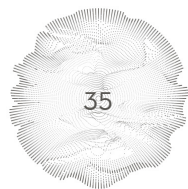
In other words, anti-anxiety medication can be greatly helpful for some people in conjunction with counseling in the spiritual components of anxiety, which this booklet tries to do.

So should you consider medication as part of your battle against anxiety? Emler states the issues in contrastive terms, and deciding on medication is a matter of making a wise decision with these points in mind:

- It is a kingdom agenda to relieve our suffering; it is a kingdom agenda to redeem us through suffering. Medication can be a gift of God to relieve suffering, yet at the same time God uses suffering to sanctify us. Relief from suffering shouldn't always be our only goal.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.





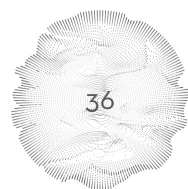
- Medications are a gift of God’s grace; medications can be used idolatrously. We should be thankful that medicine can help suffering people without turning medication into our savior that rescues us from our troubles. God alone is our Savior.¹⁸
- Too much suffering can be “hazardous” to spiritual growth; too little suffering may be “hazardous” to spiritual growth. We can suffer so much that we become embittered rather than hopeful. On the other hand, following Jesus means taking up your cross and following him. A cross-centered life cannot and should not always avoid suffering.¹⁹
- A person can have wrong motives for wanting to take medication; a person can have wrong motives for not wanting to take medication. One person might want medication as a substitute for trusting God’s promises, or because people are pressuring her in that direction. Another person might be avoiding needed medication sheerly out of pride (“I don’t need that because I’m strong enough to get through this!”).²⁰
- Using medications may make it more difficult to address moral-spiritual issues; not using medications may make it more difficult to address moral-spiritual issues. Medication might distract from the deeper issues of the heart that fuel my anxiety—my faithlessness, idolatries, and so forth. However, some people are so afflicted by poor mental health that they cannot make any headway in spiritual matters without medication addressing their worst symptoms.²¹

18 Ibid., 17.

19 Ibid., 17.

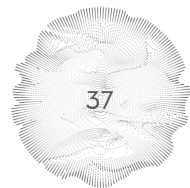
20 Ibid., 17.

21 Ibid., 18.



Emler concludes by saying that he's most likely to recommend medication when "symptoms are severe and unremitting, symptoms are not abating despite engagement with the counseling process, or there is a high risk of suicide."²² Please consider his wise counsel as you weigh the pros and cons of seeking medical assistance for your anxiety.

²² Ibid., 18.



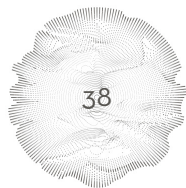
Conclusion: The Anxious Person's Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are MY Father. You love me. You know me. You feed the birds and clothe the flowers, and you value me so much more than birds and flowers.

Even so, I confess that I am an anxious person. Sometimes I get worried about silly things. Sometimes I get worried about things that aren't silly at all, things that are very real and dangerous. In this moment, I am anxious about

I also confess that when I'm anxious, I look for safety and refuge in other places besides you. I need a person to affirm me. I need food to comfort me. I need a pill to save me. I need a drink to soothe me. I need a screen to settle me.

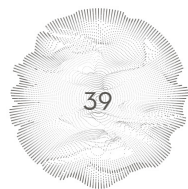
Forgive me when I run to idols that can't save me. Forgive me when I don't trust your love. Forgive me when I make you small. Forgive me when I live as stranger or slave rather than as a son or daughter.



And yet, even before I ask forgiveness, I know that I am already forgiven, justified, accepted, welcomed, adopted, and loved without limit in your Son Jesus Christ. My Savior died for me. My Savior keeps me. My Savior pleads for me in this moment. My Savior opened the way to the throne of grace, which will never be closed for me.

When I'm most anxious, when I'm most fearful, remind me of all the better reasons I have not to worry. Remind me of the gospel. Assure me of your power. Assure me of your goodness and kindness. Lift up my eyes beyond what's troubling me so deeply. Lift up my eyes to your grace and mercy. Lift up my eyes to my kind Father. Lift up my eyes to my selfless Savior. Lift up my eyes to the Holy Spirit, my Advocate.

I ask this in the name of Jesus, my only hope in all my anxiety, who will one day make all things new and defeat every reason I have to be anxious. Amen.





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