

What To Do When Anxieties Threaten To Overwhelm Us.

We are living in uncertain times, and uncertainty, in and of itself, can contribute to feelings of anxiety. We like to know what is happening and to be in control of our lives and some of this has been taken away from us by the coronavirus pandemic. What does the future hold?

Over the years, in counselling other people with their anxieties and fears, I have had to learn to acknowledge and deal with my own concerns and have found these two verses from Psalm 94 really helpful.

“If I say, ‘My foot slips,’ Your mercy, Lord, will hold me up. In the multitude of my anxieties within me, your comforts delight my soul.” (Ps. 94: 18 &19)

Facing our fears/anxieties with the Lord, and with others if necessary, is a strength, not a weakness. I would recommend it! Some folks spend a lot of time and energy avoiding situations in which they may feel anxious; much better, however, to bring those anxious thoughts and feelings into the light.

Of course, a certain amount of anxiety over specific things is understandable, necessary and important.

When I was 20 years old, my older brother invited me to join him on a climb in the Lake District. What he didn't tell me was that he was planning to go to the top of Blencathra via Sharp Edge and, in January, it was icy.



He was an experienced climber and I was a novice, so when we got to a particularly difficult and dangerous part, I suddenly thought to myself, ‘If my foot slips, there is a drop of a few hundred feet and I probably won't survive.’ So, because of my anxiety, I turned round and went back. A sensible move, I'm sure you will agree!

The psalmist is feeling similarly vulnerable – he is in a precarious position, experiencing, in the present, that his foot **is** slipping. Help!

And all of us are now living in precarious times. Times of uncertainty – When is all this going to end? Times of insecurity – What will happen to my job, my income? Times of questioning – Where is God in all this?

Now when the psalmist says, ‘My foot slips’, who is he talking to? Is he talking to himself, or to God?

Sometimes we can create our own anxieties by our self-talk, the conversation we hold with ourselves! Much better to turn our anxious thoughts to God in prayer. Let Him know the things we are anxious about.

As we do that, the psalmist says we can experience God’s mercy, His loving kindness, ‘holding us up’.

A powerful fear I once had was a fear of water. I didn’t learn to swim until I was 30 years old. Whilst I was learning, I needed buoyancy aids and clung to them for dear life! Now I don’t need them (though I still don’t feel confident in water).

However, we can never do without God’s ‘buoyancy aids’ holding us up in times of testing and trial.

Remember the disciples when they were crossing the Sea of Galilee in the boat with Jesus. Jesus was asleep in the stern when suddenly a storm blew up and they started to sink. The disciples said to Jesus, “Don't you care that we are about to drown?” Panic stations!

But no, Jesus kept them all afloat by first calming the storm and then calming the storm in the disciples! The disciples had to learn that when they were going **over** the water with Jesus, it wasn’t possible for them to go **under**!

Perhaps we wonder, ‘Where is Jesus in this pandemic storm?’ Well, he is with us in the boat. Does he care? Yes, he does. Will he hold us up? Yes, He will.

But then the psalmist goes on to say that he has a ‘multitude of anxieties’ within him. It’s not just one or two anxieties, there is a whole jostling crowd of them!

To have a few specific fears/anxieties which can be addressed is normal, but when multiple anxieties rush in, what can we do to access God’s support and comfort?

Here are some suggestions: -

- Acknowledge you are feeling anxious; your anxious **thoughts** are probably producing anxious **feelings**. What are you thinking/saying to yourself?

- Rate your anxious feelings on a scale of 1-10 and keep track of changes in intensity. Feelings of anxiety can range from mild apprehension to having panic attacks. Monitor your anxious feelings over a period of time and see if there is any pattern to them.
- If you start to feel panicky, control your breathing. Breathe in to a count of 3 – hold – then breathe out to a count of 7. Repeat this pattern a dozen times. Thank God for every breath.
- Evaluate your anxiety. What are you anxious about? Is it a fear of losing your job and not being able to provide for your family? Is it a fear of losing someone's love and respect? Is it a fear of failure? A fear of mental illness? A fear of death?
- Remember your fears may be exaggerated. In times of crisis, our imagination can run riot and we can imagine all kinds of 'catastrophes' that might happen. Whilst we want to be realistic about any risk that we expose ourselves to, it's also possible for us to over-estimate the degree of danger we are actually facing.
- Begin to dispute (argue with) your anxious thoughts. Challenge them.
- Choose to replace your anxious thoughts with the truth of God's word. For example, 2 Tim. 1:7, personalised, says this, "God has not given me a spirit of fearfulness, but a spirit of power, of love and of a sound mind."
- Act in accordance with the truth.
- Do some relaxation exercises accompanied by worshipful music.
- Stay in contact with people. We need to support one another.
- Pay attention to physical exercise, diet, hydration and sleep.
- Limit how much you see, hear, and read about the pandemic. Stick to one reliable bulletin a day.
- Have some kind of routine but also introduce variety and creativity.
- Pray. The closer we get to God, the more He can diminish our fears.

As we pay attention to these things, God will bring comfort/consolation to our innermost being, our soul.

These **are** challenging times in which we are living and the repercussions are likely to go on for months and years.

But I remember Selwyn Hughes once saying to us, 'God only allows what he can use. If He can't use it, He doesn't allow it'. God will use these disjointed times to re-order things according to His plan and purpose.

Coping with uncertainty and 'not knowing' is stressful; but God knows, sees and cares, and can bring us unexpected joy and delights, even in our present circumstances.

Many people are experiencing a new-found joy in taking time to appreciate creation during the beautiful Spring weather we are enjoying at the moment. I see more folks stopping to take pictures of blossom, butterflies, birds etc.



Finally, although we may need to do some planning for the future, it is also important to live one day at a time. Jesus said that each day has enough trouble of its own, so we have to receive his mercy and grace on a daily basis.

"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes." (Mt. 6:34 The Message)

We can have tomorrow's worries today, but we can't have tomorrow's grace today. So, let's live one day at a time.

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