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Goodbye Anxiety

Turning Worry into Action

Finding Peace through Prayer



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Turning Worry into Action – How to Worry Less and Do More

1. Make a daily appointment to share your worries with God.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:6-7

“Every evening I turn my worries over to God. He’s going to be up all night anyway.” ~Mary C. Crowley

After recovering from an anxiety disorder I learned that I carry too many needless burdens in my mind. Both before and during the time I suffered from anxiety and panic attacks, my mind was continually in the business of collecting up worries.

In my mind, the worries of the hour would be compounded by the worries of the next hour. The worries of the day added to those of the next day. The list of worries grew larger and larger with each passing week and month. My worries were like a snowball that kept getting bigger and bigger as it rolled down the hill collecting snow.

I needed a way to release my worries.

A therapist I saw during my anxiety disorder suggested I practice making daily appointments for worry. She told me to pick one hour toward the end of each day for worrying. She also told me to keep a notepad with me during the day and write down everything I caught myself worrying about. She said that recording my worries to deal with later would help me keep my mind on the task at hand.

In the Journal of the American Medical Association (4/13/99), there are research findings that suggest that writing about stressful things that worry you can actually reduce stress-related symptoms. By writing down what you are worried about, you are likely to feel in more control of it.

This simple exercise did help some. Something about having my worries written down to think about later reduced anxiety in the present moment.

Still, I felt I needed something more. I took this exercise one step further. Instead of making a daily appointment for worry, I made a daily appointment for prayer. That’s when this exercise became really powerful.

Each evening when the hour came for worrying, I got out my list and presented each item before God, asking for help and wisdom. At the end of each prayer hour, I would rip up my list to begin a new one.

As I prayed each night and ripped up my list of worries, something indescribable happened. I felt a power greater than myself lifting away each concern until my burden of worry seemed lighter. I felt a peace come over me that I could not explain. I really did experience a peace that transcended my understanding - so much so that I can hardly write about it.

After time spent in God's presence, I would realize how small some of my worries were against the vast expanse of eternity. The bigger worries, I discovered, God cared about me enough to handle.

Most of us don't worry as much as children as we do in our adult life. That's because there are lots of things children just leave to their parents. For instance, children don't worry about having enough money to make the house payment or buy groceries. Instead of worrying, children just naturally trust their parents for most of the important things they need.

The more I devoted myself to daily prayer, the more I learned to trust God like a child. The more I trusted God like a child for my most important needs, the more my mind felt free. Most of the things I worried about were beyond my control anyway.

Try it for yourself. If you find yourself struggling with worry, do what I did. Empty your mind onto paper, writing down each worry as it pops into your mind. Then, at an appointed time each day, set the list before God and pray about each item on it. See what happens. See if you don't feel the same peace I did.

From experience I know we have a God who will take our anxiety and worry away from us. In its place, God offers us peace. I don't know how. He just does it. What I do know is that we allow Him to do it by daily prayer.

Jesus tells us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." - Matthew 11:28-30

2. Transform worry into action plans.

"Problems do not really exist. Problems are simply illusions, they are just decisions waiting to be made." - Dr. Robert Schuller.

During your daily appointment for prayer, ask God to show you which of your worries you can do something about. Sometimes worry is just a signal from God that you need to make an important decision or take some action. Decisive action is the most effective way to counter worry.

Here are some steps for using your worry to create an action plan. These ideas originally appeared in the Worry Control Workbook by Mary Ellen Copeland in 1998.

- Write down the situation that is worrying you.
- Pray for God to show you possible actions you might take. Write down every action that comes to mind for improving the situation.
- Evaluate each action with regard to how realistic it is. Put a star next to any action that you could take fairly easily in the near future. Put a question mark next to actions that you think you might be able to do but present more of a challenge. Put an X next to actions you think are impossible.
- Now make an action plan for taking every action you put a star next to. List each action with a date next to it. Make a contract with yourself to follow this action plan.
- When you have finished the tasks you put a star next to, move on to the ones with a question mark next to them - the ones that are more difficult to do. Put these into an action plan with dates for each action. Make a contract with yourself to complete these also.

- Prayerfully re-evaluate some of the items you put an X next to and thought you couldn't do. Maybe after completing the items with stars and question marks, some of these look more possible. If there is any action on this list that you think you can do now, make an action plan to do it within a time frame.

Remember: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." – Philippians 4:13

3. Live in 24-hour capsules.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. – Matthew 6:34

"I've developed a new philosophy... I only dread one day at a time."

--Charlie Brown

Can you still remember the "syllabus shock" you felt as a student when you saw a list of everything you had to do for a whole semester. Looking at a list of homework, papers, projects, and tests for a whole semester is too much for most students to handle all at once.

Those of us who suffer from anxiety tend to look at life this way. We generate anxiety from thinking about the challenges and responsibilities of too many days at once. Action plans can overwhelm us because we feel like we need to do everything all at once.

To ease the syllabus shock, most students schedule tasks out over the days, weeks, and months of the semester on a calendar. This allows a student to focus on one day's tasks at a time, which usually lessens anxiety.

In his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:34), Jesus encourages us to live life this way - one day at a time, one task at a time. If you feel overwhelmed by too many challenges or tasks, just make a list of things you can realistically do in one day and limit your focus to that.

However, taking life one day at a time flies in the face of human nature. The mind is prone to wandering too far into the future, worrying about things we cannot do anything about today. Knowing that looking too far into the future would cause undue anxiety, Jesus advised us not to look beyond the boundary of the current 24-hour period.

In telling us not to worry about tomorrow, Jesus assures us that God will take care of us. Earlier in His sermon, Jesus reminds us that God takes care of birds that do not worry about gathering food in barns. God also clothes the grass of the field with lilies, even though the grass doesn't worry about what it will wear. The same God that makes sure the birds are fed and the grass of the field is clothed with beautiful lilies will make sure we have the things that we need, too (Matthew 6:26-30).

Taking life one day at a time is an act of trusting God for the things we need.

When I suffered from an anxiety disorder, it helped me to trust God and contain my thinking to 24-hour capsules. This meant compartmentalizing my life into one-day sections. As long as I didn't think past a 24-hour boundary, my mind could always handle the next moment, the next hour, or the next part of the day.

If you can look at the challenges of your life this way, you are less likely to be overwhelmed by anxiety. If you can put your trust in God about the future, just focus on the tasks of the day and not look beyond

them, God can grant you peace in the activity of the present.

Take it from a recovered agoraphobic like me - life is no more than a series of days, hours, and ultimately, moments. With God, we can handle most anything for a moment, no matter how difficult it may seem.

4. Worry about the right thing - obeying God (which is something you can control).

But seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all of these things will be given to you as well. – Matthew 6:33

Peace comes when we make obeying God more important than how things turn out.

To overcome anxiety about the future, make the big question of your life “did I obey God?” instead of “did things turn out the way I wanted them to?”

Two reasons:

- 1) You can control whether or not you obey God – but you can't control future outcomes.
- 2) God promises that if we seek his kingdom first, he will take care of the details (if they really matter).

The second time I ever taught this lesson (in 2008), I got sick and behind in my work. I got so distracted with trying to get well and catch up at work, I did not realize I was forgetting to spend time with God or read the Bible.

As Sunday morning approached, I got worried about teaching this class. My main worry was coming up with a new way to overcome worry about the future. I was worried that if I shared the exact same strategies for overcoming worry as the first time, the people who had gone through the class before would get bored. I went to bed Friday night totally worried that I didn't have any new ideas about how not to worry about the future.

When I woke up Saturday morning, it all became clear to me. God showed me that I was worried about the wrong thing. I was worried more about thinking of a new idea for class than about obeying God and spending time reading the Bible.

When I focused on obeying God (by reading the Bible Saturday morning), instead of trying to come up with a new idea for class – I felt peace. It felt right to do what God wanted me to do and put the future back in God's hands. Plus, I realized that God had taught me a lesson about anxiety to share through this experience.

So it is with many things in life, the more we focus on doing what God wants instead of how things will turn out, the less anxiety we will feel over the future.

Saturday morning, God inspired me with a story in **Daniel 3** where three men find peace in obeying God, even though it might cost them their lives. These men are a good example of being more concerned about obedience than their future.

If Action Is Not Possible.....Here Are 6 More Strategies for Handling Worry

1. Do not buy into the myth that worrying about something will help stop it from happening.

“A day of worry is more exhausting than a day of work.” ~John Lubbock

People who tend to worry a lot act as if worrying about a threatening event will actually prevent it from happening. This myth is false. This type of thinking is magical and superstitious. If you stop worrying about something, that doesn't increase the chance of it happening. Therefore, the first step to managing worry is to acknowledge that worrying has no effect on reality and engage in some more effective ways for controlling worry.

2. Recognize and accept the limits of your control.

“God, give me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things which I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.” - Reinhold Niebuhr

A lot of worry and stress comes from trying to control events and situations that you really have little control over. Chronic worriers tend to overestimate the amount of influence and control they have over external events. They act as if they are more responsible for events and situations that they really are.

You can use this exercise to recognize the limits of your control. Thoughtfully consider the amount of control you really have over the event or situation you are worried about. Then rank the amount of control using this point scale:

0 = no control

1 = a little control

2 = lots of control

Next time you are worrying, ask yourself, “How much control do I really have over this situation?” If the answer is “not much,” or “only a little,” then ask yourself why you are so worried about it. Just acknowledging and accepting the limited control you have over a situation can help reduce your worry.

3. Make a realistic risk assessment.

***“I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.”
~Mark Twain***

A large percentage of worry comes from inaccurate risk assessment and catastrophic thinking. People who are prone to worry tend to grossly exaggerate the chance of negative events happening. In most cases, the chances of the dreadful event you fear actually happening are very slim. Making a more realistic evaluation of the chances of a feared event happening is a way to tone down worry. To do this you might ask yourself:

“What are the real chances of this happening?”

“How often has this happened before?”

“Would I be able to produce enough evidence to convince another person that this might happen?”

“If I had to bet a thousand dollars for or against this happening, which way would I bet?”

You can reduce your worry by estimating more accurate probabilities of the event you most fear actually happening.

“If I had my life to live over, I would perhaps have more actual troubles but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.” ~Don Herold

4. Focus on the here and now

“Anxiety is the space between the “Now” and the “Then.” - Richard Abell

Anxiety is the distance between the present moment and wherever our mind is. The more we reflect too much on the days of our lives and let our minds creep too far into the future, the more we make ourselves vulnerable to anxiety.

The person who focuses on the activity of the present is truly blessed. About this type of person, a wise teacher once wrote: ***“He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.” (Ecclesiastes 5:20)***

Living moment by moment, focusing on what you are doing in the present, is the smoothest way to travel through life. If you can do this, God will keep you occupied with “gladness of heart.”

If you need help concentrating on the present moment, here are some questions you can ask yourself:

“Who is here with me?”

“What am I touching?”

“What do I smell?”

“What do I hear?”

“What can I see?”

“What is around me?”

5. Change “what if?” to “so what if?”

Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow. ~Swedish Proverb

One of the ways to get over worrying about the future and “what if?” thinking is to practice getting comfortable with the very worst thing that could happen. When I suffered from panic attacks, my worst fear was that I would pass out. When I could finally say “so what if I passed out?” the fear of having a panic attack slowly started to go away.

Exercise: Write down the worst things that you fear and then write “so what if” in front of each fear. Practice saying your “so-what-if’s” every time you feel anxiety arising.

Finding Peace Through Prayer – How to Overcome Anxiety About the Future

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, WITH THANKSGIVING, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:6-7

1. “Do not be anxious about anything “

Why does the Bible tell us not to be anxious?

To make us feel bad or like we are sinners if we worry about something? NO!

Because the devil can string us along with small worries to steal our relationship with God

Anxiety, stress, and worry steal our relationship with God minute by minute, and rob of us of the peace God wants us to have. The devil does not need to do anything big or dramatic to steal our relationship with God and steal our peace. **All the devil has to do is to distract us moment to moment, day to day with small worries to keep our minds away from God.**

The devil can use big worries, too.

Our relationship with God can be also be stolen when we get in a long-term situation that seems overwhelming.

Anxiety slowly kills your spiritual life and erodes your relationship with God.

Maybe you have a big worry, or source of stress and anxiety in your life right now. Maybe some of you have dealt with a major unexpected challenge this year. Maybe you are in a situation where you feel overwhelmed. Then you know how **anxiety can slowly kill your spiritual life and put you at a distance from God.**

That’s why the Bible tells us not to be “anxious about anything” but to be honest, I hated this verse for a long time because I did not know how to practice it.

My mom put Philippians 4:6-7 on a bulletin board above my bed during a recovery from ulcerative colitis. I had nine months in bed to get familiar with every word and meditate on this verse. I noticed some things I never noticed before. Now I want to share with you God’s prescription for receiving peace through prayer.

2. “but in everything, by prayer and petition.....present your requests to God.”

Instead of being anxious, God invites us to petition him in prayer. **Petition is an important part of prayer.** We do not need to be shy about asking God for things.

Sometimes we struggle to take care of stressful situations on our own. Sometimes asking God is the last thing we think of. It can be hard to believe God cares enough to act on our behalf. But God says if we ask – God will open the doors for us in life, provided they are in God’s will.

“Cast all your anxiety on him (God) because he cares for you.” - 1 Peter 5:7

“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” - Matthew 21:22

“You may ask me (Jesus) for anything in my name, and I will do it.” - John 14:13

“Come to me (Jesus) all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” - Matthew 11:28,30

3. Petition alone does not equal peace - petition alone makes for a self-centered prayer that creates more anxiety

When our prayers become long on petition and short on praise and thanksgiving, it indicates that we:

- We run the risk of creating more anxiety by focusing on what is wrong, missing, or not satisfying.
- We unknowingly tell God that we want the things He can do for us more than we want Him. This can put distance between us and God which causes anxiety.

Two types of faulty thinking can lead to prayers that are petition alone:

- “Should” thinking: Holding a rigid, inflexible view of how we, other people, or circumstances should be – and feeling anxiety when our expectations are not met.
- “Yeah, but” thinking: Focusing on the negative part of something to the exclusion of the positive.

When we think in these ways we are more likely to ask God to do things for us and less likely to be thankful for the things that God has already done. Even if God grants us our requests – if we are living a need-focused life with little gratitude, we will just think of something else to ask for and become anxious about receiving it.

4. “with THANKSGIVING, present your requests to God.”

Petition plus THANKSGIVING equals peace.

Gratitude is also an important part of prayer. Balancing petition and thanksgiving in our prayers leads to a more complete relationship with God that produces the peace beyond understanding, independent of circumstances, that God wants us to experience. When we balance petition with thanksgiving in our prayers, we tell God that:

- We don’t just take Him or the good things in our lives for granted.
- We want Him as much or more than the things He can do for us.

In the story of Jesus healing ten lepers – nine lepers received the benefits of what Jesus could do for them (physical healing), one leper received Jesus himself (Luke 17:11-19).

The story tells us that one leper “saw” he was healed and came back, threw himself at Jesus’ feet and praised Him. The Greek word for “saw” is *eido* which means “to turn over in your mind.” This kind of seeing meant having insight that comes from thinking about what you see visually. This leper thought deeply about what Jesus had done for him and came back to engage in a more complete relationship with Jesus that

included gratitude. Jesus told him, "Your faith has made you well" but he was already cleansed from leprosy. He received spiritual cleansing, too.

More thinking = More thanking. Petition comes naturally. Thanksgiving takes thinking.

5. "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding"

Petition plus thanksgiving is God's prescription for deep, lasting peace.

"Peace that transcends all understanding" = peace in bad times, peace amidst pain. Peace that does not depend on getting what we want or external circumstances.

6. "will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

When Paul wrote these words, he was in jail and had Roman guards on each side of him because there were people who wanted to kill him. The devil wants to kill us with anxiety – spiritually. If we balance thanks with petition in our prayers, God promises that His peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. So anxiety will not slowly kill our spirits.

