

6 Reasons Why Anxiety, Worry and Fear Are Issues for Believers

As a supplement to the message I did on anxiety and trust, I asked my friend Dr. Jennifer Degler to do a guest post on my blog with her thoughts and observations on the issue of anxiety and Christians.

A psychologist, life coach, author, speaker, wife and mom, Jennifer is passionate about helping people create healthy, successful relationships. You can find Dr. Jennifer podcasting and blogging about marriage, sex, parenting, friendships, and spiritual and personal growth on the Healthy Relationships Rx website.

Here's what she had to say:

About 20 percent of the U.S. population has an anxiety disorder. That's about 1 in 5 people, or 40 million adults. If you were allowed to pick your psychological disorder, pick anxiety because it's very treatable. Not every psychological condition is treatable, but anxiety responds very well to treatment; however, only about one-third of suffering anxious people ever seek treatment. If left untreated, anxiety can lead to depression.

When I was in graduate school in the 1980s, depression was the common cold of mental illness. Now it's anxiety. Americans live in one of the safest countries in the world, but after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the anxiety levels of Americans skyrocketed.

I think overexposure to and over-consumption of anxiety-provoking material, such as 24/7 scary news stories and increasingly violent movies and video games, has contributed

to the rise in anxiety disorders. You would think anxious people wouldn't watch a lot of news and crime shows, but they tend to be heavy consumers, usually because they are subconsciously watching for what the victim "did wrong" in a misguided effort to keep themselves safe by avoiding similar behaviors. Unfortunately, instead of making them feel safer, overexposure to anxiety-provoking shows and news stories just makes them feel more unsafe and keeps their brains in a hypervigilant state.

Anxiety tricks our brain, and the amygdala in particular, into activating our fight vs. flight response when we aren't actually in danger. For example, when we watch a scary movie, our brains are tricked into thinking we are in danger even though we are safe in the theater. So our heart pounds, our palms sweat and we breathe faster—until the movie is over. Then we realize we are safe, and our brain and body calm down.

For chronic worriers or those with an anxiety disorder, worry about the future is the scary movie. Those "What If" worries about an uncertain future hijack the brain, trick it into activating the fight vs. flight response, and cause physical, emotional and spiritual distress. Once anxious people understand this neural hijacking, they are much less self-condemning of their anxiety and better able to use body-centered techniques to calm their anxious brain.

Here's my favorite quote to use in conjunction with teaching clients body-centered techniques, such as mindfulness or progressive muscle relaxation, which help them use their five senses to pull their anxious mind back into today.

"Today is mine. Tomorrow is none of my business. If I peer anxiously into the fog of the future, I will strain my spiritual eyes so that I will not see clearly what is required of me today." —Elisabeth Elliot

And, most of the time, we are OK in today. Dry, warm, fed,

roof over our heads—that's today, and we are OK in today. It's in the imagined future that we aren't OK.

It's so much better to live in the land of what is instead of the land of what if.

In my opinion, fear, worry and anxiety are particular problems for Christians for the following reasons:

1. Christians overspiritualize fear and anxiety. They tend to believe it's all a spiritual thing and overlook the genetic, personality and trauma contributors to anxiety issues. And when believers hear another person tell of their anxiety struggles, they tend to prescribe only spiritual solutions for a mind/body/spirit problem. If you have an anxiety disorder, you are unlikely to be able to "pray it away" any more than you could pray away diabetes.

2. Christians carry shame over their anxiety and fear because they tend to believe it always indicates a lack of faith or an immature faith. They believe lies such as "Good Christians never feel afraid or anxious" or "If I struggle with worry, I am a weak Christian."

3. Because of the shame, they tend to cover over how much they are suffering from an untreated anxiety disorder. They gloss over it, call it being "stressed out," and don't share their stories in community where they could possibly receive support and encouragement to get treatment.

4. Christians can give each other truly unhelpful but sounds-so-spiritual advice for managing crippling fear and anxiety, such as "Just let go and let God" or "Just give it to Jesus" or "Just lean into Jesus." What in the world does this look like practically?

5. Christians can be suspicious of helpful body-centered techniques for managing anxiety. It's like we are Gnostics who believe the body is evil and only spirit is good, when in

fact, body-centered techniques work well to reduce anxiety because of the way God made our brain.

6. Because Christianity offers peace, hope and a certain eternal future, it is particularly attractive to anxious people. So baseline, you'll find more anxious people in a church than waiting in line to bungee jump. I don't have hard statistics on this, but I think the incidence of anxiety disorders in a church congregation is higher than the 20 percent you find in the general U.S. population. Plus anxious people tend to also be imaginative, deeply feeling, empathetic people—the kind of people who are drawn to the kindness and compassion found in good churches.

If you are the 1 in 5 persons who struggles with anxiety, worry or fear, please get treatment from an experienced mental health professional. While treatment may not make the anxiety go completely away, it should help you suffer much less and be able to enjoy the abundant life and peace Jesus promises.

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