

Anxiety: Finding Hope in the Messiness of Life

A 5-part Bible Study

Opening Leader's Notes

Anxiety is prevalent in our world today and can often feel disruptive to lives, plans, and relationships. But what is anxiety, really? Why does it seem to be showing up more and more in and around us? How do we help our youth wrestle with the weights of a world that does have very real challenges without being overcome with anxiety?

In these sessions will work through a theological and spiritual perspective of anxiety, fear, and worry. It will help youth gather tools for our mental health toolbox for the anxiety, worry and fear in all of us.

Outline

Session 1 - Fear, Anxiety, and Worry: The Mosquitos of Emotion

Theme passage - Genesis 3:1-7

A Word of Hope: I can have fear *and* firm faith in God.

Session 2 – Fear: Finding Safety in a Broken World

Theme passage - 2 Kings 6:15-19

A Word of Hope: God responds in my fear.

Session 3 – Anxiety: Attending to the Chaos Inside

Theme passage - Mark 6:45-56

A Word of Hope: Jesus walks with me in my questions and concerns.

Session 4 - Worry: Overthinking at Its Finest

Theme passage - 1 Peter 5; Hebrews 12:1-3

A Word of Hope: Jesus carries the baggage of life with me.

Session 5 - Caring for Others in Fear, Anxiety, and Worry

Theme passage - Acts 2:1-21 or Philippians 4

A Word of Hope: I am not alone in this life.

Other Notes

- The author used the ESV Scripture translation for this study unless otherwise noted.
- Thanks to Concordia Publishing House for allowing references and quotations from Finding Hope: From Brokenness to Restoration and Emotions & the Gospel: Created for Connection¹ by the author of this study
- Consider putting each session's "word of hope" on a sticky note or a colored index card for your students to take with them and post in their rooms or lockers or wherever to further instill the lesson each session.
- Specific notes for adult leaders in the sessions are in blue italics.

¹ <https://www.cph.org/finding-hope-from-brokenness-to-restoration?srsltid=AfmBOor-E084e9zPYENV2M3eck4DDiRdkll0kgGYGiBPxUvCcsMZuMqH>

Session 1 - Fear, Anxiety, and Worry: The Mosquitos of Emotion

Theme passage - Genesis 3:1-7

I have low mosquito tolerance. They seem to me to be the lowest creatures of usefulness in the natural world - sent to annoy and spread tropical disease - itchy, incessant, and sneaky. When we lived in Haiti, every day as the sun broke across the sky, the mosquitoes ruined the sunrise. Every evening as the sun went to bed, they bounced against our mosquito nets, finding the one tiny hole to weasel their way through. Now that we live in Northwest Michigan, our mosquito season lasts two weeks, and they are still annoying, pesky visitors at the backyard bonfire, ruining a good camping trip, and finding that exact place behind the kneecap or on your knuckle to drive you batty for weeks.

There are some emotions that we experience in our bodies that feel more like mosquitos and less like the delightful sunrise of happiness, the gentle wave of calm, or even the curious questioning of puzzlement.

We don't usually like fear, anxiety, and worry. They are uncomfortable, sometimes annoying mosquitos and other times more dramatic, feeling like system overload.

Why do we have emotions?

Look at Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostle's Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. (And me!)

Name or underline the different parts of ourselves that God made and interacts with or provides for.

What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.

Our emotions are part of our senses, we "feel" them. They are also connected to our inner thoughts and concerns. They tell us about the world and our experience within it.

Group activity:

Consider these three emotions and what they "feel" like inside, share within your small group or large group:

- Anxiety
- Happiness
- Calm

God made my emotions, and they also are impacted by the sin and yuck of a broken world. Anxiety, fear, and worry overlap, but are different emotions and even different physical experiences in our bodies. God made us with many ways to process the world around us and our emotions are part of that processing alongside our thoughts or "reason," our senses, and the Holy Spirit's wisdom and insight inside of us as well.

Where does fear and its counterparts come from?

Let's see where fear may have first begun in the Bible...

Read Genesis 3:1-7

- After the serpent deceived Adam and Eve, and they ate, why might they need the ability to sense danger in the world around them?

Now brainstorm together around the following questions:

- What were some things you were afraid of when you were little?
- What are some scary things in the world?
- Why might we need a sense of danger, or a fear radar system within us? How does that radar sometimes get in the way or how can it be unhelpful?

Emotions are meant to be informants, not leaders*. We might misperceive the true danger of a situation, previous experience leaving us amped up and ready to jump even when our safety isn't truly threatened. And even in life-or-death situations, we have Jesus as a foundation, knowing that eternally, we are safe. Even so, scary things can be scary, even when we have a firm faith in God's care for us.

Fear gone awry:

Anything developed by God for help and navigation in the world can be touched and tainted by what we call original sin. Original sin means everyone is born in sin, without true fear or faith in God because of Adam and Eve's first sin. Further, original sin is also responsible for the things that remind us that the very fabric of the world is not well - natural disasters, genetic issues, cancer, Covid, mental health disorders, stuff like that. Because of original sin, we are not perfect, and so as human beings will always have imperfect perceptions. Anxiety and worry are each cousins or family members of fear. They are each related to fear, overdeveloped and gone awry.

Here is a definition of each emotion - fear, anxiety, and worry - included in our study. We will discover them biblically and also learn a little about how we experience them as humans biologically, mentally, and relationally. Fear, anxiety, and worry all are part of that radar system that alerts us to the scary things in the world in which we live.

Fear: An emotion or visceral sense based on the perception that someone or something is threatening, potentially painful, or dangerous

Anxiety: a sense of unease and uncertainty, internal apprehension of the past, present, or future; often connected to higher heart rate, muscle tension, or other physical sensations

Worry: challenging thinking patterns associated with concerns and present or potential problems, such as overthinking, feeling lost in thought, or obsessively trying to find solutions

- What is different about each of these things? What is similar?
- Any ideas or concepts you might add from your own experience of each?

God is responsive to our fear.

Even in their sin, God sent Adam and Eve out into the world clothed in animal skins for coverage and protections from the elements. More than temporary clothes, now God sends us out into the world covered in the clothing of Jesus's love and sacrifice on the cross. We do not go alone. You are covered by God's love, forgiveness, and care for you, not unlike Adam and Eve who were covered by the gift of animal skins which God offered to them in their fear and challenge.

Group questions

- What are some gifts that God gives us to help with the scary things in the world?
- How does the gift of Jesus's love and forgiveness give us hope in our fears?

I don't know what good mosquitoes bring to the world, and to some degree I'm not sure what good fear, worry, and anxiety bring to the world. But I have seen God keep people safe by giving their bodies a radar and a way to process the challenges in the world. There will also be a day when Jesus comes again and makes all things new, according to Rev. 21:5, when fear will be no more and no longer necessary. Until that day, we turn to God in every fear, anxiety, and worry.

Closing prayer

Offer the list of scary things of the world discussed earlier before God. Consider writing the scary things on sticky notes and putting them on the cross as your group prays for God's care and intervention in each thing.

*reference: Emotions & the Gospel (<https://books.cph.org/emotions-and-the-gospel>)

Session 2 - Fear: Finding Safety in a Broken World

Theme passage - 2 Kings 6:15-19

The Old Testament was a rough place to live. The nations certainly had times of peace, but the Old Testament is more often than not a story of God's faithfulness in the battle rather than outside of it.

Fun question: Share another time period you may like to have lived in. What would have been the specific dangers, fears, or challenges during that time?

Jesus identifies the reality of each day's trouble in the Gospels, which we will return to in a later study segment. But each time has its own trouble as well - its own political, health, relational, and safety problems.

Read 2 Kings 6:15-19 below. You can read the full chapter if you'd like more context around who Elisha is (a prophet of God) and the enemy Elisha and the nation of Israel are up against (ancient Syria). Notice who is afraid in the passage and why they might be afraid.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. And Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." And he led them to Samaria.

Defining Fear:

An emotion or visceral sense based on the perception that someone or something is threatening, potentially painful or dangerous

Fear is a fire inside of us. It usually comes up hot and fast and surprising or as a cold creep of apprehension. Fear is the radar inside of us that says, "Something is not safe. We are in danger." Our body releases hormones to help us move into action when this fear radar is set off. The good news is that our bodies also have our reason and our senses to give us more information to help us navigate our fear. Then, in the abundance of God, our body releases a second batch of hormones to help us *recover* or *be restored from* our experience of fear and challenging situations. Good job, God! What an amazing Creator.

Fear in the Bible passage:

What is the fear or trigger confronting Elisha's servant in 2 Kings 6:15-19?

A massive army! Horses and chariots indicate a wealthy army with lots of resources, not a small mass

What is Elisha's servant's response to the fear-trigger in front of him?

Aahhhh! What should we do?!, or the Old Testament version - Alas! What shall we do?

Elisha meets his servant in his response. It would be easy for us to read "Do not be afraid!" as an accusative tone. While our fear might need some accountability, the Hebrew word *tirā*, related to *yare'*, is not accusative but is imperative, the -ing of language. "Do not keep being afraid," or "Do not live in fear," might be ways to help us see the phrase within the context of the story better.

Elisha and his servant had a relationship that seems to be supportive in some way, shape, or form. It is good that the servant can express his fear and that Elisha can receive it. This is how God also responds to us. Elisha also turns to God in prayer, even with his prophetic skill and statement of *"...for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."*

God in our fear:

Create a list of fear-triggers that you can think of in our world around us today. Include anything you can think of that might set off those alarm bells in our system saying "stay safe!" (example: traffic incidents, someone's intimidating stance or striking you, etc)

- What kind of internal and external responses do we have to these things?
- How does God meet us in these problems and fear-triggers?
- Who is a steadying spiritual mentor in your life, or someone who meets you in your fear and helps you know God is with you, whether with words or actions?

Fear is a human response to a challenging world.

Our fears, once acknowledged, can be answered. God is the master, we are the servant, and it is a solid and secure, loving relationship, like the one reflected in the Bible narrative. And more than our master, God in Jesus Christ is our friend.

Our fear is likely overdeveloped in the brokenness of the world and in our own faulty perceptions in original sin. We might jump at anything in fear, but God's answer is the helpful focus, not our own extremely faulty radar.

Turn in the Bible to the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 40 is another place that a form of the Hebrew word *yare'* for *fear* shows up. Read Isaiah 40:1-14* (9-14 if you'd like a shortened segment) and note:

- How does God show up in our fear?
- What is noted in the passage about God that reminds us He is capable and faithful?

Closing Prayer

Dear God, Creator of all things; Jesus, restorer of our souls; and Spirit, active and insightful in my person every day; remind me of Your work and faithfulness in my life. Give me Your perception to see more clearly every day. Help me to navigate this challenging world with You ever by my side and in my soul. Calm my fears. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

**Option: consider printing this long passage and asking small groups and/or individuals to highlight characteristics or components they see of God's response and/or faithfulness in our fears.*

Session 3 - Anxiety: Attending to the Chaos Inside

Theme passage: Mark 6:45-52

The Bible is many things - true, comforting, convicting, encouraging, honest, sometimes surprising, and occasionally, downright weird. You might know the story of Jesus walking on water and calming the storm, but do you know the story of Jesus "chilling out on the water for kicks, contemplating life"?

We like to think that we can put God in a lovely little box and understand Him, and then God surprises us, even shocks us. Awe and wonder are healthy and uniquely spiritual emotions. They remind us that the universe and God are much, much bigger than we are, and that we, while small, are connected to God, not disconnected. Awe and wonder, however, are emotional cousins to fear, anxiety, and worry. In our world and internal system, impacted by brokenness, they can quickly link to one another.

Read Mark 6:45-52 and notice anything odd, confusing, or surprising in the passage.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Do you notice anything "weird," "wonderful," or "surprising" in this narrative?

Jesus sends the disciples out into the sea and enters into a time of contemplation and prayer on the mountain. Jesus notices their challenge (painful headway), and is seemingly responsive, walking on the sea to them. Yet, His intention is to "pass them by." What? I am not sure this all makes sense to us as readers, and it surely did not necessarily make sense to the disciples.

- What were the feelings and thoughts stated in Scripture the disciples experienced?
terrified/troubled, afraid, crying out, thought it was a ghost, utterly astounded, did not understand, etc.

Note: You might also look at the Bible narrative in various translations. The NIV of Mark 6:45-52 uses the word troubled where we see terrified in the ESV.)

Defining Anxiety:

a sense of unease and uncertainty, internal apprehension of the past, present, or future; often connected to higher heart rate, muscle tension, or other physical sensations

If fear is a fire, then anxiety is the stoked coals of the campfire of our emotional life. Fear releases those hormones, comes up inside of us, and is usually resolved quite quickly with new information or a change in the environment. Anxiety, in contrast, sticks around. Anxiety is a pesky younger

cousin who won't leave us alone. Once our internal anxiety thread has begun, it often builds on itself, over time making a thicker rope of anxiety without our knowing until we feel the tug of war or experience something scary or confusing enough that we have to deal with it. Our body may alert us that we need to address something by strengthening that feeling of unease or tension.

Personal question:

- What does anxiety feel like inside of you? Or if that's too personal, what do you think anxiety feels like for different people in different ways?

Our bodies are unique and wonderful and messy in this broken world. God does care for us in our anxiety, by showing us Jesus' presence in the middle of all the uncertainty in the world.

Anxiety in the Bible passage:

The disciples appear to have questions without answers. Let's look at the Bible passage in reverse. Read Mark 6:52 again, and then look at the passage that comes before our story in Mark 6:45-52.

- What story comes before Jesus walks on the water that left the disciples perplexed or confused?

God in our anxiety:

Anxiety is at its core the sense of unease we feel occasionally or frequently within life in a broken world. Anxiety tends to be a crossroads - there is good stuff in our life and then there is junky stuff. Enter stage left, anxiety. We have awe and wonder and remarkable connectedness with God and we also have distance and confusion and just not quite enough capacity to understand how the pieces of life are going to fit together at the moment. The first part of anxiety is the mix of emotions too numerous to sort out at once.

- If you experienced what the disciples did in Mark 6, what different emotions might you have? What questions and thoughts?
- Have there been any times in your life when you have felt simultaneously encouraged, excited, confused, and afraid?

(To be honest - all of young adulthood - particularly the work of determining the next stage of life while discovering your own gifts, skills, and passions, all while focusing on our Baptismal identity in Jesus and living out our vocations possibly feels a bit similar to this mix of emotions)

The second part of anxiety is our reason meeting our senses, including our feelings, to create perceptions and understanding of ourselves, of God, and of the world. First, we have a bunch of emotions at once, and then we can't make sense of the good and hard stuff co-mingling. The meeting of our reason and sense is especially hard when something is outside of our understanding or control. And honestly, that doesn't mean the thing in front of us is even bad, such as Jesus on the water, or Jesus turning a few loaves of bread and fish into a meal for thousands of people, but it does mean that we are likely to have many questions to sort out, along with the emotions of it all.

Our bodies and DNA are a bit messy with original sin's entanglement, and things within us also tend to become overdeveloped - we start to feel anxiety around our anxiety which creates more anxiety. Now anxiety is its own beast inside of us demanding attention, saying over and over again, "We are not ok," even when that is partially or completely false. (And we know it and try to tell ourselves so!)

God loves to meet us in all our complex places. Jesus responds to the disciples, even though He had originally planned to walk on by (weird). Jesus reaches out with compassion and says, *"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."* And he got into the boat with them...

Jesus gets into the boat with us when we are confused, perplexed, troubled, anxious, making painful headway, or in a state of shock and awe.

Anxiety often makes us want to withdraw from life and all the questions. It helps to start with remembering Jesus's response - "It is I!" aka "It's me!" Jesus points out that He is WITH the disciples, not far off. God has not abandoned us in our struggles.

Then, Jesus recognizes the need for strength and courage in the moment - "Take heart!" Some translations actually say, "Take courage!" The Greek terms here refer to Jesus's heart and courage coming toward us, to the Spirit inside of us "radiating warm confidence" or "infusing strength," according to various commentaries and interlinear studies*. "Take heart!" as in Jesus's heart of compassion toward you. Soak it in. Jesus loves you, even in your most challenging moments and gross lack of understanding.

The last step is often the hardest - remain open-hearted to God in the questions. Again, we frequently want to withdraw from the anxiety and struggles of this life. Instead, it helps us stay open-hearted rather than hardening our heart to understanding or to God or the world around us. It's important in those times not to pull away from where God promises to be, in His Word and Sacraments. Even in the anxiety, we shouldn't withdraw from worship, from confession, and from the community of people in your congregation.

We try to hold what we understand and know alongside what we don't understand or know in a situation. We look to God's Word to tell us about who God is and His promises, even if we don't see it right now. It helps us hold what we can control with what we can't, all while we are connected to this big God of the universe who loves us so personally in Christ Jesus and brings us courage, confidence, and revelation as we need it.

Activity + Skill

See the umbrella chart of God meeting us in our Control/Can't Control moments (diagram attached). Note that God's love and knowledge are always the bigger background to our challenges. What God knows and understands, and Jesus's warm confidence are wrapped around and in everything we might try to discern.

Choose a challenge or struggle in front of you, small, medium, or large - picking a class, picking a career, saying yes or no to a date, saying yes or no to continuing a long-term friendship, etc. etc. - and use the areas of the chart to map out what you know alongside what you don't, and to also see God and His knowing meeting us in our anxiety.

Closing Prayer

Lord, at times our problems are many, at other times they seem small or insignificant. Lord, no matter our challenges, may Your warm confidence, Your love, and Your ultimate knowing be in and through everything in our lives and days.

**References include - Mark commentaries, biblehub interlinear, Strong's concordance, and Helps Word studies*

Session 4 - Worry: Overthinking at Its Finest

Theme passage - 1 Peter 5; Hebrews 12:1-3

Our brains are miraculous organs. I once listened to a podcast with a neuroscientist who was pressed to answer the question of how much we knew about our brains. The neuroscientist reported a shockingly complex number and utilized the metaphor describing said number as a pinkie fingernail amount in relation to the rest of our bodies. Look at your pinkie fingernail, then take in all 4.5-6.5 feet of you. Our brains are not only miraculous but also quite mysterious.

Our brains are the thought center of our bodies. While consciousness and our mental processes as a whole aren't only held in our brain, our brains are the workhorse of our thoughts. And the art of *overthinking* is worry. Again, anything developed by God can be overdeveloped in brokenness. Thinking is a gift. Contemplating something for a time is even a good practice - we contemplate God's Word, we pause and think before making decisions, we let a thought simmer before blurting something with our tongue. Worry, however, is a pattern of thought related to our desire or inner work towards fixing something, but our fixing becomes over-focus. We end up accidentally or purposefully elevating the one thing. The Bible uniquely reminds us that elevating one thing beyond God isn't good for us. In worry, we also lose concern for other things; this can impact our relationships, our work or vocations, and our mental health.

Defining worry:

challenging thinking patterns associated with concerns and present or potential problems, such as overthinking, feeling lost in thought, or obsessively trying to find solutions

Worry feels like running the hamster wheel of life rather than the race of life. Read Hebrews 12:1-3 and apply this passage to the worries of our life. Jesus came even for the seemingly silliest worries, as well as the "bigger" reasons of eternity and heaven and relationship with God, and to free us from the mental gymnastics of life. Worry and life's over-all challenges are too heavy for us to carry, so Christ carries them with us and for us.

Activity Part 1: As a group or on your own, use sticky notes to list all the worries of life you can think of, one worry per sticky note. Put them in a pile or on a wall somewhere in the room for later. (We'll come back to these worries.)

Worry in Scripture:

Read 1 Peter 5:1-11 (5-7 for a shorter passage):

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look around the whole chapter and answer the following questions*:

- What is the vocation (role) of the readers to whom this letter is written?
Those who believe in Jesus in Asia Minor were living as believers in a culture that persecutes and isolates them. They are called exiles because they were not where they belong in heaven.
- What life stage or age are the readers of the original letter?
They are both younger and older.
- Who were the original recipients of 1st Peter? What relationship did the original readers of the letter share with one another?
The original recipients were all believers in Jesus coming from a variety of backgrounds. They shared both their gift of faith and the challenges in the world around them.
- What kind of problems, or worries, did the readers of the original letter have before them?
The believers were suffering persecution and trials.
(Skim 1 Peter 4 to expand this question. *)

*A Study Bible often helps with questions like these, or a quick internet search of reputable sites is a secondary option.

Activity option

Check out the whole book of 1 Peter for an expanded Bible treasure hunt, possibly with a timer while skimming the text.

Life is full of challenges, temptations, sufferings, and gunk. It is also full of many good things that God gifts and provides. In the gunk of life, it is easy to worry so much that we miss the good stuff. Remember, worry overemphasizes one problem, rather than seeing the whole story. The ESV in 1 Peter 5:7 says, "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you;" the NLT says, "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you;" the KJV says, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."

The Greek word or phrasing for *anxiety* or *care* in the passage emphasizes that problem with worry where we separate everything else out, focusing on only our problem, the part becomes more important or at least fixed and separated from the whole. Our view of life becomes limited in our human way and in our sin of excluding God while we try to fix things ourselves, rather than including God and considering the big picture, the eternal picture of what really matters most.

God in our Worry:

Note God's response to our worries, our anxieties, and our fears...

God CARES for them. Ding, ding, ding! Blow the celebration horn. This seems like such a little promise, but "I am cared for" is no little promise. "I am cared for" means:

- I am not alone in this.
- I do not have to solve this.
- I can ask for help.
- I will not be crushed under the weight of this thing.

1 Peter 5:10 gives a really cool name for God - "the God of all grace..." God has all the grace we need to walk and run through this life. Jesus Christ death on our behalf connects us to all this grace available to us. Read Hebrews 12:1-3 again to practice a skill we call "Widen the Lens.*"

What do we have available to us, according to Hebrews 12:1-3, in all of the problems and day-to-day needs of life? Look for more answers than "Jesus"... *What* about Jesus? *What* else? *Who* else?

Activity/Skill

Widen the Lens - consider one worry from your sticky notes of worries. Consider that worry like through a camera lens. Zoom in close to the worry and discuss why this worry is a problem. Then zoom out your camera lens. Apply the Hebrews 12 gifts to this worry and describe how they work beside this worry. Zoom out more, describe God's care for this worry. Zoom out more, what else is there in life besides this worry, good and bad? Zoom out more, imagine God holding all the things of this world and life in His hands and this worry as part of all of that.

Jesus carries the baggage of life alongside of us, with and for us. God cares for you. If you'd like a stronger reminder, take all of your worry sticky notes and bring them to God's altar, add them to the prayer requests at your church for the week, or nail each of them to a cross. Cast, throw off, hand over those cares to Jesus. It's ok if you need to practice widening the lens every day, most of us do. God has won the battle for our worries too, in Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, sometimes our minds do miraculous things and sometimes they get going and run the hamster wheel of worry. Please guide my mind to Your grace. Carry my baggage with and for me. Help me to see the forest of life through the trees of this moment. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**Widen the Lens is a part of Dialectical Behavior Therapy, its manuals and handbooks, and also just a good idea that God thought of first (see Luke 12:22-27)*

Session 5 - Caring for Others in Fear, Anxiety, and Worry

Theme passage - Acts 2:1-21 or Philippians 4

When I was a little kid, everything seemed large:
the trees outside my window at night
the strangers buzzing all around me in the store
the shower head and its torrential downpour
the language of adults floating down to my ears wherever we went

I can see myself sitting cross-legged in front of the tv, soaking in the words of Big Bird or Mr. Rogers...

"Of course the world feels big when you are small!"

"Of course you have questions!"

"Of course you need a hug, to be held, to be warm and safe and less frightened."

Of course goes a long way when anxiety presses in on our little lives.

Of course also goes a long way for teen and adult experiences of anxiety as well. *Of course* helps us feel connected and less alone. *Of course* recognizes the bigness of the world and our feelings of smallness, even when the thing in front of us maybe isn't really scary to someone else, or when we look at the thing objectively.

Anxiety, worry, and fear are messy emotions. Anxiety and its cousins contain layer upon layer of biochemical, emotional, cognitive, and yes, spiritual undertones. Western culture often likes to oversimplify our concerns - "Think positively! Courage over fear! Seize the day! Believe in yourself!" All well-meaning messages that whitewash complex emotions rather than practicing connection and the one-anotherness we were intended for in God's design.

Philippians 4 is one of the primary passages in Scripture we tend to run to as a church when anxiety emerges among us. Read Philippians 4:4-7 and note what the passage has to say about anxiety and God's promises regarding anxiety:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What promises of God did you notice? Awesome.

I also think sometimes we hear this passage as a command of God, which it may be - the Law, reminding us that we are anxious and feeble, tempted to turn from God in our anxiety or relying on ourselves too heavily. We might hear and see a finger-pointing God, rather than a God who sent His Son, whom He loved, because He also loved us all so dearly. God speaks to us with firmness, yes, but also always as the tender parent He is to us, having created us in His image and adopted us in Christ.

Without an assumed harsh tone for God, or at least with the assumption of the grace and love of Christ surrounding every bit of God's Law in me, let me tell you what I hear in this passage:

- God is at hand, with us now and coming back for us in the restoration of all things.
- God brings us joy in Christ.
- We have reasonableness and objective senses alongside our less reasonable ones.

- We don't *have* to be anxious or live in our anxiety; we have prayer as an option to put it somewhere.
- We have prayer and connection to God in both thanksgiving and requests for what we need.
- In Jesus, peace watches over us in our hearts, even when it doesn't make sense to us or we can't understand it.

If we read the rest of Philippians 4, we would hear more of those important promises also related to our fears, anxieties, and worries, including:

- Of course, this world is hard. I, Paul, see and experience it as well. Yet, God is with us and we are with one another.

Read Philippians 4 and notice any language that reveals Paul's challenges as he shared the Gospel and went about his life in the 1st century*.

(Including but not limited to: v. 1 - longing for people far from us, v. 2 - people not getting along, v. 3 - laboring, v. 10 - concern, v. 11 - being in need, v. 12 - being low and/or hungry, v. 14 - trouble)

Now notice this: Paul's answer over and over in Philippians 4 to the many and great challenges of the world and its concerns, needs, troubles, and anxieties is *one another*. This is the great gift of the Church, and a different way of responding to anxiety and troubles when someone shares them. In the Church, in the community of Jesus Christ we can offer the "witness" of God by offering our "witness" with people.

We are not intended to go it alone and that is one message of the Gospel of Christ that we can bring to people, in order to extend care in their challenges and anxieties. We don't have to solve people's problems or know the next step or even the "right" words. We can say things like:

- I'm here.
- God is here, even when it feels like He isn't.
- The world is big, and I'm thankful that God is big. We need God's bigness sometimes.
- I don't know what will happen. I do know God doesn't leave us no matter what happens.
- I'm glad you told me. I have fears and anxieties too. It's nice to know we can talk about them together even when we may not have an answer.
- I wonder where God's grace is in this situation. I know we are never apart from God's grace, so maybe we can look for that grace together.
- Of course, you feel overwhelmed (anxious, worried, afraid ... fill in the blank)! This is one reason we need God. Life is huge and scary sometimes.

P.S. - These may be cheesy and they are all things I say regularly as a therapist. No shame. Cheesy happens to go a long way when we feel gunky, especially if cheesy also helps us feel heard by others and like God is listening to us as well.

Other, less cheesy ways to practice witness when someone is feeling afraid, anxious, worried, or troubled:

- Check in on them with a text, a call, or any kind of message, especially one that doesn't require a reply back, but says in different words (or these exact ones), "Hey, I'm here and so is God."

- Try some food with a nice sticky note with words or a smiley face. Food feels nurturing and reminds us that our needs are provided for in weird and wonderful ways.
- Sit with the person and promise no one has to say anything. This can also be an invitation to a movie or to look at water moving on a lake or to listen to music.
- Send a social media post or video that normalizes how hard the world can be and is also hopeful.
- ... Insert good ways to be with a friend or stranger here ...

Processing questions:

- What practice of "witness" is most helpful to you in your fears, troubles, anxieties, or worries?
- Who has been someone who has been there for you when you needed to know that you were not alone?
- How can we remind each other of God's promises and presence?
This can include worshiping, spending time in God's Word, and praying with others.
- Particularly, who has been with you and shown you the Body of Christ is a community who walks with one another in the challenges of life?

Closing prayer activity

Pray with and for each other.

Each person prays silently or out loud for the person on their right, left, or through some other random identification.

This prayer experience can include sharing any cares or concerns if your group is in a place of safety with vulnerability.

If you are on your own, make a list of people who are like the Philippians for you, showing up in your needs. Give thanks for them and then return prayers on their behalf.

A final thought

Of course God invites us to be tended to, to sort, and to heal in all of our troubles and worries, fears, and concerns. The many layers of anxiety are never outside of God's care.

**Option: consider printing this long passage and asking small groups and/or individuals to highlight characteristics or components they see of Paul's labors in one color and God's response or faithfulness in another.*