

Four Signs You Suffer From Secondhand Worry

Do you tend to worry about the problems of other people?

One day, my friend Leah called me, near her breaking point. However, the problems causing her distress were not her own, but rather those of her adult children. She was paying her son's legal fees and afraid that he could go to jail. Leah was losing sleep over her single, adult daughter's unplanned pregnancy and financial instability. Both situations left Leah emotionally and financially drained.

Leah's anxiety over her children's problems is known as "secondhand worry." As with secondhand smoke, secondhand worry sufferers experience all of the physical and emotional symptoms of worry, except that they are anxious and stressed about problems that are not their own.

Do these scenarios sound familiar?

Your son didn't finish his science project, and you're stressed out because if he gets a failing grade, he won't play in the upcoming game.

Your 30-year old sister is a free spirit, but you often feel anxious or panicky because she has no health insurance and often calls to borrow money.

What happens when we don't find a cure for our secondhand worry? We end up taking responsibility for others. Even worse, we unknowingly hijack the important lessons they need to learn on their relational, financial and spiritual journeys in life. (If you're familiar with recovery principles, secondhand worry can lead to enabling or support co-dependency.)

In Joshua 9, the Gibeonites living in the land of Canaan heard

about the Israelites' campaign into the promised land and their overwhelming victories at Jericho and Ai. The Gibeonites were afraid for their lives, so "they resorted to deception to save themselves" (Josh. 9:4a, NLT).

The Gibeonites sent ambassadors out to see Joshua and the leaders. They told the Israelites that they'd traveled from a distant land to make a peace treaty. As Joshua inspected the travelers, he saw their worn-out clothing and old wineskins. The leaders questioned the travelers again and asked them again if they lived close by, because God forbade the Israelites from making treaty with the people who lived in Canaan. The Gibeonites lied to the Israelites about how far they had traveled. It was a long and detailed story, fueled by fear and worry.

Whenever we've got someone in our lives who struggles with personal responsibility, it's tempting to believe his or her sad stories at face value. We feel bad for them and want to help. We can get so caught up in the details of his or her story that we lose sight of the actual facts. How often have you heard a frequently unemployed person in your life give you a lengthy discourse about how his or her most recent job loss was not their fault? How many excuses has your teenager given for not completing homework or long stories been told that document the unfair behavior of a teacher?

Joshua and the Israelite leaders got caught up in the facts of the Gibeonites' story and in doing so, they made a critical error. Joshua 9:14 says, "So the Israelites examined their food, but they did not consult the LORD."

As a result, the Israelites made treaty with the Gibeonites. Shortly afterward, Joshua and the leaders discovered that they had been fooled. The rest of the Israelites became very angry with them, because the people already knew the suffering that came from disobedience. Now, the Israelites were responsible for the welfare and future of people who had deceived them out

of fear and worry. Secondhand worry can be costly for everyone involved, both in the short-term and long.

What are the four signs that you might be suffering from a case of secondhand worry?

1. 1. You're stressed out or losing sleep at night over someone else's persistent irresponsible behavior, ongoing financial issues or immaturity.
2. 2. You keep bailing the same people out by making excuses or giving/lending money.
3. 3. You are afraid to let them experience difficulty or failure because you're worried that they'll suffer loss or lose future opportunities.
4. 4. You don't want to see them struggle because you're worried they will get discouraged and give up.

What do you need to do in order to break free from secondhand worry?

My secondhand worry raged when I was worried about one of my kids. She was struggling with a medical diagnosis, and I wanted to make the rest of her life smoother, since she already had a big challenge. However, the stress and worry over her life was messing me up. I went to a Christian counselor to help me figure things out. The only problem was that my counselor, Tim, didn't comfort me at all. Instead, he challenged me to stop playing God in my daughter's life by trying to fix her problems. He summed up his challenge with wisdom I consider to be the prescription to cure secondhand worry: "We have to let the people in our lives discover their need for God."

Tim's advice was put to the test when that daughter was a senior in high school. She abruptly stopped doing her homework and put her graduation in jeopardy. As her parents, we had to manage our fears for her future and trust God with her in the moment. My husband and I stepped back and let her deal with

her teachers and the consequences of her decisions. She did great! While her post-college plans had to change, our daughter worked hard to get herself back on track. When we stepped out of the way, she could follow God along her journey. Four years later, she's working in a job she loves and has grown in confidence and maturity.

Could it be that some of the people in your life aren't getting on their knees and calling out to God because you're too busy playing God in their lives?

As long as you are playing God in your spouse's, children's or friends' lives, they don't see the need or feel the pressure. But, when you allow the bill to go unpaid or let the car get repossessed, you allow the natural consequences of their irresponsibility to surface for them to see and deal with, including the pain of their bad choices.

A failing grade or a few days in jail might be the turning point your loved one needs to call out to God and change their irresponsible path in life. Yes, watching people suffer for their irresponsible behavior is tough, but it's even more tragic to watch them suffer over and over again because you won't let them learn from their mistakes.

Whom do you need to let discover his or her need for God?
{eoa}

Barb Roose is a popular speaker and author who is passionate about connecting women to one another and to God. Her goal is to equip women to win at life with Christ-empowered strength and dignity. Roose enjoys teaching and encouraging women at conferences and events across the country and abroad. Her latest book is *Winning the Worry Battle: Life Lessons from the Book of Joshua along with the companion Bible study*. Connect with her at [, Facebook \(BarbaraRoose\), Twitter \(barbroose\) or Instagram \(barbroose\).](#)