

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations. It alerts us to dangers and helps us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness and involve **excessive** fear or anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common of mental disorders and affect nearly 30% of adults at some point in their lives. Anxiety disorders are treatable, and several effective treatments are available that can help most people lead normal productive lives.

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What is Anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious or experiences the emotion of anxiety. In fact, we feel anxious many times in our life because anxiety is part of the life-saving warning system God designed into our minds. This warning system lets us know when something isn't going right, the potential danger exists, or we aren't seeing the situation accurately. Anxiety functions like a red light on your car's dashboard which comes on when a problem might exist in the car or a smoke detector starting to make that irritating noise when it senses smoke. Anxiety is meant to be a good and life-saving part of our psychological wiring.

Warning System Out of Control

Unfortunately, because we like to be in control, want our agenda, don't like to be hurt, and aren't very good at being fortune-tellers, we try to avoid any future danger or problems. So, anxiety warning signs get prematurely triggered as our mind tries to anticipate or predict the future. Anxiety about whether someone will like you, whether you'll forget part of your presentation, or that something might happen 3 weeks from now are all real concerns. But for some, instead of being a 1-2 out-of-10 concern, the anxiety rises to an 8-9 out-of-10 and takes over their mind. Just like a smoke detector has a loud, piercing, high-frequency sound that disrupts your ability to focus, think, and function, anxiety can be just as distressing and disruptive for many. Most of the future events we worry about don't even happen.

What is Problematic Anxiety?

Dysfunctional anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of anxiety, tension, worry, or agitation. Anxiety differs from fear, but the terms are often used interchangeably. Most clinicians define anxiety as a response to anticipated future events, usually lasting a prolonged period of time. Anxiety is also more broadly focused and pertains to a vague or uncertain danger. Whereas fear is usually an appropriate, present-oriented, short-lasting response, with a narrow focus pertaining to a more specific concern or threat. When the anxiety lasts for a number of weeks, causes distress, impairs functioning, and has specific patterns or traits, a psychiatric disorder is usually present. People struggling with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns that are sometimes hard to slow down or stop. Anxiety can be mildly disruptive on the backburner of your mind, or it can be severely debilitating to the point of confining a person to their home as in agoraphobia.

Psychiatric Disorders with Significant Anxiety

The Psychiatric 'bible' of Disorders, the DSM-5, lists several categories of disorders which commonly have anxiety as a prominent symptom. These categories are:

- **Anxiety Disorders** – which include Panic Disorder (PD), Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), Phobias, Agoraphobia, Separation Anxiety Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).
- **Obsessive Compulsive Related Disorders** – which include Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Hoarding Disorder, Trichotillomania (Own Hair-Pulling), and Excoriation Disorder (Skin-Picking).
- **Trauma Related Disorders** – which include Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Acute Stress Disorder, and Adjustment Disorder.

- **Depressive Disorders** – the ones which commonly have anxiety as a prominent symptom are Major Depression, Persistent Depressive Disorder, and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder.



How Many Are Struggling with Anxiety?

Before COVID, over 35% of American adults suffered from an anxiety-related issue, obsessive-compulsive related, or trauma-related disorder at some time in their life. Sadly, COVID and its many disruptive ripples have dramatically increased the prevalence of those currently experiencing disrupting anxiety to 31% and emotional distress to 41%. The increase in children and adolescents is even greater.

Danger Everywhere!

Today, more than any time since at least WWII, danger and potential harm are all around us. Each day, we seem to be one step away from loss, pain, danger, or harm. Violence in various forms and disease are ever-present due to our never-ending connection to our cellphone. Anxiety levels and people's warning systems are heightened for apparent reasons. Unfortunately, many have magnified anxiety levels from the sheer barrage of hurt, loss, and attacks on our way of living and personal psychological stability due to what we have endured these past 3 years.

Anxiety Often Looks Like:

- Thoughts running through your head of many possible worst-case scenarios
- Uneasiness or fear of being judged or critiqued at social events
- People-pleasing behavior
- Difficulty sleeping
- Fear of the unknown
- Anxiety you won't measure up to standards
- Procrastination
- Waking up early with uncomfortable or worrisome events that day
- Avoid thinking, engaging in, or addressing a worrisome situation by isolating or bingeing, (social media, food, reading)
- Using harmful ways to soothe or calm yourself – food, alcohol, substances/drugs, cutting, self-harm, porn
- Loss of appetite
- Over-eating to soothe or cope with stress
- Blaming others for being disruptive to your agenda or plans
- Temper tantrums
- Impulsive decisions to alleviate anxiety
- Physical behaviors like pacing, biting fingernails, nervous tics or twitches, knee bouncing while sitting, tremors

Sometimes Anxiety is Physical

Some people aren't connected to their emotions so instead these emotions come to the surface through the mind as anxiety, worry, or fear, and they surface through the body as physical symptoms. Common physical symptoms are:

- increased heart rate
- pounding heart
- faster but shallower breathing
- excessive sweating
- dry mouth
- tremors
- shaking
- twitches
- queasy stomach
- nausea
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- lightheadedness
- tingling
- dizziness
- tunnel vision
- feeling detached from your body
- pacing
- physical agitation
- restlessness



Wise Connections

The Explorer who struggles with anxiety and the unknown, has reached out to a stranger and has no idea how the stranger will respond. This shows how much pain and discomfort they are in that they are willing to risk more anxiety to see if relief is available. You want to represent Jesus to them by showing you are a safe person who will bring peace, calm, and help. This shouldn't be a dangerous or anxiety provoking interaction, and in fact, your demeanor should help them be less anxious when they anticipate the next interaction with you or your team.

- Always pray first. Ask God to make His peace clear and meaningful to the Explorer. Ask God to settle your heart and rouse your mind so you can use the skills and equipping to engage, soothe, and guide the Explorer.
- Resist the urge to fix or immediately fire out a Bible verse. First you want to just let them know they aren't alone, that you are jumping into the problem with them, and that you will hang in there with them until they feel safe enough to navigate with some other helper or on their own.
- Initially, ask questions about what they feel and think to discover the ripples or effects of their anxiety. Then you want to show empathy and acknowledge their struggle while also showing you are right there with them, holding them emotionally and psychologically.

Tips for Responding to Explorers Experiencing Anxiety

- 1. Your voice should be peaceful and soothing.** Talk in a calm, clear voice. Softer in volume and slower in cadence. Don't be rushed or hurried and don't rush them. Your demeanor should exude God's peace and encourage them to call again and have less anxiety the next time.
- 2. Be empathetic.** When they state difficult aspects or consequences from their anxiety, acknowledge that "it sounds very difficult" or "it seems like it has impacted you in significant ways"
- 3. Avoid "I know how you feel"** or "we all get anxious" or "it will go away soon" or "it could be worse"
- 4. Ask questions showing you care,** their story is important, and you are listening. It also helps you gather accurate information, so you aren't guessing or making assumptions.
 - Can you tell me more about your anxiety/worry/fears?
 - It sounds like your anxiety has been difficult. How has it impacted you?
 - It sounds like your anxiety has impacted you. Can you tell me how it has impacted your relationships?
 - Thank you for contacting me to talk. Do you have any supportive people to talk to?
- 5. They might sound like they want answers or reasons why but avoid giving those at the outset.** Your main focus is to connect, let them know you are with them, and that they can have hope.
- 6. Explorers want to be heard,** so let them know through reflective and active listening that you hear what they are saying and the feelings they have inside.
- 7. Do not push Scripture** or therapy programs without first building rapport or connection with the Explorer.
- 8. They fear being judged or critiqued so avoid language that can be perceived as judgmental or accusatory.** Don't mention mistakes the Explorer makes or how they could have done things better. You are using the first couple interactions to connect and build a safe bridge to send more help later on.
- 9. You don't need to give a diagnosis,** just understand and let them know they don't have to handle this struggle alone.
- 10. Don't overthink your response** as it doesn't need to be complicated. They most likely don't have capacity to take in complicated info and you aren't going to have a long conversation to give them complicated information.



A Great Sample Response

Here's a great example of how to put some of those healthy response tips into practice for an explorer experiencing anxiety!

EM = Explorer Message

CR = Coach's Response

NDR = Next Day Response

I often feel on edge. I worry about so many things. Relaxing is very hard for me and I get stressed easily. My family says I am too uptight, but this world has so many dangers and people can be so mean. I am tired of carrying so much responsibility. My anxiety sometimes gives me a headache or upsets my stomach.

EM

Hi Amanda, this is Amy. I received your message about anxiety and stress. I'm so glad you reached out.

CR

Thanks. It's so hard to talk about because I am so embarrassed. I had anxiety about calling and what you would think of me.

EM

I think you showed a lot of courage by reaching out.

CR

Not really courage, more like desperation as I don't know who else to talk to.

EM

It sounds like you've been struggling with anxiety for awhile and it's taken a toll on you.

CR

Yes, I am starting to have some health problems, and it's interfering with my relationships.

EM

I am sorry you are struggling. I want you to know you aren't walking through this struggle by yourself. I am here to help. I would love to talk more about it, and offer support, whatever that might look like. If you are comfortable, can I give you a call tonight or tomorrow morning?

CR

Yes, I would appreciate it. If I am not too much of a burden, you can call me tomorrow around 9A.

EM

Not a burden at all. I want to help you and I can call you tomorrow at 9A. Thanks for your willingness to talk more.

CR

Hi Amanda, this is Amy following up as we agreed. It took a lot of courage to reach out yesterday. I know it can be uncomfortable talking to a complete stranger, but I'd love the chance to connect with you. There is no pressure, but I want to let you know I am here to help you.

NDR

Tips

The example response here is empathetic, showed you were listening, and validated the explorer's feelings. Simply engaging, or offering to engage with people is an important step to building rapport and letting them know you are a safe person to bring into their journey.



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