



What Do You Do About Anxiety? Has Anxiety Ever Gotten the Best of You?

My second year as a pastor, my wife and our four children arrived at the monthly business meeting for our church, and I was stunned by what I saw. Cars were everywhere, cars I had never seen before at our church meetings. It turned out a small group of our members wanted me fired so without giving me any notice, they called people still on the church roles, family members and old friends to come this evening to help them vote me out as pastor. To the horror of the rest of the church and to me and my family I was voted out, given two weeks severance pay and one and a half weeks to move out of the church owned house where we lived. For more than two decades I suffered great anxiety weeks before each annual church business meeting. I am sure I had no reason to be concerned but I dreaded each and every church meeting we had. Anxiety is not always rational or based on how things actually are, it is our emotional response to how we see what's happening around us. I don't think anyone wants to be anxious or pushed along by anxiety. But it happens and for many, it is a destructive element to their lives. There are four things never to say to an anxious person. 1. Calm down. 2. Calm down. 3. Calm down. 4. Calm down. If you could just "calm down", you certainly would have done so. You couldn't though and so that is why you are filled with anxiety...and frustrated greatly by those who tell you "Just calm down."

Anxiety has a crushing effect on you. It can damage your health: your immune system, your digestive system, and your cardiovascular system. Anxiety leads to a greater likelihood of infections, heart attacks and strokes. Not only that, but anxiety can also make you less productive at work, more prone to alcohol and drug abuse, lead to you avoiding people or social situations and bring about struggles in decision making. With anxiety taking over, you will find yourself having a tough time focusing, remembering things and may experience more nightmares than normal. It can lead to a falling away from God and diminished trust in the Bible as your guide to life. Jesus warned that worry and greed can be disastrous to us. **The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.** (Matthew 13: 22 NIV) When Jesus spoke of being unfruitful, it meant that one's life becomes useless, spiraling downward.

One such person who exemplified the effect of anxiety on the human personality was King Saul who faced the terrifying prospect of a Philistine invasion. The army of Israel was no match for the Philistines and King Saul was beside himself. Prior to this new threat, Saul had banned the practice of witchcraft in the country and the law he enforced called for death to anyone caught fortune telling or casting spells. But anxiety led him to violate one of the fundamental values he had. King Saul, desperately wanting to know what to do, consulted a witch for guidance. **So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?"** (1 Samuel 28: 8-9 NIV) When anxiety takes over, it leads to all sorts of responses that one never would have dreamed of doing before anxiety grips the soul.

I have for many years been intrigued by the bizarre account of Jacob tricking his father Isaac into mistakenly bestowing his blessing on Jacob rather than his older son Esau. You may know the story. Rebekah

overheard her husband sending off their older son Esau to go catch some wild game and make a stew for him. After eating, Isaac promised he would bestow on Esau the sacred blessing. Anxiety gripped Rebekah. She knew God had promised when Esau and Jacob were born that He would put Jacob, the younger son above Esau in prominence. **The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."** (Genesis 25: 23 NIV) Over the years, she had developed a greater affection for Jacob than Esau. The promised blessing seemed to make all her dreams for Jacob come apart. Rather than trusting God to make it all work out, she took matters into her own hands and came up with a plan where Jacob would trick his blind father (Rebekah's husband), into bestowing his blessing on Jacob rather than Esau. What a horrible thing she did. Rebekah violated Isaac's sacred trust in her and enticed Jacob into violating his conscience by lying to his father and stealing from his twin brother what was rightfully his. Anxiety can wreck your moral values and lead to terrible decisions just to find relief from it.

Let me share a Biblical strategy for gaining victory over anxiety. The Apostle Peter gave this instruction. **Cast all your anxiety on him (God) because he cares for you.** (1 Peter 5: 7 NIV) Honestly, that does sound a bit like what we are warned never to say to those who are anxious. "Calm down." If I could cast all my anxiety on Christ, I would but I can't. The Apostle Paul provides us with practical instruction. Let me break this down. **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** (Philippians 4: 6-7 NIV) Here is one of the most profound statements on overcoming anxiety found anywhere in literature. It is so simple and yet over the heads of some of the greatest minds in history. You can practice this if you are highly educated or not. You don't need long hours sitting on a psychologist's sofa, just a determination to gain the supernatural help of God in overcoming the fear and worry found in anxiety.

There are three simple steps to getting past your anxiety. 1. Pray. Open up your mind to being with God. Get your thoughts on Christ and focus on Him. He is right there, and He loves you and wants you to have peace. It may take some faith to put your mind on God because you believe He is for you but even if you just have a tiny bit of faith in God at that moment, still by force of will think about Jesus. Grip that focus on Christ being there like someone holding with all his effort to the edge of a cliff. 2. Ask God to intervene and help you. This is not up to you as far as effort goes. There is no great work on your part. You just ask Christ to take over what is making you anxious. Say it out loud so it is clear in your mind that Jesus is in control of your situation. 3. Make "Thankful" notes. Write down in a journal small or large reasons for being grateful. Knowing and recalling what you have that is good helps immensely getting you through what is rough. Take some time and be thoughtful. I have a friend who is dying of cancer. Each day he is grateful God has given him a few people who join him in Bible study that want him to teach them. I've seen tears come to his eyes when he talks about the joy he has leading that little group.

Medical experts say there are four things each person should practice when anxiety is wearing them down. Journal. Write down your thoughts and explore them. Exercise. Even if you are physically unable to do much, find a way to work out a part of your body you can push. Be careful to maintain a regular sleep routine. Be rigid in this. Always go to bed at a certain time and get up at a specific time. Avoid caffeine. As much as we love it, caffeine might not be helpful when you are struggling with anxiety. Nehemiah, the Jewish governor who led the building project reconstructing the wall around Jerusalem is one of my heroes in the Bible. Before he became governor, he was the cupbearer to the king of the greatest empire on earth at the time. He had heard about how terrible conditions were in Jerusalem and he desperately wanted to leave his job and go help there. But the king was a despot, and the cupbearer was a crucial position. He needed to ask the king for permission to go but he was overwhelmed with anxiety. When the king realized Nehemiah had something on his mind and asked what it was, anxiety paralyzed him. But he swallowed hard, prayed, and then told the king about what he wanted to do. Your greatest superpower is prayer.