



Soul Care

STRESS, WORRY & ANXIETY

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Suggested Morning Schedule:

9:00-9:30am	Prep Time
9:30-10:30am	Diving Deeper: Scripture and Prayer
10:30-11:15am	Making it Practical: Read Article, "High Anxiety"
11:15am-12:00pm	Closing Prayer & Worship Time
12:00-1:00pm	Soul Care Debrief

Share with someone what God has spoken to you today.

9:00-9:30: Prep Time

Find a quiet place that will allow you to focus on God. Here's a couple of leading questions to start you off:

1. Are there any circumstances preventing you from being completely present with Jesus this morning? Take a minute to offer those to God.
2. In what areas of your personal and professional life are you experiencing the greatest amount of stress, worry or anxiety? Take a minute to offer those to God.

**ARE YOU TIRED? WORN OUT? BURNED OUT ON RELIGION?
COME TO ME. GET AWAY WITH ME AND YOU'LL RECOVER
YOUR LIFE. I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO TAKE A REAL REST.
WALK WITH ME AND WORK WITH ME -WATCH HOW I DO IT.
LEARN THE UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF GRACE. I WON'T LAY
ANYTHING HEAVY OR ILL-FITTING ON YOU. KEEP
COMPANY WITH ME AND YOU'LL LEARN TO LIVE
FREELY AND LIGHTLY.**

- Matthew 11:28

Prep for your time with God today.

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.

- psalm 95:10

9:30-10:30: Diving Deeper: Scripture and Prayer

Read Psalm 13

Reflection questions:

1. What in this Psalm spoke to you? Which verse(s) or phrase(s) stuck out to you?
2. Reflect on a time when - like David - you experienced what felt like God's absence in your life. What was that season like for you?
3. Do you have any questions for God about the season you're currently in? What do you think God is trying to say to you in it?
4. Re-read the Psalm.

Meditation and Prayer

If you'd like some other Scriptures to ponder on this topic, read Joshua 1:9, Psalm 23:4, Psalm 27:1, Psalm 56:4, Matthew 6:34 and John 14:27.

10:30-11:15: Making it Practical

Read the attached article, "*High Anxiety*." Make some notes of how you can apply it. Here are some additional helpful thoughts:

1. Give up the illusion of control.

Understand that these things spring from attempts to control the future/past. Realize those attempts are a waste of your energy. Acknowledge God's power to control the future and transform the past.

2. Turn worries into prayers.

Decide that instead of worrying about it, you'll pray about it.

3. Discipline your mind

Pay attention to what you're choosing to think about. Worry is a choice. Philippians 4:8 is a good measuring stick and filter when we worry or are anxious. Ask the Holy Spirit to renew your mind in these areas.

4. Change what you can and let go of what you can't change.

Recognize the difference between these two. Do what you can to solve the solvable and stop trying to change what is beyond your control. Pray about it all and trust God.

5 Tell somebody.

God didn't intend for you to carry that by yourself. We're made to bring somebody close and let them help bear the load. Humble yourself and allow someone in to speak life into you and help move you forward.

6. Look for the meaning in your suffering.

Ask God to give you His perspective and show you how you can grow in it.

11:15-12:00: Closing Prayer and Worship Time

I don't know what it is you're already worrying about as the new year has begun. God wants to handle that. Give it to Him.

In Amy Simpson's book, "*Anxious*," she gives some reasons why we never need worry:

- God is unlimited
- God has plans of His own
- God is good
- God calls us to joy and peace
- God calls us to trust
- God knows where we live
- God made us and knows what we need
- God is in control
- Ultimately, only God is worthy of fear
- God lives in the future

Worship God for who He is.

WHY TRUST GOD?
HE NEVER FAILS
HE NEVER LEAVES US
HE NEVER DISAPPOINTS US
HE LOVES US
UNCONDITIONALLY
HE'S THE CREATOR
OF ALL THINGS
HE TRANSFORMS US
FROM THE INSIDE
HE KNOWS EVERYTHING
HE FORGIVES OUR SIN
HE RULES THE FUTURE
HE IS EVERYWHERE
HE IS GOOD
HE IS GREAT
HE IS

HIGH ANXIETY

**“LEADERS HAVE LOTS OF REASONS TO WORRY
AND ONE OVERRIDING REASON NOT TO.”**

- Amy Simpson

Picture yourself at your next gathering of church leaders. As an icebreaker, the emcee asks everyone to turn to a neighbor and say what's going well in your ministry. With a smile, you turn to the person next to you and describe your excitement over the people from the neighborhood who've started attending the church.

Then the emcee says, "Now tell the person next to you what's keeping you up at night." What would you say?

What would you think if your neighbor turned to you and said, "Nothing. I've got no worries"? In a roomful of leaders, that would be pretty weird. We're not sure we'd believe such an answer. Worry is everywhere. As I wrote in my book *Anxious*, "If you aren't worried, you are either (1) dead, (2) comatose, or (3) seriously out of step with our culture." The majority of Americans say they live under moderate to high stress levels. This constant stress has many consequences for our health, including high blood pressure, obesity, sleeplessness, fatigue, headaches, depression, and digestion problems.

The American Psychological Association indicates that more than half of Americans report stress-related health problems. In a 2010 survey, 40 percent of people said that in the past month, stress had caused them to overeat or eat unhealthy foods. Nearly one-third said they had skipped a meal because of stress, and more than 25 percent said they had been unable to sleep.

Worry is not only common—it's expected. As long as worry doesn't become "excessive" (a term with no clear definition) or interfere with productivity and social sparkle, it's widely considered a healthy sign of life and an indicator of engagement. After all, important and hard-working people have a lot to worry about. The good parents are the ones who care enough to worry over their kids. People who take life seriously are easily recognizable for their furrowed brows. Worry is fashionable, and we are suspicious of people who don't worry.

Leaders are certainly affected by this. We feel the weight of the world (or at least part of it) on our shoulders. We believe the hype about our own responsibilities. And we admit that we worry that if we don't seem worried, people will think we're not taking our job seriously. Or we're not doing anything important. Or we've lost our edge or our motivation or we just don't care.

But Christians, even Christian leaders, are called to live differently. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his listeners not to worry but to focus on God's priorities and trust God to provide what they needed: "Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matt. 6:34). When he sent his disciples forth to do ministry (Matt. 10), he told them four times not to worry or be afraid. During his Last Supper before his trial and crucifixion (John 14), he twice told them not to be "troubled," using a word that is also translated elsewhere as "worried".

Paul wrote, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything" (Phil. 4:6-7). Peter instructed Christians to "give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you" (1 Peter 5:7). The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) describes a life in direct contrast to what worry produces.

Like other Christians, leaders are supposed to be people of peace, trust, faith, and joy. So why all the worry?

There are at least three big reasons we succumb to worry.

1. Our world is full of reasons to worry.

Let's face it: there's a lot to worry about. From a purely human point of view, there are only two really good reasons not to worry: (1) it's bad for us and (2) it doesn't do any good. Those two reasons usually crumble under the avalanche of bad news that comes our way each day (each hour!). Never have we had more exposure to what is wrong with the human race and to the brokenness of our world.

In such a world, it makes perfect sense to worry—to be consumed by worry... unless a great, powerful, loving God is in control. Unless someone much wiser than us, unflustered and unthreatened, asks us to tuck ourselves under a sheltering wing and replace our worry with trust (Psalm 91).

2. Our culture pressures us to worry.

Ever stop to think about who profits from our worry? The exaggerated fears based on urban legends, media sensationalism, and misinformation. Sometimes the things that scare us are manufactured or exaggerated by people who have something to gain from our worry—the more we worry, the more viewers they have, the more readers they win, the more people are interested in buying products or donating money to supposedly solve the problems they've got us so worried about. We wind up paying the price of worry (hurting ourselves and compromising our ability to live with purpose and intention) to profit someone else.

We also face peer pressure to worry. As the saying goes, misery loves company. Worried people want others to worry with them, and they mistrust people who keep their boats out of that current.

Bad things happen. People quit. Balls drop. Conflict erupts. In such a world, worry feels necessary. But we overlook another reality: God is at work even in worrisome situations.

If we don't give in, we are profoundly countercultural. And rowing against the flow can require tremendous energy. Sometimes it's easier to just give in and worry along with everyone else. Sometimes it's more comfortable not to question why we feel we should worry. So we ignore Jesus' call for a mindset different from that of people who do not believe (Luke 12:30-31).

3. We have an inflated sense of our own importance and control.

Leaders often behave as if everything is up to us—because at least a part of us believes this is true. We believe no one else can do what we can do, no one has a better idea, everything will fall apart if our vigilance slips. We think it's up to us to solve every crisis, and we truly believe God needs us.

But God does not need us—although he graciously grants us a role in his grand redemption story if we will take it. Without us, the planets will not go off their orbits—they do not revolve around us.

Human beings have never had more resources at their disposal than now. We are accustomed to having solutions or knowing people who have the solutions, and we're extremely uncomfortable when faced with situations in which we are truly powerless. We feel we can and must do something, so we worry, because it feels like doing something. But it's actually doing nothing, cloaked in a destructive disguise. It's a gift from the one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy, and it has no part in the abundant life Jesus offers (John 10:10).

Let It Go

Worry is bad for leaders. It causes us to make bad decisions. It motivates us to focus on self-soothing rather than serving others. It stops us from taking risks we should take and from listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Worried people tend to take others down with them in the emotional spiral. This is leadership at its least effective.

Consider instead the influence of a leader who is at peace, able to face reality without quivering, firmly planted in faith, clear-headed, well-rested, courageous, and creative. A leader who works heartily and diligently and is content to let others carry what is theirs to carry and let God retain ownership of what belongs to him. How can you be responsible for results (as leaders are) and not be worried? Accept what worry is: a waste. It doesn't help. Replace it with productive action, self-care, and wise thinking. Work well, invest in others, address problems when they arise, exercise the courage necessary to make the really hard decisions you're tempted instead to let fester while you worry over them. Then sleep at night, knowing you can't do more. Knowing that if failure comes, it will be honest failure.

When tempted to worry, respond with courage and purpose and productive action directed at the things that worry us which are within your control. Let go of what isn't. And above all, recognize the great power, wisdom, and dominion of the God we serve.

This truth about God himself is the real key to stop worrying.

Brain scientists now tell us that our brains can be rewired by not only what we do, but what we believe. Our beliefs change our thoughts. And as cognitive-behavioral therapy and Scripture both tell us, our thoughts give birth to our actions. If we want to stop worrying, we must examine and change what we believe ("Your Father already knows your needs." "For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." "The Lord himself will fight for you.")

What do you believe about God's place among the things that keep you up at night?

Go ahead and face reality, *all* of reality. Bad things do happen. This is reality. Even under the best of leadership, balls drop, people quit, conflict erupts in the worst possible ways, everyone fails, people point fingers, people go bankrupt, absolutely everyone dies. Worry feels necessary in such a world. In the face of such possibilities, it somehow feels wrong to be at peace, to walk away when we've done enough. But ironically, our worry cannot stop any of these things from happening. It could not be more unnecessary.

It overlooks another aspect of reality: God is at work, even in worrisome situations. Faith, hope, trust—now these are necessary. And because of who God is, we can live in the space they create. Sleep well, Christian leader.

What Worry Is Not

Worry is never the right response. But we need to clarify some key distinctions.

Fear is not the same as worry. Fear is a built-in, biologically based reaction to immediate threat—and it can be very healthy. Our “fight or flight” reflexive responses can keep us alive, motivate us to protect others, and enable us to take action very quickly. When it’s needed and unless it gets out of control, such fear is helpful. It helps us learn from past experiences, avoid threats, and respond when in danger.

Worry is different. It’s not a healthy process; it’s unhealthy. It’s not a built-in biological response to danger; it’s a choice (sometimes a default choice). After danger has passed, when our voluntary systems take over, we can decide to stay in a place of fear or allow ourselves to rest in God. When we worry, we are choosing to abide in fear. Rejecting worry doesn’t mean we have to reject healthy fear.

Focused mental incubation is not worry.

Sometimes we have to give focused mental attention to an upcoming sermon, project, performance, or meeting. We get “butterflies” as we contemplate the upcoming event and get our mind in the game. Writing a book means we obsess on the details we want to include. It can feel like worry, but it’s not.

The mental incubation process is intensely thinking about an idea, pondering a solution or a possibility until it hatches. Allowing a problem to live inside your head can be a productive process because it results in something useful. Worry is different; it’s non-productive. It never moves us forward or helps anyone else. In fact, it can be a distraction, a poor substitute for action. But letting go of worry doesn’t mean we have to stop wrestling with a problem.

Fretting about the future is not the same as planning

One of our greatest sources of worry is the unknown future. By definition, the future is always still to come, always at least partly unknown. Fretting about the future is a fruitless and bruising exercise. But planning and forecasting is a good and faithful response.

When we accept the boundaries of time and turn our attention to the present, we usually find great possibilities in what we can do now: pray, hope, love. And we discover that as it unfolds, the future often opens in a way we never anticipated.

Accepting our limitations is not resignation

Accepting what we can’t control does not mean giving up on what we can. It doesn’t mean resigning ourselves to the status quo. It simply means accepting truth and laying aside our attempts at self-deception regarding our own power. We can’t change everything we want to change. Admitting that truth needn’t stop us from changing and doing what we can.

Setting aside our worry over what we can’t control frees us to offer more of our best selves to what we can do.

*Amy Simpson is author of *Anxious: Choosing Faith in a World of Worry* (IVP, 2014). She also serves as senior editor of *Leadership Journal*.*



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