

Anxiety

*And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.
Luke 22:44*

If Jesus experienced anxiety, as He certainly did in the Garden of Gethsemane, then it cannot be a sin. God gives us **all** our emotions for good purposes. However, like other good gifts, emotions get twisted and used against us. For example, anger is supposed to urge us to change things, to oppose injustice, but anger can cause us to take vengeance, or it can turn inward and become depression. In the same way, fear and anxiety are supposed to protect us. They are supposed to motivate us to fight or flee a present danger. *A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it. Proverbs 22:3.*

What types of things cause you the most fear or anxiety?

Could there be any good purpose in fearing these things?

Some people seem to be biologically predisposed to anxiety and others have learned to fear life as a response to their early circumstances. For most people, both of these factors come into play. How would you analyze the origins of your own anxiety?

How has your fear gotten twisted? What unnecessary consequences does it have for you or those around you?

If Jesus experienced anxiety, then why are we all so ashamed of it? It's probably because of the many admonitions in Scripture not to be afraid, to "be anxious for nothing." Some have interpreted these as commands on par with the Top Ten. However, if a loving parent gathered his small child into his arms and whispered, "Don't be scared. Daddy's here," would you interpret that as a rebuke? On the contrary, it is meant to be a solace. In the midst of fear, there is protection; there is a Comforter. There is help for us in our anxiety; we do not need to be consumed by it. *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7*

How might it change your experience of anxiety if you thought that God wanted **to be with you in it**, to comfort you as a loving Father? Try reading the following Scriptures from this new perspective. Write about some of your thoughts. Gen. 15:1; Deut. 3:22; Ps. 56:3, 4; Ps. 94:19; Is. 44:2, 3; Jer. 1:6-8; Matt. 10:29-31; John 6:18-21; Phil. 4:6, 7.

Most people who experience anxiety regularly also struggle with secondary emotions. Some people become afraid of their fear and others are angry at themselves or at God. Reducing or eliminating these secondary emotions can be very freeing. Generally, that means accepting ourselves as God made us and being willing to walk the road He has given us. Most Christians say they are willing to die for their Savior. Are you willing to live for Him – even if that means suffering some anxiety? He was willing to suffer dreadful anxiety for you.

Your life is a story God is telling. Can you accept the plot God has given you, even if parts of it lead through fear?

What secondary emotions have you felt alongside your anxiety? How might you work on reducing those?

There is a strong corporal component to anxiety. Its manifestations are physical. Rapid breathing. Abdominal discomfort. Tremors. Light-headedness. Panic attacks. These are all symptoms of the body's emergency response system taking control. If you needed to fight or flee on sudden notice, you would be very glad of the adrenaline coursing through your system. It's a problem, however, when there is nothing to fight or flee! That's where some very practical interventions can make a difference. Everyone reacts just a little differently to anxiety, and you should try multiple remedies to find those which are helpful for you. Try the following things as you have occasion, and journal about those which are effective.

- Do increasingly difficult math problems in your head for a few minutes. This helps shift you from emotional right-brain responses to logical left-brain responses.
- Try writing out your specific fears and putting them away in a box. You could make a special container for your fears if you enjoy creative therapies.
- Concentrate very hard on something in your physical environment. For example, name the objects in your desk drawer or trace the complicated outline of carved furniture. Fear concerns past or future things; ground yourself in the present moment. This works particularly well for a panic attack.
- Use music to counter your internal state. If you are angry, listen to something soothing. If you are sad, listen to something happy. If you are afraid, listen to something which gives you strength and courage. Sing along.
- Meditate on comforting Scriptures like Psalm 23. Visualize yourself in a green pasture with your Great Shepherd. Walk your way through all the verses.
- Do something to calm yourself physically. Some people respond well to exercise but others would rather read a book or take a hot bath. Find what works for you.
- If you live with persistent anxiety, spend 5 minutes, three times a day doing deep breathing exercises. Anxiety tends to be cumulative, so you can 'reset' yourself and boost your immune system this way.

There are some effective medications for anxiety available now. Statistically, the best approach is often a combination of medication and counseling. If you have tried other remedies including counseling, if your anxiety does not seem to be related to a particular event, and if you would like to try a pharmaceutical approach, talk to your general practitioner, gynecologist or psychiatrist about it.

Most people already 'medicate' their anxiety in some manner. Some of those ways are healthy (e.g., jogging, calling a friend) and some are not (e.g., drinking, cutting, raging). How have you treated your own anxiety in the past? List every way you can think of and circle those which are healthy.

The Bible has its own treatment for anxiety. Like the other treatments you have probably tried, it is not necessarily a permanent cure (at least not yet), but it is a soothing balm which can be applied at any time of the day or night. *Perfect love casts out fear. 1 John 5:18.* While we cannot hope to appropriate perfect love in this lifetime, we can grow in our ability to understand, connect with and live in God's love for us. If you really believed that "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28) or that the Lord is with you at all times (Matt. 28:20) your fear might seem more manageable. I have a friend who clenches her right fist whenever she feels anxious to remind herself of this truth: *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. Ps. 73:23.*

The best remedy for anxiety is cultivating a loving relationship with the King of Everything. If you are not fully convinced of His self-sacrificing love for you or His desire to spend every moment of every day in your company, tell a trusted friend about your doubts, enlist a prayer partner to pray for you, find a mentor or a small group and embark on a spiritual journey to ground your soul in Christ alone.

Write down the steps you would like to take to increase your understanding of God's truth and the cultivation of His love in your heart:

Is there anyone you might ask to share this quest with you – either to pray for you or mentor you?

What have you learned about God and anxiety? Journal about your hopes for the future. Sign and date this handout so that it might serve as a 'memory stone' of God's faithfulness (Josh. 4:6). May He richly bless your journey.
