

What do we do about anxiety?

Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit; all day long they press their attack. My adversaries pursue me all day long (Psalm 56:1-2a NIV).

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4 NIV).

Many of you are familiar with the words “stress” and “anxiety.” You use them casually when talking about what to wear or what movie to watch. But you also feel them when you’re trying to sleep at night, when you sit down to take a test you forgot about, when you get asked by an adult what you’re going to do with the rest of your life, when you think about what to do next.

The crazy thing is, we experience it in so many areas of our lives that we often don’t even notice it. It becomes a natural part of our existence. And if we *do* notice it, we wonder . . .

- Is it anxiety? Or just a little bit of stress?
- Is it *normal* anxiety? Or is it overload?
- Do I need to get help? Or am I taking small things and blowing them out of proportion?
- Do I need to just get over it?

What are the warning signs when it comes to anxiety? This is not a straight forward answer. You’re dealing with a mixture of circumstances, personality, influences, hormones, and mental patterns, just to name a few! **Every person is different, so it’s not always easy to recognize the warning signs of anxiety.** But there *are* some symptoms that, when you identify with them, it’s a red flag for sure. For example, when . . .

- The pressure on your chest is so heavy that you feel like you can’t breathe.
- It’s nighttime, you’re trying to fall asleep, but you can’t because your mind is racing so fast it feels like you’re running on a treadmill and you just can’t stop.
- There are knots in your stomach and you feel like you can’t focus on anything else.
- You have a tough time relaxing most of the time because you just kind of always feel “on edge.”

What do you do then? What’s normal and what’s not? And more importantly, can you avoid these feelings? Or is this just the way life is supposed to be?

The thing about stress and anxiety is that there *are* some answers, but they can be different for nearly everybody.

To start, let’s make sure we’re all on the same page about the differences between “stress” and “anxiety.”

Here’s an easy way to think about it:

- **Stress is specific.** It’s a reaction to an actual situation. Like the pressure you feel over an upcoming test or a big game. Stress is usually short-term. **When the specific thing we’re stressed about passes, the stress usually goes away.**
- **Anxiety is not specific.** It’s more like a reaction to the world as a whole. Anxiety is something you feel all the time or about all things. **It’s a general feeling of unease or fear that doesn’t go away, even when the stressful circumstance does.**

Contrary to what you may think, both stress and anxiety can be a good thing. Stress helps us accomplish what we need to accomplish. It pushes us to get better and work hard. Nothing wrong with that! Anxiety comes from the same “fear” part of our brain that puts us on high-alert when there’s danger nearby, like when we’re about to get hit by a bus or fall off a cliff. We NEED that part of our brains!

But anxiety becomes a problem when it sticks around for too long and is no longer helpful.

When there’s no danger that we need to pay attention to, but our mind and body is acting like there *is*—or when we’re constantly creating new situations in our head to fear and be anxious about—we need to know—that’s *not* how we’re designed to work!

In fact, when we live with constant anxiety, our body creates a stress hormone that is pumped through our entire body that keeps us on high alert. And living like that for a long period of time eventually wears you down and wears you out.

At that point, anxiety isn’t helpful for pointing out danger. It’s hurting you. It’s keeping you from functioning in normal life.

So, the question is, what do you do about it? If you feel anxious almost *all* the time, what are your options?

Well, you can talk to a friend, go for a run, take a nap, lay off energy drinks, practice breathing exercises, meet with a counselor and get some therapy, and so on. Like we already mentioned, coping will look different for everyone.

We’re going to look at one thing everyone can do when you feel stressed or anxious, no matter how severe or simple your feelings may be.

Anxiety isn’t a new problem. It’s a human problem. So even though it feels intensely personal, and it makes you feel like no one else gets what you’re experiencing, you can rest assured you aren’t the first, you won’t be the last, and you aren’t alone.

That’s why I love the book of Psalms. There are several different types of literature in the Bible. The book of Psalms is like a book of poetry. But in some places, it’s more than poetry. It’s like a journal, written by real people who gave us specific insight into what they were feeling.

Psalms 56 is like that. It’s a poem written by David, who was probably the most famous king of Israel. We’re told that this psalm was written when David was captured in Gath by the Philistines. In hindsight, we know that David lived through this experience. But at the time, David didn’t know that, so who knows how much stress and anxiety he was feeling! He writes . . .

Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit; all day long they press their attack. My adversaries pursue me all day long (Psalm 56:1-2a NIV).

David’s enemies are out to kill him. He would be crazy not to be afraid. But notice what he does here. **He names the thing that is stressing him out.** One of the trickiest things about anxiety is that it makes you feel powerless. It puts a general fear in your heart. And that’s a hard thing to beat. How do you get over anxiety that doesn’t tell you to be afraid of anything specific, just the world in general? David starts by getting specific.

Feeling stressed? Overwhelmed? Anxious? Name it.

But David doesn’t end there . . .

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4 NIV).

Check out what David does here. He moves the focus from what's making him afraid to the God he trusts. **His circumstances don't change, but his focus does. His situation doesn't shift, but his perspective does.**

And that's important. Because sometimes the thing that causes us to feel overwhelmed is something we can't control.

- School is a reality.
- Parents arguing is a reality.
- Friends turning on us is a reality.

Those things don't always go away like a test does once you've taken it. When life doesn't change, the one thing we can change is what we do with—and how we respond to—the stress and anxiety that life brings. We can bring it to God.

- We can acknowledge what we are feeling. We can name it.
- We can name why it bothers us.
- And we can shift our focus to something else that is a reality—God's role in it.

Think of it this way: When we're stressed or anxious, it can be helpful to name **WHAT, WHY** and **WHO**.

In anxious situations, this can help. Will it fix everything? Probably not. But it can help you see clearly. The idea is to form a habit of focusing on truth and gaining a perspective larger than your current one. It will help you train your mind to get out of the rut of worry, stress, and anxiety. Think of it this way:

There are tools to take on anxiety.

David knew what we know—that life can be overwhelming. We will face things we don't feel prepared to face. We will get stuck in negative thoughts, paralyzed by anxiety, stressed about things we can't control, and fearful over what we can do about it all. And over time, he figured out that it did him no good to stay stuck there. So, he modeled a way through with tools that can help us today!

When it comes to stress and anxiety, there is no one-size-fits-all cure. There are lots of good and acceptable tactics to help us cope. And that's okay! **But what's not okay is living with anxiety that holds you back from what you really want your day-to-day life to look like—all while you keep it to yourself.**

That's why we want to begin the conversation today. If your stress or your anxiety has begun to take over, I encourage you to talk your family, a leader at church, and of course you can reach out to me anytime. Talk about it and try different coping methods to see if they help you.

As you head out today, no matter where you are and what you are feeling—stuck in the anxiety, stuck in stress, or not in the middle of it now, be aware that seasons like that are likely to come—you need to know you aren't and won't be helpless. **There are tools to take on anxiety.** There are people to walk with you. There are ways forward. And there is a God who is absolutely crazy about you and will be with you through it all.