

# 1

## Anxiety: What Is It? Do I Have It?

Anxiety. Does the word strike alarm in your heart? Well, it certainly plays a powerful role in today's world; particularly in America. According to the World Health Organization, 31% of Americans are likely to suffer from anxiety at some point in their lives. The organization also states that the U.S. is the worry capital of the world. Newscasters, writers, physicians, teachers, ministers, and other professionals have called our time the "age of anxiety."

As I concluded the above paragraph the phone rang. "Hello," the voice said. "This is Elizabeth calling back about the refrigerator. I checked and the price goes up tomorrow. Since I'm off at 4 PM can you come out now to make the arrangements?"

I wanted to say "I'm busy writing a book about anxiety," but opted instead for, "Yes, I'll change clothes and be there in about an hour."

Forty minutes later I was halfway to Sears when I spotted the stalled traffic. Murmuring "what next" under my breath, I squinted to see what was causing the delay. Flashing blue lights were now in view. How many patrol cars? I counted five and one red rescue vehicle as traffic inched ahead. Would I make it in time? At that moment I felt a call or tug from the Lord. What was wrong with me? Shouldn't I be praying for the people involved in the wreck? What about the rescue workers?

Anxiety is definitely a part of our daily living. Some, in fact, believe it is our number one public health enemy. Let's begin by taking a look at anxiety's many forms and faces.

Have any of these questions ever plagued you?

1. Should I marry or remain single?
2. If I'm single, will I experience fulfillment and purpose?
3. If I choose to marry, how will I find a Christian mate?
4. Will our marriage succeed?
5. Will our children be born healthy?
6. Can I help my children resist today's temptations of drugs, alcohol, and sexual promiscuity?
7. How can we cope with this abundance of social media and internet access?
8. What will my husband, mother, or friend think about what I said?
9. Should I go back to work? How will it affect the children?
10. Will my children have the tools to live godly lives?
11. Does my husband still love me?
12. Will the threat of nuclear war become a reality?
13. Can I cope now that I'm a single parent?
14. How could I ever face being a widow?
15. Will my child earn a college scholarship? If not, can we afford college?
16. Will my son/daughter be a safe driver? What if he/she has an accident?
17. Will God judge this country and send a pandemic disease?
18. Do I have cancer?
19. Will I live to see the children grow up?
20. Will my children rear their children in a free America?
21. Will my son/daughter get a divorce? What will become of the children?

22. Why did he/she let me down this way?
23. Why do I have these nagging fears and anxieties?
24. Where can I go to find peace and contentment?

While no one is looking over your shoulder, list some of your own private anxieties below. Be honest!

In John 14:27 we read: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” Do not be afraid. This is the number one prohibition in Scripture. In fact, “fear not” is repeated 365 times in the Bible, once for every day of the year. God must know his children well; he knows we experience fear and anxiety he even gives us countless examples in Scripture. You will recognize these anxious characters right away:

- I never had a childhood but I played a childish game. Feeling guilty and anxious, I tried to hide from God. I am... (Gen. 3:10).

- I was anxious and afraid in Egypt so I called my wife my sister. I am... (Gen. 12:11-20).

- We felt like grasshoppers among the giants in Canaan. How could we conquer them? Who are we? (Num. 13:31-33).

- Speaking of giants, this one topped them all. Everyone trembled with fear except... (1 Sam. 17:24).

- Afraid of losing my respect, reputation, and cool reserve, I waited for the dark. Only then did I dare speak with Jesus. I am... (John 3:1-2).

- Who ever saw a man walk on water? Now it's more than the wind rocking our boat. Have you every rocked with anxiety? We are... (Matt. 14:22-27).

- Feeling brave and excited, I thought I'd give it a try. Oh, I'm drowning. Who am I? (Matt. 14:28-33).

- Our Lord was arrested but we ran away. We are... (Matt. 26:56).

- Anxiety and fear are dreadful enemies I even denied the Lord. I am... (Matt.26:69-74).

- In the power of the Holy Spirit, I am bold at last. As I preach Christ in Jerusalem 3,000 are saved. I am... (Acts 2:22-41).

Like Peter, you and I are not exempt from problems and fears. Jesus said we would have them (John 16:33). "But take heart!" he reminds us. "I have overcome the world."

### **Anxiety Can Be Conquered**

First, we need to recognize this enemy. Although the book *Happiness Is A Choice* was written years ago, I still appreciate Frank M. Minirth, M.D., and Paul D. Meier, M.D.'s (Baker Book House) definition: "An emotion which is characterized by feelings of uneasiness, apprehension, dread, concern, tension, restlessness, and worry. The anxious individual often anticipates misfortune, danger, or doom."

When questioned, many anxiety victims can tell you why they are afraid. However, there are other people when asked, "What are you worried about?" will answer, "I don't know." Psychologists and psychiatrists call these free-floating, undefined symptoms of neurotic anxiety. Those who suffer from an anxiety neurosis cannot identify what is bothering them. Often, the problem is related to some traumatic experience from their past. Unable to handle the anxiety at the time, they bury it in their memory bank. The following is an account I've withdrawn from my memory bank.

When I was in elementary school, I remember playmates teasing me about my fear of one particular room at our annual Halloween carnival. As each child entered this room, he was blindfolded and led through several obstacle courses, including being rolled in a barrel. My friends thought all of this was a

delightful scare, but I chose humiliation over the horror of a blindfold and barrel. It was years before I understood the grounds for my anxiety. A couple of years before the carnival, when I was the ripe old age of six, I was strapped to an operating table. Then, while listening to clanging knives and who knows what, I stared in disbelief as an anesthetist slowly clamped an ether mask over my face. Everything I had ever known faded into oblivion. To this day, I still have a dread of anything over my eyes or head. I'm the best dog-paddle swimmer in the country.

An anxiety neurosis may be the result of guilt, both real and/or imaginary. When this is the case, it's time to probe and ask, "Why am I suffering?" Like David, we can say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Ps. 139:23-24) Then, if God puts his finger on some sin, the next step is confession. "If we confess our sins," John reminds us, "he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

It is also possible for a person to experience false guilt over some event from the past, or false guilt imposed by society. Often, humanistic society tends to inflict false guilt to achieve social goals, while ignoring true guilt before God. It is helpful for an individual who is plagued by false guilt to discuss his or her problem with a trained minister or counselor.

However we might describe anxiety, it is truly a weed of the mind and emotions. Left to grow, it can choke our normal thought life, making us physically and spiritually ill. In the parable of the sower, Christ speaks of the seed as the Word of God. "And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature" (Luke 8:14). The purpose of this book is to help us recognize and uproot any weeds or thorns of anxiety in our lives. In doing so, we can be productive and faithful women of God, women who "hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

Consider some of the symptoms of anxiety: anxious people

are inclined to feel nervous, tense, irritable, worried, agitated, fidgety, unable to think clearly, panicky, and immobilized. Other signs might include headaches, frequent sighing, a rapid heartbeat, “butterflies” in the stomach, hyperventilation, fainting, nausea, diarrhea, and even high blood pressure.

Of course, not all anxiety is harmful. Mild tension can help make us alert. Examples: pulling into a six lane interstate during five o'clock rush hour, taking a test, or interviewing for a job. It is also proper for Christians to be anxious in the sense of having a healthy fear of God. Take a moment to consider these helpful and harmful anxiety patterns:

**Helpful**

Jeremiah 32:39-40  
Ecclesiastes 12:13  
Philippians 2:12

**Harmful**

Psalm 6:2  
Psalm 55:4-5  
Matthew 25:24-25

Scripture places a high value on the fear of God. We will discuss this at length in the next chapter, but for now we will define this fear as a recognition and reverence of all God's attributes including his power, holiness, justice, mercy, and love. Out of this awareness flows a constant desire to obey and glorify him. This includes all of our thoughts, words, and behavior.

**Follow the Psalmist**

When you and I have a proper fear of God we begin to lose our fear and anxiety about other people, our needs, or other adversity we face. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all” (Ps. 34:19). “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread” (Ps. 37:25). In these verses, David reminds us that God is faithful, yet we know there were other times in his life when doubts and fears still attacked.

For this reason, the first step in conquering (not simply coping with) anxiety is to *admit* it. When anxiety is camouflaged with pills, alcohol, endless introspection, soap operas, working, joining organizations, shopping, social media, excessive sleeping,

and escape reading, it becomes difficult to recognize it and to turn to God for answers.

The second step in overcoming anxiety is to do what the psalmist did in Psalm 42 and 43: cry out to God. As he remembers happier days, when he could rejoice with God's people, the writer is now filled with distress, tears, mourning, pain, and loss of appetite. He says his soul thirsts and pants for God like a deer in search of water. In both psalms he cries out to God for relief and in 43:3 he *asks* for God's light and truth to lead him once again.

After the prayer, the psalmist *admonishes* himself for his unbelief and anxiety. The King James Version reads, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why are thou disquieted (in turmoil) in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (Ps. 42:5). This man is saying, "Look, soul. You don't need to feel unsettled. Your hope is not in people or circumstances. Your hope is in God. Remember, God is present with you." The psalmist recognizes that anxiety is sin. God compares us to sheep, which are prone to wander and stumble. When we fall we need a shepherd who can, and will, put us back on our feet.

In Psalm 42:11 and Psalm 43:5 the same words are repeated again, except for the last phrase. David writes, "For I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance and my God." In other words, the writer states that an anxious, dejected, and miserable attitude shows in my face. But, when I talk to myself and look into the face of God who is walking with me, I lose that anxious, troubled, haggard expression. I become calm and relaxed. This is not a game of "let's pretend," but a reality. God's light is now reflected in my eyes, my lips, my voice—everything. "He is the health of my countenance, and my God" (Ps. 42:11).

Will Rogers used to say, "I never met a man I didn't like." I can't agree. I don't like Murphy. Murphy, you remember, was that man who said, "Whatever can go wrong will go wrong." Talk about a negative attitude. And yet, a chronic worrier falls into this trap. If everything is going well for a while, the worrier can't believe it. Something bad is bound to happen soon. What can it be? This person is worried because there is nothing to worry

about. I wonder if this was Martha's problem as she prepared dinner for the Lord. Maybe she was thinking, "What if the meal isn't ready on time? What if the roast burns? What if? What if?"

"Martha, Martha," came the Lord's rebuke. "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41). Martha was a servant, but she was a distracted servant. This is always true for the Christian who is constantly worried and anxious. A person with this temperament should do what the psalmist did: identify the problem, talk to God about it, and talk to himself or herself about it.

But we need to remember two principles as we *analyze* ourselves. First, we are all different. No two personalities or temperaments are exactly alike and each person will react differently to the problems and trials of life. The person who is constantly morbid and introspective must work harder in the area of self-talk. When mental programming is all negative, it's time to change channels. It's time to reprimand ourselves. It's time to stop and say, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

A second consideration to keep in mind is physical health. Naturally, it is easier for a healthy person to display a happy, outgoing attitude. In the same way, a person who is physically weak will have a harder battle with anxiety and depression. Satan is quick to recognize and use any physical or emotional weakness in his efforts to discourage and defeat us. Whether the temptation to worry comes silently into our minds like a poisonous spider, or pounces with the force of a roaring lion, we can be sure Satan exploits our weakest spot. We begin to listen to him instead of to God.

When you and I fall into the sin of listening to Satan there is only one cure: turn to God and *admire* him. Like the psalmist, we can call out to our soul saying, "Soul, consider God. Consider who God is and what he does. Soul, consider the faith he has given you and exercise it." We can say with David, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears"

(Ps. 34:4).

You and I can begin to deal with the worries and anxieties of our life when we crawl out of bed tomorrow morning. From the moment we wake up, we can take control of those first thoughts that spring into our awareness. Instead of muttering about yesterday's problems or stewing over what might happen today, we can remind ourselves that we have a God in heaven. We have a savior in heaven. We have a father in heaven. If we should fall he will lift us up again. Finally, we can speak to the depths of our soul saying, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

### **Other Voices**

"Sometimes you lie in bed at night and you don't have a single thing to worry about. That always worries me." Charlie Brown

"God helps those who cannot help themselves." Charles Spurgeon

"God is like the sun; you cannot always look at it, but without it you cannot look at anything else." G.K. Chesterton

"Worry is the dark room where negatives develop." Anon.

### **Statistic**

A recent Gallop poll revealed that 90% of those interviewed believe there is a God. However, 90% of this same group said it made no difference in the way they lived. Their attitude seems to be flirtation. Here are men and women who are willing to give God attention yet no intention or commitment. No wonder our society is plagued with anxiety!

### **Hymn**

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" by Martin Luther, translated by Frederic H. Hedge.