

As our anxious thoughts lead to self-criticism, we hate both the worry and the self-judgment.



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## anxiety

by Janet Lewis, PhD, NCC  
NavMissions Staff Care Director



Worry. It's in our nature. We worry about our bills, our kids, our kids' friends. We worry about our kids' lack of friends. If we don't worry, our friends say, "But aren't you worried?" We figure worry isn't such a bad thing. *If I worry enough, maybe it won't happen.*

Give worry its other name—*anxiety*—and it sounds a little worse.

Anxiety is hard on us in every way. Muscle tension, irritability, restlessness or feeling "wired." We might have difficulty concentrating. We could experience depression, extreme fatigue or general tiredness, or have difficulty sleeping. Panic attacks sweep in with intense fear or discomfort, bringing accelerated heart rate or palpitations, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, or the feeling of being smothered.

Simply put, anxiety is a fight-or-flight response to crisis. Let's say you're practicing the piano when a car smashes through the wall and explodes in a ball of flame. Instant panic. Your hormones jump up and down, yelling, "Danger!" As blood and oxygen rush out of your brain and into your muscles, you pick up the piano and run outdoors with it. A few hours later, getting the piano back inside takes six strong men.

This kind of thing actually happens. In this case, anxiety is your best friend. Now, shift to the classroom and the calculus test on your desk. You look at the first question, and your mind goes blank. Panic sets in. Your hormones do their job exactly the same way, but this time it backfires. Your brain needs the blood and oxygen, and your muscles don't. You can't even remember how to spell "math." Anxiety has become your worst enemy.

This happens, too, as we all know. The remedy: breathe! Deep breathing gets the blood and oxygen back up to your brain so you can think rationally.

Worry truly *is* in our nature. Everyone experiences a certain amount of anxiety, and for the most part, we deal with it. But anxiety becomes a problem when it develops into a habit. We obsessively focus on potential threats and worst-case scenarios, too busy dreading what might go wrong to live in the moment. As our anxious thoughts lead to self-criticism, we hate both the worry and the self-judgment. So we avoid them by backing away from jobs or relationships that challenge us, procrastinating, and seeking reassurance from people we see as safe. This gives short-term relief but does little for our quality of life. And eventually these unhealthy strategies break down.

Here's the good news. Healthy strategies also exist, and they can usually help. Consider the following questions:

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# worry proven to be highly effective

by Brad Hillman

People Resources Team Director


A scientific study has revealed the significant effectiveness of worry and anxiety. It turns out that over 95 percent of the things we worry about never occur! 😊



In spite of this “scientific study,” we see Jesus taking a different view.

In Matthew 6:25-34, He addresses the fears that often plague us. What caught my attention is that Jesus doesn't dismiss them as unfounded. Instead, He invites us to trust in a sovereign God who cares about our souls and our ultimate good. Jesus doesn't promise that the things we worry about won't occur, but He does invite us to a hope that is deeper and more lasting than any of them.

In some cases, anxiety is a persistent disorder that needs professional treatment. We address that in this issue. But for many of us, it's more that our focus has shifted. When we put our worries at the center, we don't see God. Our worries become a distorted mirror in which we gaze at ourselves.

As you explore the articles in this *UpFront*, I pray you'll hear Jesus' invitation to a greater hope and receive it in ways that free you from the debilitating effects of fear. May His perfect love cast out fear and the self-absorption that ties into it. And may He replace them with a freedom to live the gospel and make disciples next door to everywhere. 

**anxiety** (continued from page 1)

**1. Does your lifestyle contribute to your anxiety?** Take a good look at your time with Jesus, your eating and exercise habits, the balance of work and personal life, stressors at work and at home, your emotional support system, your caffeine.

(Yes, your caffeine. If you play a big role in keeping Starbucks solvent, you might want to reconsider.)

**2. What's really important?** Identify and clarify these things. Urgent doesn't always mean important. Dashing around putting out fires for things that have very little meaning to you adds stress. Doing what truly has value for you takes intentionality, but it's worth the effort.

**3. What are your anxiety triggers?** David asked God to “test me and know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139: 23-24). One strategy is to keep a weekly “Thought Diary,” where you list stress-inducing events, the emotions and thoughts they brought out, and activities that helped you feel better. This is a good way to identify “thought cycles,” where one thought spirals into the next and increases the cycles of distress. You might initially want a counselor's help to analyze your diary.

**4. What strategies do you use to suppress your feelings of anxiety?**

There are plenty of unhealthy strategies for this. Some people use drugs or alcohol to self-medicate. Some burn or cut themselves, inflicting physical pain to relieve emotional pain. Some overeat or undereat to feel better, watch TV to distract, or go for thrill-seeking activities to get the rush. Ask yourself, “When I feel stressed or anxious, what's my go-to activity? Do I ‘need’ a drink? Do I ‘need’ ice cream? Do I bury myself in fantasy to escape real life?”


The difference between good and not-so-good strategies is usually easy to see. You go for a walk and come back more energized, ready to enjoy your family instead of wishing you'd stayed single and celibate. You scroll through Facebook, but as soon as you turn off the computer, your worries flood back. In this case, walking actually helped relieve your stress. The internet was just a distraction.

**5. Do I need professional help?** When persistent, excessive worry for no obvious reason makes it hard to carry on with normal life, the answer is yes.

Possible symptoms:

- Feeling constantly on edge
- Anxiety that gets in the way of job or relationships
- Irrational fears you can't shake
- Using ritual behaviors to ward off disaster
- Avoiding everyday activities
- Panic attacks
- Sense of dread and imminent danger

David, “a man after God's own heart,” struggled with anxiety and depression. The Psalms are David's record of his journey with God. Psalm 18 is one of my favorites. “He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from an enemy that was too strong for me.... He brought me out to a spacious place; He rescued me because He delighted in me.”

Our struggle with anxiety can take us on a journey like David's. In his weakness, he found that God was the One who deeply met his needs. “When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul” (Psalm 94:19). Even when we can't see or feel His presence, God is with us in our despair. As He draws us closer to Him, we can discover Jesus in greater depth and reality. 





## a new song

by Caitlin Kochanasz, PRT

“How’s your health, Caitlin?”

This was a simple question from a caring Navigator staff woman, as we caught up during a wedding weekend in 2009. Suddenly, the room spun and I had trouble breathing. Heart racing, I lay down on her couch and tried to compose myself. *What in the world just happened?*

I was a first year Nav rep, considered “fully trained,” serving with the collegiate mission. I guess I’ve always been a little high-strung and nervous. My EDGE teammates lovingly mimicked me as the neurotic squirrel from the movie *Ice Age*. But I didn’t think much of it. My life was full, and ministry was flourishing. That moment in 2009 brought the first hint of something wrong.

From there, though, things quickly got worse. I had trouble sleeping. I was physically in bed for 7 or 8 hours a night, but I felt aware the whole time. My dreams were intensely vivid. When I woke, such energy pumped in my chest, I felt I could run a marathon—and I HATE to run! I couldn’t relax in the evenings or take time off on the weekends. Watching TV made me anxious.

I compensated by constantly busying myself . . . anything to distract from the gnawing uncertainty that always lurked beneath the surface. Waves of panic started washing in, leaving me paralyzed. Eventually, I couldn’t be alone for even a few minutes without slipping into these waves. I couldn’t just snap out of them myself by reading my Bible or praying. I felt out of control.

When my campus director referred me to PRT for help and evaluation, my counselors there were very concerned with my high levels of anxiety. They suggested I see a psychiatrist. I hated the idea. I felt like a failure and was overcome with shame. How could this happen to me, a Nav rep? I was supposed to be the “spiritual” one who had it all together. Instead, I found myself sitting in a mental hospital straight out of a movie set, complete with creepy wrought iron gates that keep people IN!

**new song** (continued on back page)



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**new song** (continued from page 3)

My psychiatrist diagnosed me with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and depression, and prescribed medication that helped me sleep at night. I continued meeting with PRT to explore the roots of my anxiety. Inner healing prayer ministered deeply to me, and cognitive therapies challenged my distorted perceptions with reality. I also learned practical breathing exercises for when I felt a wave of panic coming. What a relief! It felt great to gain some help and tools to begin overcoming anxiety, rather than being ruled by it. Slowly and gently, the Lord “lifted me out of the slimy pit...and gave me a firm place to stand” (Ps. 40:2).

It’s been about 7 years since that dark season, and I’m amazed at God’s provision and presence through that time. I’d love to say my anxiety has gone away completely. But the reality is that although it’s been dramatically reduced, it might always be in my life to some degree.

Is anxiety a sin I need to repent of and “just stop”? Or is it a neurological, genetic condition, a result of the fall that I can’t help? I wrestled with that tension for years, and sometimes I still do. But one day it hit me that in either case, Jesus paid for my anxiety on the cross. Focusing on its origins leaves me frustrated and hopeless. But focusing on my primary identity as His beloved—who happens to struggle with anxiety—frees me to be strong in the battle. The joyful truth is that I’m not defined by my anxiety. I’m no longer a slave to fear, and my new nature is more powerful than my flesh (Rom 8).


Maybe someday I’ll be able to fully embrace my anxiety, invite Jesus into it, and watch it take me to new places of intimacy with Him. Already, I see our redeemer God using my journey for good. I now have the privilege of ministering with PRT, helping our staff with an issue I understand from the inside out. Self-reported anxiety is on the rise in this country, especially among millennials, and this includes Nav staff. Many are confused, having never heard Christians talk openly about anxiety. They feel the same shame I did, battle the same tensions, and ask the same questions. It’s a joy to help them experience the hope and healing of the Gospel in the inmost places of their lives so they can serve in the outmost places of the earth.

*“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.”* Psalm 40:1-3 (NIV) 

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## thoughts on anxiety

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 40 million adults in the US (18 percent of the population) have an anxiety disorder. If someone you know is struggling with anxiety, here are a few thoughts:

- Anxiety and depression often go together.
- There could be a medical component. Suggest a physical exam and blood work.
- Don’t tell them to “just stop” being anxious.
- Help them give voice to the “what ifs” that fuel anxiety.
- Help them identify and process root causes, or direct them to someone who can (local counselor or pastoral care specialist).
- Help them identify ways to reduce stress, such as exercise, limiting caffeine, regular sleep, healthy diet.
- If they’re involved with The Navigators, contact PRT for help. 

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