

How to Escape the Anxiety Trap

Ever notice that after going through a stressful or difficult event, you sometimes end up with a terrible cold? Or that your propensity for migraines or annoying backaches can show up after a demanding day at work, worry over the health of a loved one or a tense conversation with your teen?

If you've identified stress and anxiety as the culprit, you're right.

In early 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that "41.5% of U.S. adults exhibited symptoms of anxiety or depression. Globally, seven in 10 people report that they are struggling or suffering, according to Gallup." Additionally, studies show that stress and anxiety are incompatible with good mental and physical health. The idea that we can "worry ourselves sick" is not just a catch phrase; it's true. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, people who deal with chronic anxiety are three to five times more likely to go to the doctor and six times more likely to be hospitalized for mental health issues than those who do not. The Bible makes it clear that the human heart was not designed to carry anxiety, and that its presence can weigh us down and even lead to depression (Prov. 12:25).

So what are stress and anxiety? And as Christians, what are the practicalities of applying God's Word when life is stressing us out?

Stress can be recognized as environmental, interpersonal or intrapersonal changes that cause physical, emotional or psychological strain. Essentially, stress is our body's response to anything that demands our attention or action.

Anxiety, as a response to stress, can show up as worrisome thoughts, apprehension over present matters or concerns about things that “could” happen. Additional symptoms of anxiety may include, but are not limited to the following:

- Fear
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- A sense of impending danger or doom
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling on edge
- Agitation
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Physical pain or symptoms with no diagnosable medical cause
- Nervous tension
- Nausea
- Restlessness
- Increased heart rate
- Rapid breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle aches and tension
- Overwhelming feeling of panic or fear
- Sweaty hands and feet

Stress can be positive and can be interpersonal (stress within relationships) and intrapersonal (stress related to ourselves as individuals). The excitement of a new relationship, the birth of a child and the joy of preparing for a daughter’s wedding are all examples of these types of stress. Yet ongoing stress, even the good kind, can lead to excessive worry and anxiety.

Stress can also affect us indirectly in negative ways even when we are unaware of its impact upon our emotions. News of

political unrest in other nations, “wars and rumors of wars” and ongoing reports of global pandemics are all stored in our conscious and unconscious memory—even if we weren’t paying attention when we heard it. These and other concerns can occupy our subconscious thoughts hours after listening to a news report. Some time later, we may notice we are agitated, anxious and restless yet be unable to trace the cause of the shift in our mood. When we are overly stressed and anxious, our minds continue to process the events of the day, even when we are trying to rest. Our bodies were designed to tolerate periodic amounts of stress, but excessive stress that leads to anxiety exhausts the body and is known to repress the body’s immune system.

‘Fearfully and Wonderfully Made’

Is it any wonder that the Lord admonishes us not to worry (Matt. 6:34) and to “be anxious for nothing” (Phil. 4:6a)? Not only do fear and anxiety rob us of God’s peace during times of adversity, but they can also wreak havoc on our nervous system by activating the body’s fight, flight or freeze response.

As part of His perfect design (Ps. 139:14), God created us with the ability to instinctively respond to any threat of danger in a matter of seconds. The sympathetic nervous system, responsible for the body’s fight, flight or freeze response, enables the body to physically defend itself against predators and to run away from impending danger. You can liken it to your computer. With too many screens open or multiple programs running at the same time, it may freeze or simply shut down. In simple terms, this “emergency center” of our brain quickly assesses whether we are safe or in danger.

When it comes to assessing for danger, interestingly, the brain cannot differentiate between emotional danger and physical danger; it interprets excessive stress and anxiety as “*imminent danger*.” Consequently, prolonged bouts of worry and anxiety activate the body’s fight or flight system—the

emergency button in our brain. This is similar to your house alarm going off after being triggered and remaining on long after the need for the warning has passed. Your body believes you are in physical danger, and as a result, it releases a deluge of stress hormones throughout your body. As it anticipates your need for extraordinary strength and energy to save yourself, you become like a car with its lights left on. Without fuel to recharge the battery, the battery eventually burns out—and as the analogy suggests, so will you.

When we fall prey to worry, our bodies are slowly drained of energy and are in danger of shutting down; we need recharging. As a desperate cry for help, our body sometimes uses its loudest voice to communicate its distress: physical symptoms and disease. This is our body's SOS signal to stop, listen, refresh and refuel.

What if we could recognize the warning signals our body is sending before we get sick? And what if there were practical steps we could take to facilitate our body's God-given ability to replenish and renew itself?

'Be Anxious for Nothing'

For many of us, Philippians 4:6 is our go-to Scripture when it comes to dealing with stress and anxiety. But if we're honest, putting legs on this passage can be a bit challenging, especially in our current world.

To avoid the pitfalls of anxiety, here are 10 strategies that can help you walk in peace through any season.

Rest and retreat. God designed us with the need for rest, and designated alone times physically recharge our mental and emotional batteries. For some, this may look like taking a day (or perhaps a half-day) off work for personal renewal or a break away from the usual lunch crowd to eat alone, journal, pray or to just be alone with our thoughts. An afternoon break may include going for a walk or a jog. If possible, you may

consider blocking off several days to enjoy time for rest, relaxation and unlimited hours to enjoy God's presence.

Microbreaks. For some individuals, such as single moms, parents raising children and teens, caregivers and those with impossible work situations, a day off can rarely be included in the weekly to-do list. Consequently, microbreaks can serve as a helpful practice. A microbreak is an intentional 5-10-minute break for a brief refueling of your mind, body and spirit. Microbreak activities could include the following:

- **Worship.** Escape into an empty room for a five-minute listen to your favorite worship song. Allow the Holy Spirit to nourish and replenish you in this brief time of encounter. Earbuds in? Ready, set, receive!
- **Breath prayers.** Breath prayer is a prayer that can be said in one sentence and spoken in a single breath. To enjoy this practice, find a quiet space and sit, relaxed, in a comfortable position. Take in a few deep relaxing breaths, slowly releasing the air. Then, from your heart, pray a simple prayer, breathing in for the first half of the prayer and out for the last half. Repeat your simple prayer to God during the few minutes of your microbreak. Here are some examples of breath prayers; use any of these or compose your own: "I receive Your peace—I release all anxiety," "I give to You Lord, my worries and fears." *Now, breathe, pray and repeat!*
- **Stretch as needed throughout your day.** Take a 5-10 minute "stretch break" at your desk or within your workspace. If needed, check with your physician or health care provider for some practical suggestions.

The practice of a weekly Sabbath day. Jesus said that "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27b). So whether you are one who adheres to a strict interpretation of this Scripture on the original Sabbath day or as a designated day each week to rest and replenish, the

meaning is clear: *God gave the Sabbath to man as a blessing!* Enjoy this practice for a 30-day period. Who knows? After that, you may not want to do without it.

Sleep, exercise and nutrition. These are three must-haves when stress and anxiety rise to dangerous levels. We all know these are crucial, but they are usually the first to be overlooked when life speeds up and becomes stressful.

So how do we keep these basic three from becoming wishful thinking?

When it comes to improving in these areas, try shifting from “all or nothing” thinking to taking baby steps toward your desired goals. So if you are averaging five hours of sleep each night, try adding 30 minutes to your sleep regimen for the next 30 days. Consider adding a daily salad to your meal as a way to improve your nutrition. And if you can’t find any time to exercise within your busy day, consider adding just five minutes of exercise each day over a 30-day period. Your body will appreciate even these minor changes, and these small improvements may keep your lights burning longer.

A doctor’s visit. Check with your doctor or health care provider to find out if you are deficient in essential vitamins and minerals that affect mood and energy levels. If anxiety and depression are interfering with your ability to function in the daily activities of life, consider their recommendations for medications that may help stabilize your mood. This may serve as a short- or long-term solution to help your body function at its best.

Live in the present. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11); “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things” (Matt. 6:34a, NKJV). A quick review of these Scriptures reveals a common theme: God’s allotment of grace for our lives is provided on a *daily* basis. And while God will speak to us about our past and future, His

grace is available in our present. Set aside time each day to receive your daily portion of bread from God's Word.

Capture your thoughts (2 Cor. 10:5). Learn to be mindful of your thoughts and anxious ruminations. What are you telling yourself? Are those thoughts consistent with what God says about you and your situation? About His nature? Does your history with God suggest that He will not take care of you—even when you feel overwhelmed by adversity? (Isa. 43:2). When anxious thoughts have captured your mind, apply the principles of 2 Corinthians 10:5—*Capture your thoughts!*

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and *we take captive every thought* to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5, NIV, emphasis added).

Practically speaking, the best way to capture your thoughts is to write them down. Your amazing brain is processing thoughts in milliseconds. You will have difficulty capturing them, let alone recognizing them while they are whizzing through your brain. So what can this look like?

- First, journal your anxious thoughts on paper.
- Put your most resistant thoughts on trial against the Word of God and everything you know to be true.
- Then, in Jesus' name, cast out of your mind everything that is false, argumentative and unsubmitive to the truth.
- Meditate on the truths and Scriptures that remind you of who you are and whose you are.

A mind saturated with the Word of God is hostile territory to the enemy. Keep unruly thoughts on the run—*renew your mind!*

Pray out loud. Use your voice to shift the atmosphere around you as you declare God's promises. If you have a prayer language, pray in tongues; and if you don't, find Scriptures on fear and anxiety and pray or sing them audibly.

Shift from anxiety to gratitude. Create a gratitude list. First, write down 10 things you are thankful for. Begin each statement with, “Lord, thank You for ...”

Next, get your body into a comfortable position. Take a deep relaxing breath in, then breathe out slowly. Say aloud the first item on your gratitude list; be mindful of each word you are saying. Follow your statement by taking another deep breath, breathing the air out slowly (meditate on your statement as you breathe in and out).

Repeat this pattern with the remaining statements on your list.

Ask for help. Asking for help is never a sign of failure but of strength. Reach out to a friend, your church family or consider joining a support group for additional support. Seek out a licensed Christian counselor. Christ-centered therapy can be a part of discipleship when professional help is needed. Never be afraid to receive help!

Remember, you were created not only to survive but to thrive in all seasons. When you feel overwhelmed, ask God for His divine strategy for overcoming. Through prayer, the leadership of the Holy Spirit and practical Spirit-directed strategies, God can empower you to avoid the pitfalls of anxiety and remain centered in His peace.

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