

4 Things the Church Really Needs to Tell Anxious Young People

“Anxiety is like when video game combat music is playing, but you can’t find any enemies.”

“Social anxiety is like being trapped in a box, and you can’t scream for help because you’re too scared someone will hear you.”

“Living with anxiety is like being followed by a voice that knows all your insecurities and uses them against you. It gets to the point where it’s the loudest voice in the room. The only one you can hear.”

A wave. Quicksand. Prison. A rollercoaster. Google the words “Anxiety is like,” and you’ll be shocked by the number of comparisons and descriptions you’ll find. You’ll find memes, poetry, artwork and music—pleas for help, or at least understanding, seeping out of every pore of today’s anxious generation.

Anxiety is tough. While it’s normal (and some would even argue it’s healthy) to experience anxious feelings in particular situations and seasons of life, the living, breathing examples above show us that, without the tools to manage those feelings, anxiety can eventually consume a person’s thoughts, health and even identity. Like it has for this 22-year-old, who describes her everyday life this way:

“My anxiety demands that I always have an escape route in my mind, no matter what I’m doing. I’m at work, and I think ‘worst case scenario, I can pretend to get a migraine and leave.’ I’m at a friend’s house and I think ‘I can tell them I have a family emergency and book it out of here if I need to.’

Every single day I have to convince myself to function.”

As the body of Christ, we can help change the script for young people

Throughout my years in youth ministry, evenings were the time of day when I did the vast majority of my pastoral work. Although youth group took place on Sundays, my weekday evenings were much busier. Each day as the sun went down, texts and messages would begin:

“Can you please pray for me? I have SO much homework I’m going to be up all night.”

“I’m failing a class and I don’t want my parents to know.”

“All my friends are ghosting me.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with my life.”

“I don’t know why God loves me. Or if God loves me.”

“I’m cutting again.”

“I just feel bad. All the time.”

As much as I would have loved to make all my students’ problems and fears go away—and at times, it’s tempting for those of us in ministry to think that we can—I couldn’t. Instead, I learned to focus on sharing the language, the strength and the restorative relationship that the church can uniquely offer with young people feeling hopeless and lonely.

As society becomes more aware of the anxiety epidemic among young people, we’re growing a better toolkit of language and skills to help those who are sinking in its tide—and a deeper well of empathy and understanding for young people in their struggle. I happen to think that the message we receive (and share) and the practices we learn as people of faith are gifts that can help hurting teenagers and young adults when they

navigate difficult waters.

I have four hope-filled messages the church needs to tell today's anxious young people:

1. Come as you are.

It's hard enough for adults to resist giving a superficial "Fine" when someone asks how we're doing on Sunday mornings. For young people, external appearances and surface-level answers are rarely an indicator of what's going on inside.

Step back and take a critical look at how your church members and ministry leaders interact with the teenagers who are coming through your doors. If it seems like students are only reporting on their success or achievements in school, sports or day-to-day activities and not equally opening up about their disappointments and failures, there's a good chance you need to communicate this message more loudly and clearly.

What's more, if young people are expected to sit up front, act as greeters before the service, join the worship team, teach VBS and/or serve meals for church fundraisers in order to find affirmation or favor with the congregation, some anxious young people may simply be staying away. Create safe, supportive groups and spaces that allow young people to share honestly; go easy on the expectations for them to perform; and educate the adults in your church about the challenging realities today's young people are facing.

2. God doesn't leave us alone in our anxiety.

Here's a fresh approach to your next quiet time: Having read through the descriptions of anxiety above, go back and read through some of your favorite Bible stories. Think about the different characters, what they might have felt in the situation and what motivated their choices (right or wrong). Abraham. Sarah. Moses. David. Ruth. Simon Peter. Do you see it?

Anxiety is everywhere.

The pages of the Bible are filled with people who had everyday emotions doing extraordinary things. But what's even more encouraging is this: In those stories we see that the almighty Creator of heaven and earth doesn't watch events unfold from afar. God enters in to emotionally-charged, human situations and sits with us in our fears, griefs and joy. The journey to healing or victory over a struggle may be a long one, but we are never alone. Tell your young people these stories often, and teach them to ask as they read, "Where is God at work amid our feelings, our fears and our anxiety?"

3. You can talk to us.

A helpful article from Lifeway research spotlights data suggesting that although suicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans ages 15 to 34, only 4% of churchgoers who have lost a close friend or family member to suicide say church leaders were aware of their loved one's struggles. What makes this report even more heartbreaking is its finding that "8 in 10 Protestant senior pastors believe their church is equipped to intervene with someone who is threatening suicide." In essence, church leaders want to help—but young people and their families don't know it.

That means we need to be talking about mental health a lot more on Sundays, and every other day of the week. Do some research with your church leadership team. Schedule a sermon series—annually. Invite adults who've struggled with anxiety and depression to share testimonies of what God is doing in their lives, even if they don't feel completely "healed."

Recruit and train a pastoral care team to widen your net of those who can respond with care when they hear someone is struggling. Welcome (or create) support groups, and post their meeting information wherever people might see it.

With your students, sensitively ask direct questions. Follow

up with young people you're concerned about. Check in with families who have expressed concerns, and connect them with support. We've crafted Faith in an Anxious World to be a thoughtful, researched curriculum that will help you have more honest conversations with your young people and their families about anxiety.

Don't wait for young people who are hurting to come to you. Lead by example, and let your students know that church is a place where they can talk about how they're feeling.

4. Asking for help makes us strong, not weak.

When I was a kid in Sunday school, we used to sing a song that opened with the line, "I'm inside, outside, upright, downright happy all the time." Hopefully, the days when we taught children and young people that if they have enough faith they'll never feel sad, angry or disappointed are long behind us. But are we teaching them that as people of faith, we were created to draw strength from our community?

Get to know mature, caring adults in your church and connect them with young people who need an empathetic ear. Keep a list of trusted and qualified therapists and support organizations in your local community (and consider posting that list where students and parents go for youth ministry information, so they can access it anonymously if they wish). If you're not sure where to start, begin by adding to your phone and perhaps posting in your youth room the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number: 1-800-273-TALK.

Most importantly, let your young people and their families know that as God's people, we are a circle of care they can turn to in good times and bad. {eoa}

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