

Christianity and Anxiety

This is my first car, a 1996 Jeep Grand Cherokee that had over 200,000 miles. I got it from my aunt when I graduated from high school. One weekend in college, while driving home to visit my parents, about an hour and a half from my school, I remember accelerating to 100 MPH on I-75. I set the cruise control and stood up through the sunroof. It was late at night and I really didn't care if a deer ran out, a tire blew out, or one of another hundred possibilities occurred. I didn't care if I died; part of me wanted to die...It wasn't the first time I contemplated suicide, nor was it the first time I recklessly was willing to throw my life away. I had come to one of the lowest points of my life that night. For years, I had seen abuse in my home, tried to help hold my family together, tried to maintain a job, do well in school, be involved in church, gain and keep scholarships, be there for friends, be an athlete, & be a good & helpful person. But I simply could not handle the pressure anymore. The anxieties of my life had a death grip on me.

Thankfully, I had enough remaining sense to sit back down & finish the drive. But that night was a turning point for me in recognizing that this was not normal. I had come face to face with an anxiety disorder within my mind. Now, I've come a long way, but I still struggle with things from time to time if I'm honest, so to help me & to help others, I want to spend this lesson publicly & spiritually discussing what so many, both outside & inside of the church, deal with every day. We'll begin by defining what anxiety disorders are, then illustrate how Christians do indeed struggle with anxiety, review what the Bible says about anxiety, and discuss steps the church can implement to address this disorder of the mind & spirit. May God be glorified as we address all things from His pattern (Ps. 119:160; 2Tim. 3:16f).

I. What Is Anxiety? (Please note: I am not a medical professional and I am not qualified to diagnose or otherwise medically treat mental disorders.)

A. These are the general diagnostic criteria for anxiety disorders in the DSM-V:

1. Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance)
2. The person finds it difficult to control the worry
3. The anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following 6 symptoms (with at least some symptoms present for more days than not for the past 6 months): restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, & sleep disturbance
4. The disturbance is not better explained by another mental disorder
5. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important functioning areas.
6. Disturbance is not attributable to physio. effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another med. condition (e.g. hyperthyroidism).

B. Additional Observations:

1. Anxiety disorders affect an estimated 600 million people in the world (WHO), 40 million people annually in the U.S., and 25% of teenagers. With the exception of OCD, women are 2x as likely to be diagnosed (1Pet. 3:7?).
2. Anxiety disorders can result from chemical and neurotransmitter imbalances in the body and brain as well as from overwhelming stress in life such as abuse/work/conflict. Some hormonal imbalances, environmental toxins,

- & medical issues may present w/ the symptoms of anxiety disorders.
Anxiety disorders can also come from unconfessed or past sin (Ps. 38:18).
3. There are many different forms and manifestations of anxiety disorders and they can present with different symptoms. Some common anxiety disorders: GAD, separation anxiety, panic disorder, phobias, OCD, etc.
 4. Depression and anxiety are two sides to the same coin. Often, the diagnostic criteria for each overlap and some disorders contain both (e.g. Bipolar Disorder/M.D.). In fact, some studies have shown that 50% of those diagnosed with one type of disorder are diagnosed w/ the other type as well (<https://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/depression>). Generally speaking though, there are differences in how anxiety manifests itself apart from depression. Depression=slow thoughts/movements; Anxiety=racing thoughts/movements. Depression=stagnation in the present; Anxiety=concern over the future.
 5. Like depressive disorders, anxiety disorders are associated with high mortality, primarily because of suicide, drug use, and risky behavior. Those with anxiety disorders can also exhibit a great deal of self-sabotage.
 6. While mental illness is becoming more destigmatized, there are those who take advantage of this and who, as a trend, romanticize anxiety and depression, using very real disorders to excuse controllable behavior. Though we should be careful not to accuse people of faking a disorder such as this, as it is a very real issue, it is a reality that some misuse, mislabel, and take advantage of such struggles for personal gain.
- C. It stands to reason and evidence is showing that anxiety disorders are on the rise as millions are now fitting the diagnostic criteria due to the events of 2020. Many are now struggling w/ what others have been struggling w/ since b4 the events of 2020. With this on the rise outside of the church and inside of the church, we are learning to empathize with those who do already struggle & it also provides opportunity for us all to open up with one another & be honest regarding our struggles with the anxieties of life (Job 14:1f; Matt. 6:34).

II. Christians Struggle with Anxiety Disorders (Gal. 6:2; 2Cor. 1:3-5)

- A. *"I think levels of anxiety have increased, but there are different types and with that in mind, I don't think my type of problem has increased. My anxieties aren't just based on how bad or good the current events in the world are. It might make them worse but even if things are going well in the world I still believe I will have anxiety. I feel anxious in groups of people or if I talk to people, but sometimes I am fine. I will feel panicky for no reason & fear is there on repeat."*
- B. *"When I was in college, about 2/3 of my friend group struggled w/ some form of anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, etc. I think it's more pervasive than we care to admit. If I could say one thing to Christians struggling w/ this, it would be that Scripture tells us to seek wisdom. Counseling and therapy is wisdom. It makes us masters of our own minds again. And helps us be the most effective Christians we can."*
- C. *"In my estimation, I would say that there is likely a large percentage of members struggling with anxiety. From a scientific standpoint, I have read statistics that many moms and dads suffer from postpartum depression, so it could be that*

almost all parents have experienced it one way or another in the course of parenthood. I know I did badly after the girls were born and to a lesser extent with my son. So much uncertainty, worry, and fear constantly in our faces is not good for mental health. Regarding my advice for Christians, I don't know where the stigma about therapy came from, but it's necessary for a lot of people. Learning coping skills can be really valuable!"

- D. *"I think the vast majority of people at some point have endured some degree of anxiety. It's quite common as disorders go. So, it makes sense that a large portion of Christians have to deal with it on a persistent basis, though honestly I am extremely hesitant to bring it up. My experience can be best described by comparing anxiety to the tide. At times, it is low, no problems at all. Periodically it will rise due to various reasons or sometimes no reason at all. Even when it is high there are things you can do to protect yourself from it. Then at the worst times the tide will rise over the flood wall and it feels like it consumes you. It can feel as though some horrible harm is about to happen to either you or your loved ones, but you don't know what it is or when it will happen. This ominous fear becomes exhausting and causes physical fatigue, panic attacks, and a desire to completely withdraw from any interaction with another. If I could say one thing to someone struggling with this, it would be that you do not deserve to suffer like this for your entire life. Your friends and family want you to be at peace. All we ask is that you try to receive help. We don't expect perfection. We will try and support you, but just try and see if it helps."*
- E. *"I think anxiety might be more common among those in the church than most realize; I just think people aren't talking about it. I mean, I'm not a person that's really talking about it. I talked to someone I went to pharmacy school with about church once, and she said she stopped going because 'church and God and all the rules' made her anxious. She felt that she would never actually be good enough, so she quit. She said she's felt a lot better ever since. I hated hearing that from her, but if she felt that way I can imagine that others in the church could feel that way and are embarrassed to admit it. Most of the time I just feel like I'm doing something wrong when my mind gets stuck in one of its 'something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong' loops. Jesus told his disciples not to worry about their lives. It says in Matthew 6 not to worry about tomorrow because tomorrow has its own troubles. If I know that God is in control and that God will take care of me, am I not doing something wrong when I feel this way? Because really, there's nothing explicitly wrong with my life. So, what am I worried about?"*
- F. *"I think when I was a kid, I didn't even realize that the way I was thinking was something anyone else struggled with. In fact, I think on some level, I thought that my OCD coping mechanisms were normal and everyone else was just better at it, or I was an exceptionally bad person. But after I opened up (COUNSELING is so important) and got help, I realized that it was actually quite common and was definitely not a normal way to think/ behave. I don't think people realize that anxiety-driven compulsions can be based in a religious practice. Satan is tricky that way, and he delights in twisting Gods Word to mean something that it doesn't. For examples: you just had a bad thought- better pray right now or you'll*

go to Hell. Grace is mentioned, sure, but if people know what you did, they'd hate you. Better be extra good. Result? Attempt at rigid unwavering control of EVERY WAKING MOMENT of your brain without any forgiveness or grace for yourself. Which turns into complete exhaustion and unproductivity. SO: all that to say...the most hurtful things that have been said to me were actually things that were Scripture-based, but twisted to fuel Satan's lies to me instead of fighting them. They were from people who meant well but did not know what I was struggling with (because I didn't know myself until I was in my mid-20s!) and unintentionally added ammunition to the Devil's pile. Until you are aware that those anxieties ARE lies, often you take truth and misapply it to support the anxiety process rather than supporting a healthy process. I don't think that means we should fear to encourage each other with God's words, but I DO think we should stop throwing pat Scriptures at our brethren and walking away feeling like we did something good. If you do that without taking the time to get to know someone and understand their problems and thought processes, you can actually do harm. It's like talking without listening and expecting your words to be helpful. It's not because God's Word is wrong or insufficient- it's because Satan is so good at what he does. Seeking help is NOT weird, weak, hipster, or somehow indicative that you're failing. It is STRONG. Paul says to lay aside every weight that keeps us from running the race. I can PROMISE you anxiety/OCD is a weight that is keeping you from your full potential as a Christian. There is no 'one time' magic bullet for this problem. I fight it every day, sometimes unnoticeably even to myself, sometimes it's an all-out war. Therapy gives you the weapons you need to fight that war with the Devil. Because let's be honest, that's who you're fighting with. You better believe he's using every weapon in his arsenal. Therapy adds more weapons to yours. It's not weakness, you're arming yourself for war. I have never had to take prescriptions, but I've been in therapy three times. And I'd go again if it gets bad again. The solution is not the same for everyone, but whether medication is needed or not, I strongly recommend going to a reputable licensed therapist. They are the equivalent of taking your brain to the gym to build the mental muscles you'll need for the battle. It's something I'm passionate about, b/c it has scarred my life so deeply, but with God's grace I'm overcoming."

- G. "I am an advocate for getting help. There is no shame at all in seeing an issue and addressing it as needed, even if that help isn't strictly 'go to church, trust God more, read your Bible'. Of course, those things should be foundational. But would we not encourage a brother who struggles with alcoholism to seek rehab or AA? Why would we not equally rally behind a brother who is seeking help with their inability to stop worrying? There is never shame in seeking help and growing, there is only glory. Only make sure God is your center; you are sure to succeed!"
- H. "Anxiety can be both a real medical problem and a problem to which God has the solution. It makes perfect sense that the God who created the body has the answers for healing it. I think God has the answers for preventing it, too, in many cases, though. Starting with how parents raise their children, treating our body like a temple of the Holy Spirit, not interfering with the body's natural functions through things like hormonal birth control, not succumbing to use of drugs and alcohol to deal with trauma – and the list goes on. Go to the Lord and beg for a

blessing. Any other starting point, any other source, will leave you running in circles. Rely on brethren? Will they let you down? Probably, but when we follow God's path, the blessings will come. Give your brethren a chance to not let you suffer alone."

III. What Does the Bible Say About Anxiety?

A. Biblical People Who Struggled with Anxiety (Situational or Otherwise)

1. Job (Job 3)
2. Moses (Num. 11:13-15)
3. David (2 Samuel; Psalms)
4. Elijah (1Kgs. 19:1-4)
5. Jonah (Jonah 4)
6. Jeremiah (Jer. 20:15-18)

B. God repeatedly condemns anxiety and expects us to avoid it as far as is in our control by entrusting our thoughts, feelings, and worries to Him, confident that He cares for us (e.g. Ps. 55:22; Matt. 6; Phil. 4:6f; 1Pet. 5:6f; et al). It is imperative that we understand these instructions in light of foundational principles regarding sin as lawlessness and the extent to which sin has deeply affected this world.

C. When Adam and Eve chose to sin, open access to perfection was cut off. Being cut off brought corruption and death, including corruption of the human mind (Ro. 8:18-25; 2Cor. 4:4; 10:5; 11:3; Eph. 6:10-18; 1Jn. 5:19). This means that Satan can and does attack on levels we don't typically think about including: DNA, our thoughts and cognitions, our medical and mental state, even environmental, agricultural, & chemical toxins! Satan also uses social media & the globalization and digitalization of information to bombard us with an overabundance of things to worry over & fight about that we were never intended to take in. We are brought face to face with the horrors and corruptions of people all over the world, every moment of every day.

D. Satan further tears us at the spiritual seams by tempting us w/ activities offering temporary relief, but no true satisfaction (e.g. drugs, alcohol, sleeping around, theft, gambling, etc.; Heb. 11:25). This complicates things further.

E. So, despite the plethora of warnings against anxiety and these schemes of the devil, we still struggle, by our own choices, by the choices of others, and because of the corruption of this world which is passing away and destined for destruction.

IV. How Can We Address Anxiety in the Church? (Lk. 10:25-37; James 4:17; Prov. 12:25)

A. Godly people invite open and constructive dialogue about more than just trivial matters. To do this, here are a few tips: 1) Don't ever stigmatize mental disorders; 2) Open up with others about your struggles as you would be surprised how you initiating the conversation will give someone the courage to open up about themselves; 3) Learn about what kinds of anxiety disorders there are, how to combat them, and treatment options that are available; 4) Be understanding of the different reasons for anxiety disorders and learn how to converse about these different causes; 5) Know your limitations; & 6) Persevere in sympathy, empathy, prayer, patience, encouragement, & evangelism.

B. If you struggle with an anxiety disorder, you are not any less spiritually valuable or dedicated than someone else who doesn't. You are also not alone; anxiety disorders are one of the most common disorders in the world and the church does not exist in a vacuum away from that fact. Know also that anxiety disorders are very treatable, but sadly less than half seek treatment (cf. Jer. 15:18; 17:14).

- C. There is an abundance of options for treatment including: individual or group therapy, cognitive exercises, homeopathy, physical exercise, nutrition counseling, medication, etc. But before you begin any of these, get educated on what to expect, what not to expect, and what you need to know. This is especially true with medication because if used negligently, one can end up far worse or even die from things like serotonin syndrome. These options, with God, prayer, Bible study, and accountability in the church as foundations, can and will get you on track. Without these first and foremost though, any & all treatments and therapies will be inadequate (Ps. 127:1).
- D. God has given people gifts, knowledge, and talents within the church who are professionally equipped to effectively address anxiety (Rom. 12:4-8; 1Cor. 12:27f; 1Pet. 4:10f). Just in our group we have pharmacists, nurses, a nutrition educator, and a personal trainer. In the body of Christ, we have even more resources including therapists, counselors, physicians, homeopaths, & others who want to serve! (Eccl. 4:9-12)
- E. For all, know what is coming into your home and into your body. Be careful what is coming into your body and brain. Too many are negligent and as a result invite disaster into their own lives. Being an informed person can give you greater power over what you can control as far as triggers, toxins, and other sources that cause or aggravate anxiety (1Cor. 3:16f; 6:19f).
- F. Learn more about your body. Learn about how things like the natural stimulation of serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin can offset and flush the system of cortisol and adrenaline, stress hormones that contribute to anxiety. These are systems designed by God to help you combat stress, worry, and anxiety, and if you are able to employ them in the fight, it will help tremendously! (Ps. 139:13-16) Try also to regulate your schedule, rest, hydration, eating habits as that will help.
- G. Channel your predisposition to be anxious into a helpful service; that's what I did!

Anxiety is a corruption of the human mind resulting from sin being in the world. It may degenerate further or be effectively managed depending on one's openness to seek treatment and spiritual healing. It will continue to be a very real struggle in this world as a chronic issue and as a situational issue as long as sin is in this world, which will be until God destroys this world as He has promised (1Jn. 2:17).

Statistically speaking, chances are that we have several in our assembly struggling with anxiety. Chances are that each and every one of us has struggled with at least a touch of anxiety these last few months. I don't offer a medical opinion as I am not qualified; however, I do want to offer the hope of redemptive healing through Christ. I want to affirm to you the value of God's people in their understanding and extend the hope of spiritual regeneration. I want to encourage you to talk to a spiritually-minded person who is educated in such areas. If you don't know of one, I'll be happy to assist as I do. Do this for your benefit, do this for the benefit of your family, & do this for the benefit of your spiritual brothers & sisters.

God freely offers forgiveness from sins, one of the most taxing weights on the human mind. Let's immediately take care of this weight first and vow to address the rest, not because we are weak, but because we are strong in Christ.