

Unworried: A Life Without Anxiety

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Chapter One Have No Anxiety

Christians believe that God's word is true for all times. We know our identity, our purpose, and our path, not by what we feel is true in this moment, but in the truth of the Word of God.

Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Jesus constantly reminded his followers, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (Jn 14:1) and "do not worry" (Mt 6:34). In John 14:27, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." In Mark 5:36, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; just have faith."

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. (2 Timothy 1:7)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)

As a Christian, you can be comforted by realizing that whatever worry or anxiety you are feeling in this moment, it was never God's will that you be anxious. Neither are you destined to live in your anxiety.

Looking at the human condition from this perspective, we see that anxiety didn't enter the scene until sin entered the world. Prior to the Fall, God, man, woman, and creation lived in harmonious union. Genesis paints a picture of Adam and Eve confident in God's providence, safe in each other's arms, and happy to do the productive work of tending the garden.

After the Fall, everything shifts. Suddenly, man and woman, separated from God for the first time, are intimately aware of how alone, how vulnerable, how tiny they are. But God assures Adam and Eve, and us, that he did not intend to leave us this way. The Word would become flesh in the person of Christ, entering into the experience of historical man to tell us again and again to "be not afraid."

We don't have to wait until the end times to be delivered from most if not all of our anxieties! God is already hard at work, healing us day by day by drawing us deeper and deeper into relationship with him, where we can encounter the perfect love that casts out all fear (cf. 1 Jn 4:18).

The "Mystery" of Anxiety

As we experience the integration that comes with self-mastery, the peace that accompanies finding healthy and godly ways to satisfy our deepest longings, the wisdom that helps us confidently discern the right thing to do at the right time and in the right way, and the all-encompassing love that comes from entering more and more deeply into the intimate presence of God, it stands to reason that anxiety would have less claim over our lives.

Emotions, like anxiety, begin as pre-conscious, embodied experiences that bubble up, unbidden, from the limbic system (our emotional/reptilian brain) several milliseconds before our conscious mind is even aware of them. Emotions, including anxiety, can never be sinful because sin requires us to make a choice.

Anxiety, in particular, is a physiological and psychological response to the perception that, for some reason, we are not safe; that our physical, psychological, relational, or spiritual wellbeing is in jeopardy.

Anxiety is meant to be a sign. Sometimes the reasons we feel threatened are obvious. Sometimes they are not. Anxiety is the perfectly predictable response to life in a fallen world where things truly are so often unsafe.

When Saint Paul experienced anxiety about his own inability to overcome certain flaws (2 Cor 12:9), God reassured him that, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

We have a tendency to identify with our “emotional problems” in a way that we don’t identify with “physical problems.” The problem is, when we identify with the anxiety we feel, we begin to think of it as a necessary part of who we are. We may not like it, but there it is. We think we can’t do anything about it. It’s just part of us, so we have no choice but to accept it.

But think of how ridiculous this is. Even the person with an illness they can’t do anything about still thinks of his or her “true” self as healthy.

With anxiety, we have a tendency to assume that this is who we are. But if God did not create you to be anxious, and if he plans to deliver you from all anxiety in the fullness of time, then you may have anxiety today, you may even struggle against it tomorrow, but you are not “an anxious person.” You are not defined by your anxiety, but by God’s grace and the mighty work he longs to do in you.

When God looks at you, your whole, healed, godly, grace-filled self is who he sees, and who he is working to help you to become.

If you have children (or even know a child that you love), you might be able to naturally understand my point. Even if your child is having a bad day and making lots of mistakes, no loving parent would write their child off as a screw-up. You may see that your child is struggling, but you know who they really are. You know the good, strong, confident, talented person they are — even if they can’t see it.

You dedicate yourself to helping them live up to all you see in them, all they can be. You want to help them discover that strength and lean into it so that they can exhibit those qualities consistently and confidently.

You already have the capacity to be a peaceful, strong, confident person dwelling within you in the seed God planted while you were still in your mother’s womb.

As we draw closer to God, all the stuff that isn’t authentically part of us gets stripped away, and his grace allows us to become more ourselves. Grace does not take something that is horrible and turn it into something else. Grace peels away all the false layers our fallen world applies to us so that we can become more of who we truly are.

God is not asking you to become something that you are not. He simply wants you to learn how to nourish the seeds of peace, confidence, courage, strength, security, and all the rest that he has already planted in your heart

God literally created you with the physiological, psychological, and spiritual capacity to be the peaceful person you long to be. You just have to learn how to lean into that vision of yourself to “become what you are”

God has great plans for you. He wants to free you from your fears and deliver you from your anxieties so that you can rest confidently in his love and care like a child rests in its mother's arms. That was his intention for you from the beginning, and it is your destiny to be fulfilled through his grace.

The first step is learning to stop clinging to our anxiety as if it was a necessary part of us, and cling, instead, to the perfect love of God, which will cast out all our fears.

Chapter Two An Anxious Brain

The more intensely a person experiences anxiety, the more difficult it can sometimes be for them to tell the difference between anxiety and a host of heightened emotional states.

This confusion can be especially strong when a person is struggling with panic attacks. In such cases, something as benign as simply feeling excited about an upcoming birthday celebration can sometimes trigger fear that another panic attack is just around the corner if they allow themselves to get "too overstimulated."

Ironically, obsessively attempting to live a less stressful or stimulating life can become its own stressor, as the person feels both overwhelmed by the impossibility of the task and suffocated by the sense that their life just keeps getting smaller and smaller. Agoraphobia — where a person can become so fearful that they cannot leave their house — is a perfect, albeit extreme, example of this.

For instance, a prominent public speaker perceived an increased heart rate, slight sweatiness, and light-headedness before speaking engagements. Reframing her experience as an adaptive response — rather than a threatening one — helped her see that her body was actually trying to help her do a good job. Understanding these sensations in a new light enabled her to more effectively focus her mind on the performance she was about to give. Excitement can easily be interpreted by the body as anxiety.

This simple reframing intervention did allow her to more effectively reinterpret and manage the physiological symptoms

An Ocean of Emotion

Every emotion begins with molecular shifts that occur throughout your body as you interact with the outside world. Everything that happens to you, every choice you make, every thought you think, every response you make sends a wash of hormones, neurotransmitters, and other chemicals through your body.

An emotion, is simply the process of your primitive brain (your limbic system) collecting all this information to allow you to identify the change that has occurred in your physical, psychological, relational, and/or spiritual well-being.

The primitive part of your brain responsible for collecting information about the molecular shifts in your body is too unsophisticated to say whether a particular change is good or bad, much less what you should do about it. That job belongs to a much more advanced part of your "thinking brain" called the insular cortex (IC). It's the IC's job to take all the information from the primitive brain about the various micro-shifts constantly occurring in your body and give that constellation of symptoms a label that identifies it as a particular emotion. Having labeled it, the IC then sends messages back down to the primitive brain so it can tell your body how to adjust or what behaviors to enact so that you can function most effectively in any given situation.

Sometimes, especially when people struggle with chronic anxiety, the primitive brain/limbic system is throwing so much information at it so quickly, the IC just can't wrap each emotion in the correct package. Eventually it gets overwhelmed, labels everything "anxiety" just to get it over with.

Why does this happen? For some people it's because they have either lived through prolonged, traumatic events or experienced singularly stressful situations that left their nervous systems stressed and overwhelmed.

A Body of Fear

The process of reframing is one simple exercise that helps the IC learn (or, in some cases, relearn) its job of wrapping and packaging emotions correctly. Consciously renaming a particular experience as something else teaches the IC to stop automatically slapping an "anxiety" wrapper on every heightened state that bubbles up from the primitive brain. The most important distinction to make is the one between anxiety and fear. Fear is the natural, biological, and appropriate response to an imminent threat. Anxiety is when the brain's natural fear circuits get hijacked by something that isn't in immediate danger who could even be good for us.

When the fear-systems in our brain work properly, they serve a protective function, warning us away from danger and easing off once the threat has passed. Anxiety hijacks this God-given fear-threat system and causes us either to fear things that could be good for us or experience disproportional responses to actual threats.

Fear, as unpleasant as it may be, can be a great gift, a servant of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. But anxiety represents a threat to our physical, emotional, and spiritual integrity that, left unchecked, can tear our lives apart.

Feeling Burned Out?

The chemicals produced by the brain's fear response are caustic. When persistently stressful or traumatic events trigger prolonged exposure to these chemicals, they create something like a chemical burn on your amygdala, the CEO of the fear/protection system. At the very least, this can cause us to feel every stressor more acutely, making it harder to respond in a calm rational way.

Even though fear and anxiety feel very similar to one another — because they both are produced by the same fear-threat system in your brain — they are very different phenomena. The person experiencing fear reacts because they are having a genuinely protective, biologically pre-programmed reaction to an imminent threat to their safety or wellbeing.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is akin to suffering a pinched nerve in the brain's fear-threat system. The pain is real enough, but it's the result of something happening inside of you, and not a response to an external, physical threat.

For example, if you had a pinched nerve in your leg, you wouldn't call an ambulance. You would feel pain, and it might hurt terribly, but you would (1) recognize that the pain was coming from the inside of your body, not from an outside assault; (2) focus your attention on trying to breathe through the cramp and relax your leg; and (3) eventually engage in some limited exercise to work through any remaining soreness.

Three Steps to Anxiety First-Aid Recognize, Relabel, and Respond.

Step 1: Recognize the Problem

You feel anxious. Don't act out. Instead, check the feeling. Ask yourself, "Am I responding to an imminent (not a past or potential future) threat to my life or safety?" Is there something to be afraid of?

Anxiety tends to be a fear response triggered by something that has either happened a long time ago, has not yet happened, may not actually be happening at all. Anxiety tends to hang around and haunt you. You might keep replaying the scene over and over in your head and experience a low-grade sense of dread. Or you might imagine all the ways you might make a fool of yourself and struggle with a constant feeling of dread and terror. Or, alternatively, for no reason at all, you might just be suddenly struck with an overwhelming sense of panic that causes you to feel like something terrible is going to happen.

This is anxiety not fear because you are not responding to an imminent and obvious threat to your safety or wellbeing. You feel fearful in these instances because the concerning event caused a misfiring of your fear-threat system.

This is a small but significant difference. It means that the answer to your problem is not to be obsessively thinking about it. Instead, you must step back and help your insular cortex relabel your experience of anxiety. Instead of running around trying to figure out how you can fix something going on around you, you must instead figure out how to control your brain and body. Then, you will be able to correctly assess what to do about the situation itself.

Step 2 Relabel and Relax

The second step is to relabel your experience and relax your body. You can then intentionally shift your focus away from the concerning event for the time being and refocus on relaxing your body and getting your fear-threat system back under control.

Problems with anxiety are always serious physiological events. The good news is that your anxiety is actually being caused by a process that, with practice, you can learn to control.

One of the most effective, yet simplest, techniques involves consciously speaking and acting more slowly than you feel like you want to. Often, when we are anxious, our thoughts and speech automatically race. On top of this, because our brain is preoccupied with being anxious, we stop paying attention to what we are doing. Intentionally speaking a little slower than we want to, acting a little more slowly and intentionally than we naturally prefer in that moment, and forcing ourselves to pay attention to what we are doing taps the brake pedal.

Deep breathing exercises can be tremendously helpful for getting your sympathetic nervous system unstuck. Here is a simple one. Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose for the count of four, hold your breath for the count of seven, and blow out through your mouth to the count of eight. Repeat for at least five minutes or until the anxiety passes.

Although you might be tempted to dismiss the power of simple suggestions like "take a deep breath" for relieving anxiety, science shows you may be missing out if you do.

Reflective prayer is also very helpful to "tap the brake" and slow down your brain and body.

Close your eyes and intentionally recall the times God has been faithful to you or carried you through a difficult time. Take a moment to praise God for these things. Your heart won't be in it at first, but that's okay. It's what Saint Paul called a "sacrifice of praise" (Heb 13:15), and it helps to remind you of the fact that if God has been present to you so many different times in the past, he isn't going to fail you now.

Grounding is another simple way to "tap the break" on your slowdown nervous system. Grounding reconnects you with your body and the present moment instead of letting you fly away with your thoughts.

Count five things you see, four things you hear, three sensations you are feeling in your body. Identify two people who care about you, and one simple thing you could do to feel even a tiny bit better right now (for instance: have a hot cup of tea, listen to your favorite music, do something you enjoy for a few moments).

Anxiety cause wants your thoughts to race ahead to anticipate all possible future problems. Forcing yourself to re-focus on the present moment, especially at this level of detail, activates your para-sympathetic nervous system and slows the anxious brain's tendency to race ahead.

Reconnecting with others can be tremendously important. Go to your spouse or a good friend and ask them to give you a hug. Don't be quick about it. Relax into the hug until you feel yourself exhaling

the stress. Hugging actually syncs your heart rate to the other person and increases the presence of oxytocin, a powerful "calm down" hormone produced through interpersonal bonding.

Remember, unless there is an immediate threat to your life or wellbeing, you should not be experiencing fear. If you are, something in your nervous system is misfiring. The more you ignore this simple biological fact and instead try to control all the outside factors that might be causing the anxiety, the more anxious and out of control you will feel. Because you are ignoring the real cause of your anxiety, the unnecessary or disproportionate triggering of your autonomic fear response, any attempts to "fix" the problem by trying to control your external world will simply backfire.

Remind yourself that having a legitimate concern about X does not mean that X is an imminent threat, and then refocus on getting this fear-threat system back under control. You will be able to consciously and intentionally restore a sense of peace and confidence.

The point is, anxiety — unlike fear — is not a reaction to your environment. Anxiety may be triggered by context, but it is caused by a misfiring of the autonomic nervous system your best hope for reclaiming a sense of peace is to focus primarily on getting control of your body rather than your environment.

Step 3 Respond

If you take the time to calm your body down, turn off your fear-based reactive brain, and turn on your thinking brain, you will be in a much better place to respond to the specific event

The key is "think small." In fact, the smaller the better. Ask yourself how you could take a little better care of yourself. Perhaps you could take a walk, call a friend, pray, or do something you enjoy, even for a few minutes.

One of the chief antidotes to anxiety is thoughtful productive action. When you make yourself pursue even a tiny change, you'll be surprised at how little it actually takes to regain a sense of power in your life, and how much of an impact this sense of personal power has on helping you overcome anxiety.

This three-step process of Recognize- Relabel-Respond is a simple but powerful way to begin to master those feelings of anxiety that threaten to master you.