

Sweating Blood: Understanding Anxiety (notes)

What anxiety is – and what it isn't

What causes it and how it is treated

How Christians should (and shouldn't) respond to the anxiety epidemic

Psalm 94:17-19

In December 2025 the Health Secretary Wes Streeting announced an independent review into rising demand for mental health services. The commonest mental health problem is ANXIETY.

What is anxiety? Anxiety is a feeling of unease, like worry or fear that can be mild or severe (NHS definition). It is a feature of everyday life but is also the main symptom of a number of mental health conditions like GAD, phobias, OCD, PTSD.

Anxiety is a feeling, like anger or sadness. Physical symptoms like increase in blood pressure and heart rate are mediated by the Autonomic Nervous system and are *involuntary* (not under conscious control).

Anxiety is a natural part of everyday life – maybe more so for Christians

Christians fear God – our own sinfulness makes us anxious – anxious to please our Lord and Saviour. Anxiety is very often a factor in conversion (conviction of sin & our perilous state) Christians also bear each another's burdens. Paul said of Timothy (Philippians 2:20) "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely **concerned** for your welfare." So Timothy's concern is a virtue. Anxiety can have positive 'concern' connotations or negative 'worry' connotations.

Job was anxious lest his children had sinned against God. He offered sacrifices (Job 1:5) on their behalf. Christian parents should be anxious about what their children watch online!

The apostle Paul experienced daily **concern** for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28). So there is good and godly anxiety just as there is righteous anger and godly sorrow.

Anxiety is a feeling of unease: it can be an illness or just a part of everyday life. It can be a special problem for Christians because they feel guilty about their anxiety- we know God loves us and has it all under control, but we still can't stop worrying. Also, many prominent theologians have said that since Jesus said Do Not Worry, then all anxiety is sinful. Let's look at that.

What Anxiety isn't

Anxiety is not your fault. All suffering is ultimately the result of the Fall. But is anxiety ALWAYS due to personal sin? Personalities differ and it is not your 'fault' if you have a predisposition to anxiety. Jesus made it clear that the man born blind was not being punished for sin in his life. Blindness is not due to personal sin (John 9:2-3), nor is cancer, nor clinical depression, nor an anxious disposition. The limbic system within the brain is what governs the anxiety response and in some people it is just set 'too high'.

Not necessarily wicked. Anxiety is a feeling like sadness or anger. Sadness could be self pity or godly grief. Jesus wept. Anger could stem from punctured pride or be righteous. Jesus cleansed the temple.

Anxiety could be sinful – I don't trust God, I doubt His goodness or His sovereignty. But it could simply be a natural human response to a stressful situation or because we care deeply about others. Would it be sinful to be anxious at midnight if my daughter was supposed to be home at nine?

Scenarios:

Many years ago a patient asked for sleeping tablets. He couldn't sleep because he was anxious. And he was anxious because he was having an affair with his secretary and his wife was pregnant.

Anxiety due to personal sin? Yes.

Gabriel said: Do not be afraid. But I am a young unmarried woman living in days when sexual sin could mean the death penalty. This unexpected visitor says I am to be a single mother. **Would any anxiety be due to personal sin?**

Not rebellion against God. Most anxious Christians would rather not be anxious – anxious thoughts arise unwelcome, unbidden. Sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4) Anxiety is not lawlessness. Anxiety often draws Christians closer to God. *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.* Anxiety can move us to be more like Christ—growing our dependence on God.

Not distrust. Anxiety is not necessarily about doubting God, just an acknowledgement that bad things happen. An example from the 1930s when Christians discussed whether or not they should lock the door on leaving the house.

Not necessarily unbelief. Some Christians say that anxiety is the same as unbelief. Kevin DeYoung writes: *'Worry about the future is not simply a character tic, it is the sin of unbelief.'*

The Lord Jesus was sinless, but in Gethsemane he experienced agony of mind, a fearful apprehension as he thought about what was soon to happen. He was 'deeply distressed and troubled' (Mark 14:33).

Not necessarily lack of faith: C. S. Lewis, "Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins." Many people of faith suffer severe anxiety but atheists are not anxious – not about their own sin or the souls of others.

What causes Anxiety?

Fear and anxiety are part of the human condition. It is natural to feel anxious if we face a painful or dangerous situation. Christ was 'in anguish' in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Luke 22)... 'being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.' Hence our title: Sweating Blood.

Some people are predisposed to anxiety because of **genetics**. The tendency to anxiety has a strong genetic component.

Some people are predisposed because of **life events** – a serious accident may mean you are too anxious to ever get behind the wheel again. The brain has a complex limbic system which links memories to emotions. That way the body is primed to respond if we face the same danger again. This is why it is very difficult for someone who has experienced sexual abuse to ever enjoy intimacy. This is why, for someone who has had cancer, every new symptom is a recurrence until proved otherwise. This **hypersensitivity of the limbic system** is involved in PTSD and phobias.

Life choices like alcohol or drug misuse can also predispose us to anxiety

So genetics, life events, life choices predispose us. But many things can tip us over into anxiety. These include other health problems/debilitating physical long term illness/ head injury/biochemistry/hormones/pregnancy/ side effect of medication. Stress/overwork/ insomnia/ learned behavioural patterns/ dysfunctional family. Existential (lack of purpose and meaning) spiritual angst (lack of assurance). Anxiety is often associated with Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

So everybody gets anxious. Even Christians.

How is Anxiety treated?

A conversation with someone else – a trusted Christian friend– pray for me

GP Tests to make sure our anxiety is not due to an underlying condition

A counsellor (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). CBT is fine for Christians – it's about replacing unhelpful negative thought patterns with healthy ones. Using logic as Jesus did: 'Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?' (Matt.6:27) See Resources.

Relaxation – Exercise –Distraction

Medication eg. antidepressants or betablockers. Not habit forming

A conversation with ourselves

We have the Scriptures: Psalm 77:11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

We have hymns: 'His love in times past forbids me to think he'll leave me at last in trouble to sink.'

We have God's invitation - Cast all your anxiety upon him, *for he cares for you.* 1 Peter 5:7.

We can reason with ourselves - don't fret as if you have no heavenly Father. "For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," (Matthew 6:32-33)

A conversation with our Father: 'When I was in distress I sought the Lord'. 'I cried out to God for help' vs 1 and vs 2 Psalm 77. 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.' Philippians 4:6 **Turn worries into prayers.**

Christianity is good for mental health!

Hope, joy, peace is nowhere else and in no-one else but Jesus.

How Christians should (and shouldn't) respond to the anxiety epidemic.

How Christians should not respond

Despising (Snowflake Generation)

Many young people have had a tough time – not materially but emotionally and spiritually. They have no foundation on which to build. No Jesus. No faith. No church. No Bible knowledge. Nothing solid.

Denying

The late, great John MacArthur (April 2024) said there is 'no such thing' as mental illness 'There's no such thing as PTSD. There's no such thing as OCD. There's no such thing as ADHD. Those are noble lies to basically give the excuse, in the end of the day, to medicate people'. 'No such thing as bipolar disorder. Mental illness is just people's inability to cope with life'.

A Christian commented: "*There is simply no way he could know, for example, what my husband has endured over being in a fire with his brother when he was a toddler and watching him burn and not acknowledge the reality of PTSD.*"

Demonising

In a sermon published online John Piper says that '*Anxiety is one of the evil conditions of the heart that comes from unbelief.*' '*Paul and Jesus explicitly command us not to be anxious, so to be anxious is a sin. This is a trust issue*'

To which (in the comments below) the mother of a child with Autistic Spectrum Disorder replied: 'So my autistic 4.5 year old's anxiety stems from his lack of trust in God?'

(John Calvin – Institutes of Christian Religion) "For if all weeping is condemned, what shall we judge concerning the Lord himself, from whose body tears trickled down? If all fear is branded as

unbelief, how shall we account for that dread with which, we read, he was heavily stricken? If all sadness displeases us, how will it please us that he confesses his soul 'sorrowful even to death'?

How Christians should respond: like the Good Shepherd (Isaiah 40) vs 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Don't despise

Never minimize a person's suffering – even if it invisible it is still real. And it is a wonderful gospel opportunity. People feel disenchanting and distressed by a future that looks increasingly uncertain. Many are turning to Christ. Many are also turning back to Christian ethics. The most pro-life demographic in the UK is now young men (16-34).

We don't despise people – we esteem others better than ourselves. We show Christ's gentleness & compassion.

Don't deny

Don't deny that mental illness exists or causes suffering. Be quick to listen, slow to speak. Encourage your anxious friend to see a doctor, to take medication, to see a counsellor. Don't fire verses or palm people off with a 'sort yourself out' Bible verse. Be vulnerable - all are broken. Be kind as God is kind. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

Don't demonise

Avoid triumphalist views, which equate emotional distress with spiritual failure. Anxious Christians need more support, less stigma. Encourage. 'Do not be afraid Do not fear' - Tim Farron MP says Jesus is our 'safe space'.

Don't despise, deny or demonise: point anxious people to Jesus, strong and kind.

Are we Christians because we've got everything sorted or because God is forgiving and kind and loves broken people?

Psalms 121

Resources

bcuk.org Biblical Counselling UK ([Home - Biblical Counselling UK](#))

www.acc-uk.org/ (Assoc of Christians in counselling and linked professions)

Hope in an Anxious World (book) by Helen Thorne

Mental Health and Your Church (book) Helen Thorne & Steve Midgley

Is it Unspiritual to be Depressed? (book) by Paul Ritchie (pastor Limerick Baptist Church)

I'm not Supposed to Feel Like This: A Christian Self-Help Approach to Depression and Anxiety (book) Williams et al, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002.

https://admin.cmf.org.uk/pdf/cmffiles/53_depression_and_cbt.pdf (explanation of CBT by Christian Psychiatrist)

livinglifetothefull (website by a Christian Psychiatrist)

Prof K George Psychiatrist Melbourne Australia (Christian Psychiatrist various podcasts & good advice on helping yourself)

Lots of self help sites online. Patient.co.uk & Northumberland Tyne and Wear Self Help booklets – brilliant and free

<http://www.patient.co.uk/> (reliable info & help with panic attacks, phobias, anxiety, stress, OCD)

<http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/> Anxiety UK, (0844 477 5774)

<http://www.nopanic.org.uk/> No Panic, (0808 808 0545)

<https://www.kintsugihope.com/mental-health-friendly-church>