

Calming Your Anxious Mind: Get on the Path to Peace and Emotional Rest

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Anxiety. Stress. Worry. Panic. These words get thrown around a lot in everyday language, and people use them to refer to a wide range of feelings and experiences. You have probably heard that the only things in life that are certain are death and taxes. Well, I think we can also add anxiety and stress to that list! Anxiety impacts people at every level of society, and women, with our tendency to become preoccupied with anxious thoughts, may find ourselves overwhelmed with anxiety and stress.

Anxiety and stress are normal reactions and responses to life circumstances, physical needs, time pressures, personality types, and relationship dynamics. Anxiety is unavoidable on this earth and we will probably never get to the point where we have NO worries or stress. So this presentation is not about *eliminating* anxiety, but rather how to cope with it and minimize how much it impacts your emotional, physical, social, and spiritual health.

What are some things that cause anxiety for you?

Let's take a quick look at the way the body and brain respond to stress. When anxiety is triggered it activates a series of neurobiological responses that we can learn to recognize and regulate.

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) Responses

"The First Responder" to stress and anxiety

- ↑ Norepinephrine
- ↑ Adrenalin
- ↑ Cortisol
- Rapid heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Sweating and shaking, "butterflies" in stomach, muscle tension
- Prompts escape behavior or paralysis ("fight-or-flight")
- Prolonged SNS activation can interfere with deep sleep and lead to anxiety or depressive disorders

Activating the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) Response

(Can override SNS activation!)

- Produces relaxation
- Can be activated purposely
- ↓ heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, perspiration
- ↓ Stress hormones
- Calms activation in the hippocampus and anterior cingulate areas of the brain
- Contributes to brain repair, new nerve cells, dendrite growth
- Helps with memory, problem-solving, and reasoning
- Prompts deeper, more restful sleep

How to activate the PNS

(And override a panic attack!)

- **Diaphragmatic stretch and breathing:** Raise arms, open chest, stretch shoulders, rib cage and diaphragm, and inhale deeply. Then drop your arms, bend over, and push the air out as you exhale.
- **Exercise:** A burst of exercise for just a few minutes. Try fast walking, running in place, going up and down steps, or jumping jacks
- **Kegel Exercise:** 15-20 second pelvic floor contraction impacts your vagus nerve, which interfaces with the parasympathetic control of the heart, lungs, and digestive tract, for rapid reduction of anxiety/panic.
- **Crying:** This PNS response quickly reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol (for both men and women!) As little as 3 minutes of crying can decrease stress hormones by 50%.
- **Cold Water (or ice water):** Drink it or splash it on your cheeks.

Strategies for Coping with Anxiety and Reducing Misery

- Identify and replace anxiety-producing thoughts (self-talk)
- Plan for the day (schedules, lists, appts.)
- Schedule “worry time” (perhaps 15-20 min. daily)
- Spirituality, Scripture promises, prayer, mindfulness, reflection
- Daily moderate exercise (30 minutes of walking is great!)
- Sunshine—at least 10 minutes daily
- Time spent in nature
- Daily act of kindness
- Gratitude list: What went well today?
- Creativity, humor, fun, play
- Time for self-care, soothing, nurturing (relaxation)

Anxiety and Self-Talk:

People who suffer from anxiety, fear, panic, and low self-confidence are especially prone to engage in anxious thinking or “self-talk.” It’s often *what we say to ourselves* in response to any particular situation that determines our moods and feelings. Anxiety can be generated in the moment by making statements to yourself that begin with the two words, “what if...” It can be easy to get caught in a downward spiral of negative thinking. No matter how much faith we have, or the level of our spiritual understanding and scriptural knowledge, we all have automatic, instinctive ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Fatigue, hormone swings, illness, grief and loss, or a history of abuse or trauma may also make us more sensitive to stress.

Human beings are amazingly diverse and complex, with different personalities, histories, experiences, and needs, all of which play a distinct role in how we think and act. Getting to know your mind and learning how to adjust what you are thinking is one of the most important keys to living a more peaceful and more faithful life. Are you a worrier? A self-critic? A victim? A perfectionist? Do you have too much to do and not enough time? Do you feel responsible for everyone else and unable to rest and care for yourself?

The Worrier: This is one of the strongest factors in promoting anxiety. The Worrier develops anxiety by imagining the worst-case scenario (and then imagines it will be too much to cope with). This scares

you with fears of catastrophe, disaster, failure, and/or loss. It can also activate physical symptoms (as noted above) that may lead to panicky feelings. In short, the Worrier 1) anticipates the worst, 2) overestimates the odds of something awful, bad, or terrible happening, 3) has vivid visual images of potential failure or catastrophe, and 4) fears it will be too overwhelming to cope with.

The Worrier’s most often-used expression is “What if...?” Examples of Worrier self-talk might include statements such as “What if I fail?” “What if I lose him/her?” “What will people think of me?” “What if I can’t handle it?”

Do you notice any Worrier self-talk in your thinking? Any “What ifs?”

The Critic: The Critic is the part of your self-talk that’s constantly judging and evaluating your behavior. It tends to point out your flaws and limitations, and reminds you of any mistakes you make until you feel like a failure. The Critic generates anxiety by putting you down, comparing your self-image with others, and emphasizing your weaknesses and inadequacies. When you notice the Critic in your thinking, you might hear the voice of your mother or father, a teacher, a pastor, advertising, social media, or anyone who wounded you in the past with their criticism.

The Critic’s most-used expressions include, “That was so stupid.” “What a disappointment I am.” Examples of typical Critic self-talk might include statements such as, “How could I have done something like that?” “I could’ve done better.” “I’m so weak and stupid—I should be stronger (smarter, faster, thinner, prettier...)” “Look how clever and capable _____ is!” “_____ is a better mother, wife, daughter, Christian...”

Do you notice any Critic self-talk in your thinking? Any “I’m stupid.” Statements?”

The Victim: The Victim is the part of your thinking that feels helpless or hopeless. It generates anxiety by telling you that you are not making progress because life is unfair, and that you are in some ways deprived, defective, or unworthy. You see insurmountable obstacles between yourself and your goals and desires. You often feel as if others are getting things you deserve, or are “out to get you” in some way. You feel that God has withheld blessings from you, and you catch yourself complaining and regretting things as they are. You believe nothing will change and may feel like giving up. This kind of self-talk can also lead to depression, which often occurs hand-in-hand with anxiety.

The Victim’s most-used expressions are, “I can’t.” “I’ll never be able to.” The Victim thinker may also say things like “I’ll never be able to do that so what’s the point of trying?” “I feel drained and unmotivated today—why bother doing anything?” “I wish I could go back and have a do-over with

that class (relationship, job, living situation, church) but it's too late now." "It's not going to work."
"People always let me down." "I'm a failure."

Do you notice any Victim self-talk in your thinking? Any "I cant's?"

The Perfectionist: Perfectionist self-talk is closely related to the Critic, but its concern is less to put you down than to push and prod you to do better, *and better, and better*. It generates anxiety by constantly telling you that your efforts aren't good enough, that you *should* be working harder, that you *should* always have everything under control, *should* always be competent, *should* always be pleasant, pleasing, and all the things we think Christian women and mothers *should* be. The Perfectionist is intolerant of mistakes or setbacks. It has a tendency to try and convince you that your self-worth is dependent on externals, such as achievement, money and status, physical fitness and beauty, acceptance by others, being loved, and having perfect, well-behaved children, and a devoted spouse, in a spotless home. The Perfectionist pushes you into stress, exhaustion, and burnout in pursuit of unrealistic goals, and it ignores signals from your body that you need a break.

The Perfectionist's most-used expressions are, "I should." I have to." The Perfectionist pops up in our minds with instructions such as, "I *should* always be on top of things." "I *should* always be considerate, patient, and unselfish." "I *have* to keep my body, home, children perfectly in order and under control at all times." "I *have* to (get this job, make this much money, get approval from this person, etc.) or I'm not worth much." "I *should* never make a mistake."

Do you notice any Perfectionist self-talk? Any "Shoulds, Shouldn'ts, Have-tos?"

Calming your anxious thoughts and starting on the path to peace

It can take some practice to become familiar with your self-talk and the way your mind interprets things. Learn to use your anxiety as a reminder to check in with yourself and do a little investigation. You might be so used to your stressful thoughts that you've become attached to them, they're habitual, they make sense to you, and you automatically believe them. But to get on a new path of peace and rest, you will need to start questioning the negative self-talk that keeps you in a spiral of anxiety. Following are some questions to help you challenge your anxious thoughts, and take the first steps in learning how to calm and change them!

1. What is the anxious thought? See if you can recognize the self-talk or interpretation your mind is promoting. Can you identify a Worrier, Critic, Victim, or Perfectionist statement in your thinking? Write it down.

2. Is it really true? What is the evidence for this? Often our anxious thoughts are unrealistic overreactions that may not be true. Or they may not be *completely* true or *always* true. Anxiety can scare us into thinking things are much worse than they are. Is it true that you should always be perfect? Is it true that you should never make mistakes? Is it true that you're "stupid?" Examine the evidence and ask yourself if your anxious thought is actually true.

3. How likely is it? What are the odds that the thing I'm worried about will actually happen? Give it a percentage if that helps.

4. Am I looking at the whole picture? Am I being objective?

5. What would be a more effective, helpful, supportive, or useful thought? Does God provide a promise that can help with this concern?

6. How could I cope better with the situation that concerns me? What people, supports, strengths, and resources might be available to help?

7. What do I need to let go of? Is there something I can't change, or I can't change now with my current resources? Do I need to apply the "Serenity Prayer" and ask God to help me accept what I cannot change, and save my energy for things I *can* change?

8. What would I say to a dear friend or family member who was anxious about this kind of situation? How could I validate and encourage her/him? Can I do the same for myself?

Scriptures about thinking and testing our thoughts: (NIV Bible)

For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. Proverbs 23:7

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will. Romans 12:2

Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. 1 Corinthians 14:20

Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Philippians 4:8

...but test them all; hold on to what is good. 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Anxiety-calming Scripture promises: (NIV Bible)

The Lord gives strength to His people. The Lord blesses his people with peace. Psalm 29:11

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous be shaken. Psalm 55:22

When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Proverbs 3:24

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Isaiah 26:3

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. Jeremiah 17:7-8

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7

Positive and Effective Thoughts to Calm Your Anxious Mind

As you become more aware of negative thought patterns which may be contributing to anxiety, worry, or lack of confidence, you will want to develop some useful replacement thoughts. Consider what kind of “self-talk” statements will help you calm your anxiety, cope more effectively, or prevent discouragement. Some of the best coping thoughts simply remind you that you can stay peaceful and faithful in the face of stressful situations. Here are some suggestions to get you started. Circle the ones you feel would be most useful for you. *(Thank you to PUC students who helped with this list!)*

1. I like myself.
2. Mistakes are learning opportunities.
3. I know I can do it.
4. I am safe.
5. I can take a deep breath and relax.
6. I am lovable.
7. I can make good decisions.
8. I can encourage myself and others.
9. I can deal with my fears.
10. I can learn how.
11. With God all things are possible.
12. Things will work out for good.
13. I'll do the best I can.
14. My wisdom and skills are valuable.
15. I can forgive others.
16. I can depend on spiritual strength.
17. I am facing this with courage.
18. I have the qualities to succeed.
19. I expect things to work out.
20. I am a good person.
21. I can work hard.
22. I can handle this positively.
23. I have something important to offer.
24. I feel good about myself.
25. I can be a friend to others.
26. I don't have to be perfect.
27. I can grow and change.
28. I am learning how to focus.
29. I am inspired and creative.
30. I treat others with respect.
31. Others care about me.
32. I'm making progress toward my goals.
33. With God I can face anything.
34. I can get through this.
35. I am calm and capable.
36. I'm allowing God to use me.
37. I can be kind instead of critical.
38. I am pleased and proud of my progress.
39. I respond respectfully to others.
40. People like my smile and my style.
41. I put my heart into everything I do.
42. I eagerly move forward.
43. With God I'm never alone.
44. My family loves me.
45. Others want me to succeed.
46. No problem is too big to handle.
47. It will be OK.
48. I handle conflicts with a healthy attitude.
49. I am building my future.
50. I approach problems with an open mind.
51. I learn from my mistakes.
52. I can stop, relax, and breathe deeply.
53. Solutions will come as they are needed.
54. I am forgiving and patient with myself.
55. I know that “this too, will pass.”
56. I have everything I need right now.
57. I am a strong person.
58. I choose to be happy.
59. I am thankful for many blessings.
60. My bad habits aren't permanent.
61. I appreciate my life experiences.
62. I'm taking good care of myself.
63. I choose to think big.
64. I'm becoming what I was meant to be.
65. I move beyond former limitations.
66. I am created to grow and succeed.
67. I have important strengths.
68. My life makes a positive difference.
69. I see beauty in the world around me.
70. I feel warm and nurtured.

HEALING PRAYER FOR INSECURITY



Father, I come boldly before Your throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace for deliverance from emotional insecurity. (Hebrews 4:16 NKJV)

I stand on Your Word that assures me that You are able to make all of Your grace abound toward me so that I will always have all sufficiency in all things and will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

I cast down every thought of inadequacy and every imagination that rises up against what Your Word says about who I am and what I can do. (2 Corinthians 10:5 KJV)

I resist any anxiety over the possibility of losing a social, professional, academic, or any other position, or a desired relationship. I know that no one can thwart Your purpose for my life. You, O Lord are guiding my destiny (Isaiah 14:27) and You guard all that is mine. (Psalm 16:5 NLT)

Thank you Father, for my unchangeable and unique physical features (height, race, hair, complexion, etc.) I repent for all the times I rejected Your design and allowed insecurity to creep in because of worldly standards or judgments. I know, according to Your Word that You deliberately shaped me to be Your servant and witness. Therefore, I rest and rejoice in the truth that I am designed for my destiny and am *perfect* for my purpose. (Isaiah 49:5)

Because of Your grace, I walk neither in self-doubt nor in worldly pride because I know that apart from You I can do nothing. (John 15:5) Therefore I look to You to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that I could ask or think, according to Your Power that works in me. (Ephesians 3:20 NKJV)

I thank You that as I have prayed, You have heard me and delivered me from all my fears; they no longer have any power over my life. (Psalm 34:4 NKJV)

Thank You for the supreme confidence that is mine because I am connected to You, my all-powerful, all-knowing, and always-near Father. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. **Amen**

Adapted from *Supreme Confidence; Secrets to Bold and Fearless Living*, by Deborah Smith Pegues, 2005