

COPING WITH ANXIETY

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*All your anxiety, all your care, Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there, Never a burden He cannot bear,
Never a friend like Jesus!¹*

Early in His ministry, the Lord Jesus gathered His disciples around him on a mountainside and taught them (Matthew 5-7). The content of the “Sermon on the Mount” was astonishing and revolutionary. In one famous passage, Jesus commands “Do not worry about your life” in particular food, clothes and health (Matthew 6:25-34 NIV). Many other translations say “Do not be anxious”. This was going to be particularly relevant to the disciples who had left jobs and homes to follow Him, so faced great uncertainty, but it is a message for us all.

The Greek word used is *merimnao*, meaning to worry anxiously – the frame of mind which gives us careworn days and sleepless nights. Jesus is not forbidding prudent forward thinking and planning. He is telling us not to let ourselves engage in the pointless fretting that cannot change the past and may even make us literally sick with worry as we contemplate all kinds of terrible things that might occur in the future. This kind of worry can hinder our judgement and decision-making.

Anxiety may become severe, and anxiety disorders are common, well recognized mental health problems. Anxiety and depression may feed off one another. Persistent worry can steal and destroy our Christian joy.

When we think of the past, it should be to look at what the Lord has done, and seek to regain our equilibrium by remembering how He has rescued us or others. The downcast psalmist ordered himself to remember God (Psalm 42:6). John Newton wrote in his hymn *Amazing Grace*: “Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

What the Bible says

Command Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. (Matthew 6:34 ESV).

Commit Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6 NIV)

Calm I want you to be free from anxieties. (1 Corinthians 7:32 NRSV)

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

Consider Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (Matthew 6:27 ESV)

Comfort Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!” (Isaiah 35:4 ESV)

Cheer Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. (Proverbs 12:25 NIV)

Jesus sets out seven points to help us quell our anxiety.

1. God gave us life itself. Therefore we can trust Him for the lesser things that support life. If He can give us the miraculously complex human body, He can also provide food and clothes for it. (Matthew 6:25)
2. God cares for the birds, so He will surely care for us who are made in His image. (Matthew 6:26)
3. Worrying is pointless. It does not change the situation. (Matthew 6:27)

4. The beauty that God gives to flowers, for their short lives, shows His lavish generosity and abundance. He will not run out of resources to help humankind, whom He has made “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5-8) and put to rule over the rest of His earthly creatures. (Matthew 6:28-30)
5. Worry is natural, even logical, for those who do not know they have a loving, all-powerful heavenly Father. It should not be natural for Christians. (Matthew 6:31-32)
6. Focus on the Kingdom of God. Let that dominate our thoughts. If we fill our minds with God’s purposes and glory, there is little thinking-time left for anxious pondering. (Matthew 6:33)
7. Live one day at a time. Sometimes we might need to make this “Live one hour at a time.” But, either way, trust God and His perfect will. Leave the future to worry about itself. (Matthew 6:34)

The bottom line is that Christ’s followers should be people marked by serenity and contentment, whatever their circumstances. For worry is a characteristic of pagans (Matthew 6:32). If we can lay aside anxiety, we will find not only greater peace of heart but also greater power to live effectively for the Lord and to build His Kingdom.

George Müller (1805-1898) never requested funding for the orphanages he established in Bristol, UK; he only prayed that God would provide. Sometimes it looked as if the orphans would go hungry, but always a gift of food or money was received just in time. Müller said, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.”

ALL YOUR ANXIETY

Edward H. Joy

In times of distress and worry, Edward Henry Joy’s hymn All Your Anxiety reminds us of Christ’s tender entreaty, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). We are called to know we can trustingly “leave our burden” (1 Peter 5:7) with our perfect friend, Jesus.

Is there a heart o’erbound by sorrow?
Is there a life weighed down by care?
Come to the cross, each burden bearing;
All your anxiety—leave it there.

Refrain:

All your anxiety, all your care,
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there,
Never a burden He cannot bear,
Never a friend like Jesus!

No other friend so swift to help you,
No other friend so quick to hear,
No other place to leave your burden,
No other one to hear your prayer.

Come then at once; delay no longer!
Heed His entreaty kind and sweet,
You need not fear a disappointment;
You shall find peace at the mercy seat.

COPING WITH PAIN

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Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional

One feels hesitant, even as a professional, when asked to write about pain.

Ultimately the pain experience is profoundly personal and a very lonely path to walk. Pain can be the result of many things: physical pain in the body, emotional pain, the pain of past memories, mental or spiritual pain, and all these lead to suffering.

The word “pain” comes from *peine* and encompasses the agony of Christ, punishment, penalty, penal and also the torment of hell; it also comes from *nocere* which means injury. So it is unsurprising that the word “pain” for us evokes judgement, punishment or that we have “done something wrong to deserve it”.

The word “suffering” means “to bear” or “to carry”, so we may just end up carrying the consequences of past and present life experiences.

Physical pain can be amplified in its intensity by past emotional experiences. We try to relieve physical pain but also treat the suffering component, which is often mental and emotional. Bringing freedom from the pain and suffering allows us the opportunity to be released from its prison, but it is still up to us to walk out into the sunlight.

Acute pain, in contrast, is a protective reflex which allows our survival. The few who have genetic lack of pain sensation present with crushed and burnt fingers and toes. Acute pain is a gift to us, to warn; it will insistently tell us to stop until the cause has been dealt with. We may consider that acute pain is an unwelcome companion, but it is, in fact, often a true friend, speaking to us when others may be silent. For some of us, the acute pain becomes a “dis-ease”, something which becomes self-sustaining and chronic pain. This may be independent from any outside circumstance and is associated with emotional suffering.

The role of faith and belief

When pain is severe, one asks “Why has this happened to me?” Part of the wrestling and soul searching for answers can bring suffering to our door very rapidly as we mentally and emotionally respond to the pain. Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Frankl highlights the potential for the transformation of our suffering.

It is hard if our faith is based on “God is love so He will stop anything ‘bad’ happening.” If this is our belief we will, in time, become extremely disappointed and angry. A theology that does not allow a God of love to coexist with the experience of suffering will be profoundly inadequate in dealing with the consequences of everyday life, including the experience of pain and illness through our journey towards eventual death.

Pain and suffering are at the heart of the Christian Gospel and yet this may appear distant and irrelevant when pain first strikes us. Yet our journey need not be made alone. In the suffering, God is present, though may appear absent at times, and the divine light, “the Shekinah” may appear. The experience of many of those who have suffered much is that His divine grace enables them to bear the pain. As the

Lord said to the apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Healing lies in acceptance of our shared human condition and of a loving God who Himself chose to become one of us. We will experience pain, often as an unwelcome intruder on our life's journey. The reality is that the God of our childhood and the Jesus of the Gospels can still speak to us as we experience trauma and disease, even though He can feel distant and removed from us. Christian mystics speak of a "cloud of unknowing" or of being in deep darkness; the light of the sky or soft starlight seeming too distant, unreachable.

The experience of trauma, pain and suffering will cause us to re-evaluate our relationship with God. "Is He really all good?" "Will my prayer work?" "Can I hope for a miracle?"

The presence of the Divine in the middle of pain and suffering usually does not remove the cause of pain. Despite the prayers of many, suffering continues in us and in the world.

We hold in balance "He was a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" alongside "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

CS Lewis

Total pain

Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement introduced the idea of "total pain". "This kind of total pain" she emphasized, "has physical, mental, social and spiritual ... elements." There continues to be recognition for a holistic approach to pain, as Broglio comments: "An understanding of the physical, psychological, social and spiritual issues important to the patient is fundamental for effective pain management."

"Total pain" requires holistic care. In the hospice setting, we are so fortunate to have the time and space to just "be" with patients, finding out what is important for them at any given moment. This "total pain" isn't just about dying, it's about the loss of being "in touch" physically, mentally, socially or spiritually. This is grief. It is inherently woven into our very being. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and theologian, describes this:

"When we dare to look into the centre of our being, we encounter there our loss. When we were born we lost the safety of the womb; when we went to school we lost the security of our family life; when we married we lost the joy of options; growing older we lost our looks, health, friends and fame. All these losses are part of ordinary life."

Can we allow ourselves to grieve? As we truly "feel" our own loss we find the miraculous happens. Nouwen suggests that "our grieving hearts open our inner eye to a world in which losses are suffered far beyond our own little world ... the pain of our crying hearts connects us with a suffering humanity."

This is love shared, a love that is stronger than death. Amidst all the brokenness we may yet find healing and peace.