

Understanding and navigating

ANXIETY

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Exposing lies and uncovering God's truth about anxiety

BY WENDY KITTLITZ

In her mid-twenties, Ally stepped down from her job at a Christian organization, feeling too stressed to continue. After moving back in with her parents, a friend asked her to house-sit while they were on vacation, and she thought it was a great opportunity to spend some time alone to reflect on her next steps.

Initially she was running on adrenaline, but when she settled in for some time with the Lord, her heart began to race, she began to sweat profusely, she felt physically ill and her thoughts began to spiral uncontrollably.

“What if I can’t find another good job? What if I do find something but can’t handle it?”

“Are people going to think that I’m a failure?”

“Has God abandoned me?”

This was her first panic attack – though not her last in the weeks to come.

These kinds of experiences are debilitating, leaving us feeling crippled with fear, and unable to move forward with purpose and meaning.

This is only one form of anxiety (others include generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety, etc.), but it is commonly experienced even by people with a deep relationship with God. There are those who would teach that worry or anxiety is a sin, but this perspective on anxiety is not only wrong, it can be incredibly damaging to those who are anxious or have an anxiety disorder.

When we read in Scripture that God’s people are told to “fear not,” it can be easy to misunderstand and feel shame when we experience anxiety. What it means is that even though there might be reason to fear or be anxious, followers of God can be assured that his presence is with them, and that he will protect and sustain them even in the worst of circumstances.

Anxiety is not typically a choice people make. It is an autonomic response to a real or perceived threat. Ally did not choose to have a panic attack; rather as she began to reflect on what her future might hold, her thoughts and fears began to overwhelm her, physically as well as mentally, even though she had a strong faith in God.

Psychiatrist and author of *The Whole-Brained Child* Dr. Daniel Siegel explains the difference between the “downstairs” brain and the “upstairs” brain.

When our anxiety is triggered, it is because the amygdala, which is part of the downstairs brain, has kicked in to warn us of danger. Before we can think, we instinctively go into a fight, flight or freeze response. When we are functioning out of the downstairs brain, we are not able to access our upstairs brain where we can make rational, well-thought-out decisions.

While this instinctive response to danger is all part of God's design, it should be noted that we all experience fear and anxiety to varying degrees, depending on genetics, circumstance, biochemistry or trauma. The good news is God also designed us to be thinking beings, and to counter anxiety we need to be able to re-engage the upstairs brain.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul tells us to "take every thought captive to obey Christ." This can be an excellent tool as we move from being controlled by the downstairs brain to utilizing our God-given upstairs brain.

Let's go back to Ally and her terrifying experience. 

As she feels overwhelmed with worry about her future, her downstairs brain is screaming at her, but simple tools such as deep breathing, taking a brisk walk or distracting herself with music can help Ally re-engage her upstairs brain by countering her negative thoughts (taking them captive) with a few simple questions.

Fear: "Is it true that God has abandoned me?"

Truth: "No, I don't see any evidence of that. He gave me a safe place to land for now and has promised to be with me."

Fear: "Have people actually said that they think that I am a failure?"

Truth: "No one has said that."

Fear: "Is it true that I will not be able to handle the demands of another high-pressure job?"

Truth: "This experience has taught me some things about how I handle stress and ways I can put supports in place so I can manage some of those things better."

Fear: "What if I can't find another good job?"

Truth: "It might take a while and it might not be perfect, but I am employable and have insurance while I search. Maybe this isn't so hopeless."

In Canada, it is estimated that 11 to 25 per cent of adults deal with anxiety.

Now that Ally's upstairs brain is functioning again and she is better able to think rationally about her anxieties, she can begin to move forward again, faith intact, trust in God restored and no longer paralyzed by fear.

For those who become overwhelmed by their anxious thoughts, it can be difficult to find a way out of that heightened state on our own. While

God did provide us with an upstairs brain, he also provided us with helpful resources. Counselling, support groups or even doctor-prescribed medication are all available to help Spirit-filled believers like Ally manage their anxiety.

Wendy Kittlitz is vice-president of counselling and care ministries at Focus on the Family Canada.

The following articles and resources provide valuable tools to help you on your journey of living well.

Living with anxiety: What you and your spouse need to know

BY AMY VAN VEEN

*“I haven’t felt any anxiety about marrying Pete,” Lana explains, “but I do feel anxious that I’ll burden him with my anxiety. I know he wants to support me and help me, but I don’t always know what I need from him. He’s also quite extroverted and loves to be social, but those situations make me anxious. I fear that I hold him back.”**

Once you free yourself from feeling unworthy and worried about burdening your spouse with your anxiety, you can work together to keep anxiety from limiting your life together.

Walking through life with anxiety is a path that is more common than you’d think, but it can also be a unique experience for each person. In a marriage where only one spouse lives with anxiety, it can be difficult to navigate this dynamic together. So, what can a husband and wife do to support and encourage one another?

BUILDING YOUR TOOL KIT AS A COUPLE

- 1. Name it.** “Simply talking about it can bring it out of your head,” Focus on the Family Canada counsellor Karin Gregory explains. You can’t deal with something without first acknowledging it’s there. By putting a name to it – or even giving it an actual name – you and your spouse can address it together.
- 2. Have a strategy for when anxiety hits.** For times when it is not possible to prepare ourselves to avoid an anxious situation, it is important to know what we need when anxiety gets the best of us. By communicating with your spouse what is required for you to find calm, they can help you in those difficult moments without feeling as though they’re adding to the problem.

3. **Don't walk through this alone.** Marriage is designed to be a beautiful space of safety, belonging and understanding, but no husband or wife can be everything to their spouse. We are wired for community and sometimes that means inviting friends, family and/or a counsellor into our journey with anxiety. By having people other than your spouse you can turn to, you're not requiring your husband or wife to be your only lifeline.

WHAT TO REMEMBER IF YOU LIVE WITH ANXIETY

1. **Don't let shame take over.** Everyone deals with anxiety in varying degrees. Having anxiety doesn't mean there's something wrong with you, it just means you are more sensitive when those anxious thoughts arise. You are not wrong or broken. You are worthy of love and you're more than your anxiety.
2. **Accept it and normalize it.** Avoiding your anxiety is a short-term solution with long-term consequences. By accepting it as part of your life, you can take away its power – remember it is not your defining characteristic; it's a separate entity over which you have agency. It doesn't control you.
3. **Learn your triggers and limitations and communicate them with your spouse.** Your husband or wife cannot read your mind. By keeping communication lines open and inviting them into how your mind works in calm moments and anxious moments, you are equipping them with the knowledge they need to better help you.
4. **Take care of your own mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well-being.** Your spouse is not responsible for taking care of you. It is proven that establishing a daily routine, exercising regularly, eating healthy and getting a good night's sleep helps us manage our anxiety better.

WHAT TO REMEMBER IF YOUR SPOUSE LIVES WITH ANXIETY

1. **You are not your spouse's therapist.** If your spouse has anxiety, Gregory wants you to know that you are an encourager and a voice to remind your spouse of the strategies and tools they need to walk through their most anxious moments, but *you are not their therapist*. If they don't have someone already, it would be good for them – and for you – to seek professional help to better navigate this dynamic in your relationship.
2. **Set healthy boundaries.** Many people think that setting boundaries is a selfish act, but it is quite the opposite. By knowing our own limitations, we are more capable of taking care of our own mental, spiritual, physical and emotional well-being and encouraging our spouse to do the same.
3. **Know the difference between encouraging and pushing.** There may be situations where your spouse needs a “gentle nudge” to face their fears, but some situations may simply be too scary and anxiety-inducing for them. It is crucial for you two to communicate when is helpful for you to push, and when that push becomes damaging.
4. **Never shame your spouse for their anxiety.** Just because your spouse has a different walk than you does not mean that you are right and they are wrong. Any kind of indication – whether it's verbal or non-verbal – that you think your spouse is flawed or broken because of their anxiety will cause deep damage to their psyche and to your relationship. Educating yourself, being open to learning and thanking your spouse for their vulnerability in inviting you into their journey will create the safety required for intimacy to flourish.

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Overcoming anxiety in parenting

BY CAROL CUPPY

As parents, it is critical that we train ourselves to manage our fears and anxiety in order to protect our children and train them to be resilient. Overcoming anxiety and caring for our family's mental health all starts with us.

Anxiety comes in the form of “what if” questions about the future. The best way to avoid anxiety is to keep your mind grounded in the present. To overcome anxiety, you must be intentional and purposeful about training your mind to *focus on the here and now*. The good news is that we can learn not to worry.

How do you train your mind? First, you can't just read about how to overcome anxiety. You must put it into practice. The more you practice, the more resilient you will become and the more automatic the response will be when anxiety starts. Here are some practical ways you can bring your mind back to the present:

3 X 5 + 1 TECHNIQUE

We sat down with Tim Sanford, the clinical director at Focus on the Family, to discuss anxiety and ways to overcome it. He walked us through a technique that he calls “3 x 5 + 1.” It is a fantastic way to focus your attention on what is happening around you at that moment, rather than on the “what if” questions.

If you are feeling anxious, do these three steps:

1. Look around you. Name 5 colours that you see.
2. Listen to your surroundings. Name 5 sounds that you hear.
3. Name 5 things that you can physically feel, such as the collar of your shirt against your neck or the breeze blowing across your skin.

Once you have gone through each of these 3 categories and listed 5 things each, ask yourself this 1 last question: “What do I need to be thinking about *right now*?”

This technique of observing your surroundings is a great way to pull your mind back into the present. Go ahead and try it right now!

DEEP BREATHS

If you feel yourself becoming anxious, another great way to bring your mind back into the present is to take several slow and deep



breaths. Try taking three deep breaths right now. Notice how it calms and relaxes your body and tightens your focus on the present.

KEEP A ROUTINE

This will create a sense of normalcy. If you don't have a routine already, create a new schedule and stick to it. Sameness is very helpful in creating a sense of control in our lives.

EXERCISE

Getting some exercise is also a great way to overcome anxiety. Choose activities that require focus on the moment at hand. For example, a game of basketball requires that you focus on the ball at all times and on making baskets. You don't have time to worry about anything else.

Anxiety can dump a lot of adrenaline into our bodies. Physical exercise and activities are a great way to burn off some of that adrenaline.

LEAN IN TO GOD

Spend time daily in the Bible. If you are feeling anxious or fearful, read through the many verses that speak about anxiety and fear. Reading and studying his Word is a great way to focus your thoughts and will provide peace.

Spend time talking to God also. There is nothing more freeing than getting on your knees before him and surrendering all of your thoughts and worries to him. He is truly in control of this and every other situation that we could ever face.



Just like we as parents can experience anxiety, so can our kids. Younger kids may not know how to verbalize that they are feeling anxious, so keep an eye out for some signs that they may be feeling that way. Usually, anxiety will manifest in one of two ways: either your child will become really quiet and withdrawn or they will become really energetic and bounce off the walls. Kids may describe the physical symptoms of anxiety as a "tummy ache." They may breathe rapidly or start sweating. Some kids will even say they feel like ants are crawling under their skin.

No matter how old your children are, or how they show that they may be anxious, it is always important to bring them back to the present. You can use these same techniques to train them to focus their own thoughts on the here and now so they too can learn to calm their worries.

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“Do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”



PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

Learn more about dealing with anxiety as a parent and with your children at
FocusOnTheFamily.ca/AnxietyAndParenting

Four lies that fuel anxiety and depression in teens

BY CATHERINE WILSON

If you discovered, quite by chance, that your normally trustworthy teen had been telling bold-faced lies, would you be shocked? Then ready yourself for this: if you have an anxious or depressed adolescent, they are almost certainly telling lies every day.

Your teen is never “caught in the act,” because those lies are told in secret. They are the lies discouraged kids tell themselves.

For nearly everyone, the lies begin at an early age. We are all prey to negative thoughts that run through our mind almost continually, a disparaging play-by-play commentary that ridicules not only our actions, but even other thoughts we have.

“As much as 77 per cent of self-talk during an average person’s day is negative and berating in nature.”

Psychologists Archibald Hart and Catherine Hart Weber, *Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed?*

When all that negative self-talk is allowed to continue unchecked and unchallenged, anxious children in particular are at risk of coming to harmful and irrational conclusions about themselves and others. Little by little, their self-esteem can be whittled away by false assumptions that they may never voice out loud.

To preserve a healthy sense of self, kids need to learn how to “talk back” to their negative thoughts with **truth-based self-talk**; they need to be taught how to confront irrational lies and discern the truth about themselves and others in every situation.

FOUR LIES TO WATCH FOR AND CHALLENGE

That “irrational, inaccurate thinking,” as Drs. Hart and Hart Weber describe it, turns out to be surprisingly widespread – even among mature adults. In 1980, psychiatrist David D. Burns published a now-widely-circulated list of ten common patterns of pessimistic thinking. Burns’ “checklist of cognitive distortions” could equally be called a checklist of false assumptions.

Here are just four of Burns’ “cognitive distortions” to watch for in your teen:

All-or-nothing thinking: You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

- » Telltale signs of all-or-nothing thinking are words like “always,” “never” and “every.”

Overgeneralization: You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat, or you reach a broad conclusion based on just one bit of information.

- » Example thought: *Amy doesn't want to come to my party. I bet nobody's going to show up.*

Jumping to conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

- » Example thought: *My friends went to the mall on Saturday, but they didn't invite me. That proves they don't like me anymore.*

Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.

- » Example thought: *I feel stupid and unlovable, therefore both are true.*

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

In the Scriptures, God urges us to safeguard the quality of our thought life. But overcoming a habit of falling into erroneous, negative thoughts is not easy. Here are some ways you can help your child “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Help your teen understand that negative thoughts aren't harmless. *Negative thoughts become feelings, and those feelings often dictate actions and outcomes.* Study Burns' list of cognitive distortions together, and be honest with your teen about the ones you tend to fall into. Be careful not to imply that your child is “too negative”; Burns' list will help them realize that many people struggle to be optimistic thinkers.

In casual conversation, gently challenge false statements and steer your child to the truth. Make a habit of asking, *Is that really true? Let's look at the facts.* Or rephrase your child's negative statements into truth-based statements: *You don't always forget your homework. You forgot one day this week, that's all.* (Be cautious, however, about challenging your child's statements when he or she is in the grip of strong emotions, either angry or sad. Intense moods call for *empathetic listening.*)

Champion Philippians 4:8 as a helpful “litmus test” for honesty and logic in self-talk. Encourage your teen to test a funk to see if it flunks the first part of the Philippians 4:8 test: *Is it true? Is it honourable? Is it right? What is a pure, unbiased way of looking at this? What would be an excellent, praiseworthy plan to deal with this? What is a likely positive outcome?*

Nail down negative thoughts. Encourage your child to write down recurring negative thoughts. Check them against Burns' list of cognitive distortions, or apply the Philippians 4:8 test, then list the real truth of the matter alongside each negative thought. Urge your child to write down some positive action steps that may resolve the issue, then choose one or two to act on.

Pray for your child and encourage them in the Word. Healthy, lasting self-esteem flows from a child who trusts – regardless of how they feel in the moment – that they are God's unique creation, made “more than good enough” by Christ's sacrifice, and intensely loved by their Heavenly Father. Remind your child that his Spirit knows who they really are, and moves them forward toward all they are meant to be.

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Additional resources and information

Finding help for yourself

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY BROADCAST

- » “Calming Your Fears” with Deborah Pegues
- » “Trusting God in Worrisome Times (Parts 1 and 2)” with Lee Strobel
- » “Thriving as a Mom” with Kara-Kae James
- » “Hope for the Anxious During Unsettling Times” with Deborah Pegues

Listen at **FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Radio**

BOOKS

- » *30 Days to Taming Your Fears* by Deborah Pegues • C03399B
- » *The Hidden Link Between Adrenaline and Stress* by Dr. Archibald Hart • BP228
- » *When It Feels Like the Sky is Falling: How to Find Hope in an Uncertain World* by H. Norman Wright • C03740B
- » *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* by Amy Simpson • C02495B
- » *Anxious for Nothing: Finding Calm in a Chaotic World* by Max Lucado • C03204B

Find these titles and more at **Shop.FocusOnTheFamily.ca**

Helping your teens and young adults

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY BROADCAST

- » “Help Your Young Adult Be Brave” with Sadie Robertson

Listen at **FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Radio**

BOOKS

- » *Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed?* by Drs. Catherine Hart Weber and Archibald Hart • N00109B

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Helping your kids

ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY

- » Episode 784: “Cycle of Fear”
- » Episode 10: “Nothing to Fear”

Listen at **FocusOnTheFamily.ca/AIOEpisode**

BOOKS

- » *The Berenstain Bears Do Not Fear, God Is Near* • Co2023B
- » *The Berenstain Bears and the Gift of Courage* • Co1198B
- » *What Am I Feeling?* by Dr. Josh and Christi Straub • Co3707B
- » *Braver, Stronger, Smarter: A Girl's Guide to Overcoming Worry and Anxiety* by Sissy Goff • Co3892B
- » *It Will Be Okay* by Lysa TerKeurst • Co2900B
- » *A Warrior Prince for God* by Kelly Chapman • Co1296B

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You can find more articles at **FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Anxiety** and
FocusOnTheFamily.ca/AnxietyInKidsAndTeens

Even though not everyone who deals with anxiety also deals with depression, there are many who do face both. If you or a loved one are carrying the burden of depression, visit **FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Depression** to find helpful resources.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP

We know that life can be overwhelming, and it can sometimes be difficult to know how to navigate the trials we face – whether it's anxiety, depression, broken relationships or prodigal children. Whatever you may be dealing with right now, we want you to know you're not alone.

We are here for you with prayer and counselling support.

*Every weekday our team prays together for the needs of families all across the country. You can email prayer@fotf.ca or submit your prayer request online at FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Prayer. Or if you'd like to receive prayer over the phone, call our team at **1.800.661.9800**.*

*We also offer a free, one-time phone consultation with one of our in-house counsellors. Our counselling staff are all committed Christians and registered (Masters level) counsellors with ministry experience. We can also refer you to a counsellor in your area to better help you on your mental health journey (fees will apply). Call us at **1.800.661.9800** or visit FocusOnTheFamily.ca/Counselling to learn more.*



**“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”**

PSALM 121:1-2



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