

## Are You a Micro-worrier? Help for the anxious

Someone has suggested that, “most of us are micro-worriers, though small-scale fretters. Nibbling at our minds are such up-to-date worries as whether or not our insurance policies will be canceled if we have the gall to file a claim. Or the possibility that a tire will blow on a jammed bridge during the 6 p.m. traffic snarl.”

Everyone knows what it feels like to worry. Some, however, battle tidal waves of anxiety? Their problem is not minor moments of worry interrupting the normal flow of life. These are people who are immobilized by excessive worry. I’ve spoken to individuals who describe panic attacks that cripple their ability to perform the simplest tasks of life.

Some of these people long for freedom but allow fear to drive them into a sheltered existence. The only release many find is in Valium, tranquilizers or other anti-depressants. And, sometimes this is necessary. In severe cases, I always recommend seeing a medical doctor for a thorough examination.

I remember reading about a medical doctor who told of examining an increasing number of patients with various alleged symptoms. After evaluating them, he coined a new word in his diagnosis - “incopability.” He wrote, “these were people who had no apparent physical malady but somehow were just unable to cope with the pace, pressures, and problems of contemporary life.”

Several years ago, my wife and I traveled to a speaking engagement at a church on West 57th street in New York City. We stayed in a Christian hospitality house on 75th street. While traveling back and forth (on the New York subway) we couldn’t help but notice the anxiety on so many faces. It has been said that anxiety is always characterized by a sense of vulnerability. Perhaps this explains our observation on the subway.

I believe it also explains the prevalence of anxiety among parents-especially parents of teens. We tend to feel increasingly vulnerable in areas where we lack control. Have you ever tried to control a teenager who is bent on doing things his or her own way. Many anxious moments fill the days of parents.

Since anxiety is a universal problem, one would expect the Scriptures to address it. Jesus said, “Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with the worries of this life” (Luke 21:34). Some of the most well known instruction on anxiety is offered by the Apostle Paul. He wrote: “Do not be anxious about *anything*, but in *everything*, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7, emphasis mine).

Overcoming anxiety requires prayer *with thanksgiving*. When we do not move beyond prayer requests to praise and thanksgiving, relief for our anxiety is not experienced. The Apostle Peter encouraged believers to cast *all* their anxiety on God knowing that he cares for them (I Peter 5:6-8). (see also Isaiah 26:3-4; Psalm 94:19,22).

Research indicates that anxiety comes from real or imaginary threats to something an individual considers important. If good grades, for example, are important to students, exams and term papers cause anxiety. Parents are anxious about their children because they value them. Jesus also relates anxiety to values. His alternative to anxiety is not only trust in the Father's care (Matthew 6:26-32) but also commitment to greater priorities. In his sermon on the mount where he forbids anxiety three times, he concludes with a counter-demand; "to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). Sometimes, according to Jesus, our anxiety hinders more valuable commitments.

A 1988 *Reader's Digest* article entitled "Winning Over Worry" recommended the following solution: "Put aside a period each day when you sit down and deliberately worry about things on your mind. It is easier for most people to stop worrying during the day and concentrate on productive thoughts if they tell themselves that they'll have a chance to get back to the worry later. Researchers agree that the worry period ought to be 30 minutes long. Don't use your favorite living-room chair, because the associations might make you start worrying every time you sit there. The researchers have discovered that a shorter worry period might actually *increase* the amount you worry."

The Christian alternative is better and more firmly grounded in reality. Christians have long advocated a daily devotional time. Choose your favorite chair. Open the scriptures and commune with your Heavenly Father. Recite His promises. Sing His songs. Cast your cares on Him realizing that He cares for you.

Many people waste too much time focusing on past regrets (leading to guilt and depression) and future fears (promoting anxiety). These concerns inevitably rob from them the present joy and enjoyment of life God offers. I am not advocating ignoring the past or being cavalier about the future. For our *regrets*, God offers forgiveness and the healing comfort of His presence and promises. For our *fears*, he invites us to trust him at all times (Psalm 62:8). He offers himself as "a refuge and strength—an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1; Hebrews 4:16).

Though trust in God is offered as the alternative to anxiety, it must never be used to justify indifference or laziness. God's provisions normally involve our cooperation (Philippians 2:12-13). On the practical level, anxiety can be reduced by careful planning. I have often reduced anxiety by simply scheduling my commitments more reasonably. According to Scripture, we should diligently and realistically deal with the difficulties of life. Yet as one counselor suggests, "Anxiety, as fret and worry, comes when we turn from God, shift the burdens of life onto ourselves and assume, at least by our attitudes and actions, that we *alone* are responsible for handling problems."

One more consideration must be gently applied to anxiety. Some people refuse to be comforted by God's care because he does not care for them on their terms. This is a much deeper problem. It reveals an internal refusal to accept God as God. Admittedly, it is not easy to suffer great loss and say with Job, "the Lord gives and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Yet this is the deepest expression of worshipping God as God. Remember, subtle rebellion sometimes feeds anxiety because of a lack of acceptance of one's lot in life.

Jesus never promised a trouble-free life to his disciples. Instead he said, “Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34). Normal life in a sinful world involves unavoidable elements of vulnerability, threat, and suffering. Sudden changes, rejection, loss of health, aging, financial collapse, crime, accidents, failure, broken dreams, etc. These are common causes of anxiety for all people.

Yet it could be argued that Jesus taught his followers to expect increased difficulty (John 15:18-21). He said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33), but he also said, “Do not let *your hearts* be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me... (John 14:1-3 *emphasis mine*).