

# WHAT IS ANXIETY? HOW CAN I PROCESS IT?

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In this brief document, we are going to consider what the Bible teaches us about anxiety and how to process it for ourselves. As we learn to manage our own worry and anxiety in a wise and godly way, we will then be equipped to help others process theirs.

## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

**i** We need to be clear about what anxiety is and what it isn't. Fears and concerns are often legitimate and godly, but they can also reveal sinful desires or false beliefs.

Consider four points that help us think biblically about the experience of fear, worry, and anxiety.

- **Fear and distress are not inherently sinful.** “Scripture assumes that we live with fear...we are weak people who can control very little. Our reputations, finances, loved ones, and even our lives are at risk every day.”<sup>1</sup> God responds to our fears and frailties with compassion (Ps 103:13-14).
- **Distinguish sinful anxiety from godly concern.**<sup>2</sup> Godly concern is appropriate; it leads to wise action and dependent prayer. In the current danger of COVID-19, godly concern leads us to pray and also to protect ourselves and others. We ought to have an appropriate vigilance in the face of risk and potential loss.
- **Our anxieties reveal our hearts:** In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus commands us three times: “Do not worry.” In the broader context of the passage, we see a contrast between worshipping God and worshipping money, between seeking my kingdom and seeking God’s kingdom. My worries and anxieties, in this sense, reveal a heart which has its priorities wrong.<sup>3</sup> My desire for something – money, clothes, etc. – has become more significant than my desire for God. This type of anxiety is rooted in sinful desires and reveals the sinful condition of our hearts.
- **Anxiety gives us an opportunity.** When we get anxious, we have an opportunity to turn to God. We have an opportunity to explore what’s going on in our hearts. We have an opportunity to listen to the God who loves us and speak to Him in prayer. Scripture assumes that we will get anxious and fearful. When that time comes, let’s turn to our loving Heavenly Father.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Welch, *Fear is not sin*, Journal of Biblical Counseling, 34:1 (2020).

<sup>2</sup> My thinking here is influenced significantly by Tim Lane, *Living without Worry*, The Good Book Company, (2015).

<sup>3</sup> R.T France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, InterVarsity Press (1985).

## HOW CAN I PROCESS ANXIETY?

**i** *Anxiety is replaced with peace as we relate to God in Bible-soaked prayer.*

Anxiety isn't processed either mystically or merely cognitively—it is processed relationally. We process our anxiety in relationship with our covenant-keeping God. We need to think rightly about God, and we then need to talk to God based on what we've read and meditated upon.

The process below, based on the work of David Powlison,<sup>4</sup> provides you with a way to process your anxiety. Please work through this, making personal notes and engaging in authentic prayer.

Action Step	Description	Personal notes
<b>Name</b> your cares and concerns	Worry can feel amorphous, endless and infinite, but in reality, our anxieties are finite and specific. What is weighing you down? What's keeping you up? What's on a video loop in your mind? Name what these are.	
<b>Listen</b> to the God who cares	What does our God say to His anxious people? Consider what He says Luke 12:22-34. Or consider another Bible passage that provides reasons not to fear or assurances of His care. Listen to His Word.	
<b>Talk</b> to the God who cares	In the light of what you've read in Scripture, go to your Father and talk to him. Confess any sinful desires, repent of false beliefs, delight in His love, rejoice in His promises.	
<b>Meditate</b> on the God who cares	"A holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves." <sup>5</sup>	
<b>Act</b> wisely today	Give yourself to today's trouble. What do you need to do today?	

### Additional practical steps to take that can help

- Sleep: can you develop a good plan or schedule for sleeping?
- Work and Rest routines: what does a realistic work and rest schedule look like?
- Relationships: connect with others, laugh, and share your heart (even if it's on Zoom or WhatsApp)
- Exercise: or just make contact with nature and sunshine (if possible!)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ccef.org/podcast/help-and-hope-special-edition-powlison-handling-anxiety/>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, Soli Deo Gloria (2000).