

MANAGING ANXIETY DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

COVID-19 continues to spread, and efforts to contain it have led to profound disruptions in many of our lives. This potential threat is rapidly changing, disrupting routines, and causing distance from loved ones. It wouldn't be unusual to become anxious in this environment. And for those who struggled with anxiety before these recent circumstances, the current environment can make that anxiety worse.





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Anxiety, in many cases, stems from the belief that God isn't going to get it right. Faith believes that He will. The situation we are facing, even though it is beyond our resources, is not beyond God's resources. It is important to remember the definition of faith according to Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Additionally, Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Our faith is strengthened as we look to God and fellow believers in the midst of trial. We need to pray, and we need to talk to others who can guide us along the journey. God wants to use our circumstances to strengthen our faith and increase our peace.

Anxiety is a feeling of fear in response to a perceived threat, and usually comes with thoughts or beliefs that this situation is beyond our resources or ability to cope.

We experience anxiety through physical symptoms, such as sweating, increased heart rate, and upset stomach; mental symptoms, including racing thoughts, mental confusion, and an inability to decide on the best course of action; and even behavioral symptoms, such as avoiding things and freezing. Anxiety may also impact interpersonal relationships, as we tend to become irritable and preoccupied with ourselves when we're anxious.

Each of us is subject to the circumstances and situations of life. As Christians, our response is dependent on our faith: what we believe about God's character and our understanding of His promises. For example, God has not promised to shelter us from all pain and suffering, but He has promised to be with us through it. God is a good God who has a purpose and a plan for everything, which includes pain and suffering. He is all-powerful and trustworthy.



How can we use the helpful aspects of our anxiety to help us cope with the current threat?



Intellectual Curiosity

Many of us spend a great deal of time following the spread of the novel coronavirus and the public health response on social media, getting each moment's play-by-play. Managing anxiety, however, may require spending less time following social media posts and more time learning helpful information about the virus.

Limit your time on social media platforms that offer endless discussions about the spread of the virus. Ask yourself, "Does this information help me feel prepared and armed with knowledge, or helpless and more anxious?" Intellectually learning about the virus from reputable sources helps us to prepare, whereas endless speculation on Facebook and other social media platforms may increase paralysis.

Action

Anxiety often makes us want to DO something. So, go ahead and DO something. No, you can't do anything about the virus, but there are many things you can do that are under your control. Do something that helps you feel productive. For example, make a list of small businesses in your area that you'd like to support through this crisis. Take action related to your health. Sleep, nutrition, and moderate exercise all help our mental health and immune systems. If you're stuck at home, identify a project you've been putting off or neglecting and take action. Cultivating the feeling that we have some choice and control helps decrease anxiety. Identify one thing that you can take action on and do it.





Altruism

Doing something for someone else is a powerful antidote to anxiety. Anxiety triggers our survival response system, causing our perspective to narrow, and we become even more anxious. Focusing on helping others automatically shifts and widens our perspective to include other people, information, and input besides our own fear-based thoughts. Give altruism a try by asking yourself, "Who can I help today?" Write notes to family and friends or create a list of people to call regularly. Check with your neighbors about their needs, and don't discount the positive impact of just listening to someone. Research tells us that altruism helps the help-giver as much as the help-receiver.

Gratitude

Anxiety causes us to scan our bodies and our environment for whatever is wrong, internally or externally. Let's face it, if we're always looking for something wrong, we are bound to find something. The questions, "What is good right now? What can I be thankful for?" allow us to focus on searching for whatever is OK. God is with you every day. What is He bringing to you? Concentrate on cuddling your child, petting your dog, hearing your favorite song, watching spring arrive. Savor it. The more you practice this, the easier it will become.

As Christians, our faith gives us the strongest foundation for thinking positively and being grateful, because the object of our faith is God and what He has done for us through Jesus. Continuing in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." It is our faith in the goodness of God that allows us to focus on the intangible blessings that have the power to extinguish the negativity that is so easy to see in the circumstances around us.



Be in the moment.

Mindfulness is another tool that can help us recognize when we are feeling anxious. It can help us *respond* wisely rather than *react* rashly to anxiety. Mindfulness means paying attention in the present moment with an attitude of curiosity and non-judgment. It is being "in the moment" with God.

Some exercises for mindfulness during stressful times:

JUST THIS MOMENT

When you are feeling overwhelmed by information about the virus, take a moment to pause, and listen. Think about *just this moment*. What is God bringing to you right now?

COMPASSION

This is a time to treat ourselves and others kindly, recognizing that we're in a moment of suffering, we're all dealing with this together, and we're trying the best we can. Pray to our Abba Father and tell Him everything.

DO JUST ONE THING

Remind yourself to focus on one thing at a time. What can you take action on in this moment? What can you let go of until another day? Do you need to ask for help?

BREATHE

Notice your natural breathing. With anxiety, our breathing tends to be shallow and only in our upper chest. Try to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth with a big sigh. Slowly lengthen and deepen your breathing. Breathe in Jesus and breathe out Jesus. Visualize your lungs filling with air on the inhale and emptying on the exhale.

MINDFUL WALKING

Take some time to go for a walk, whether that's in your neighborhood or the woods. This can be helpful if you're feeling cooped up inside or need to get out of a ruminating thought pattern. Feel the fresh air, notice the first signs of spring. Have gratitude for the ways your body is able to move.

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

The Serenity Prayer begins with, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It is a prayer that specifically addresses the tension between the things in life that we can control and the things we cannot. We create problems for ourselves when we lack the faith that allows us to cooperate with God and what He is doing. Instead, we try to control the outcome of things because we are shortsightedly looking at what we want.

The most helpful perspective is found in Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” It is much easier to accept things as they are when we have faith in a good God who has a purpose, even when we are in the middle of a difficult situation.

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TOGETHER FOR GOOD TO
THOSE WHO LOVE GOD





JOURNALING

An effective tool to help you clarify what's going on in your head and in your heart is journaling. Just the act of taking out a pen and writing can slow down a frantic mind and bring focus to your thinking. Simply writing a letter to God can help you release your tension and allow the Holy Spirit to refresh your soul. Journaling can also help you control your thinking because you can prompt yourself with statements like, 'Today I will...', 'God, I'm thankful for...', or 'When I'm upset one thing that comforts me is...' God wants us to turn to Him with our anxious thoughts. He loves to listen. He cares. He will use that time to encourage you.

**In the end, while we may have
little control over our
circumstances, we do have
control over our responses.**

**Note: If you'd like to be referred to a counselor, or if you are
interested in joining an anxiety/depression group, please
contact margaret@oakpointe.org**

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