

SIX THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR ANXIETY

Do you want to hear a good description of what happens with anxiety?

"A man who has no control over his spirit is like a city broken into and without walls."

That's Proverbs 25:28. How do you get a grip when barbarians are rioting in the streets of your mind? Terrorist attackers, a gang of criminals, suicide bombers, cities invaded, fires everywhere, a lion in the street, chaos. Your mind loses its grip. Fear and anxiety have taken over. Nothing's safe or certain.

Anxiety is a universal human experience, and you need to approach it with a plan. Notice this is not a formula. When a professional football coach enters a game, he doesn't know a single thing that's going to happen after the opening whistle. He doesn't even know who's going to kick off until they flip a coin. But he's not unprepared. He goes in with a game plan, a basic orientation to the game ahead.

Here are six things as a game plan for when you start to worry and obsess:

1. NAME

First, name the pressures. You always worry about something. What things tend to hook you? What do you tend to worry about? What "good reasons" do you have for anxiety?

The very act of naming it is often very helpful. In the experience of anxiety, it seems like a million things. You're juggling plates, round and round and round and round. But really, you're juggling only six plates—or maybe obsessing on just one. It helps you to name the one thing or the six that keep recycling. Anxieties feel endless and infinite—but they're finite and specific.

2. IDENTIFY

Second, identify how you express anxiety. Spot the signs. How does anxiety show up in your life?

For some people it's feelings of panic clutching their throat, or just a vague unease. What a huge step forward when you stand back and say, "Aha, a red light on the dashboard!" Rather than just indulging your worries, you can name them.

For some people it's repetitive, obsessive thoughts: "Oh, now that's the fourth time I've repeated that scenario in my mind."

For some people the sign is anger. They get irritated, but when they work back, they realize, "I was fearful and worried about something."

For other people, worry shows up in their bodies (e.g., a tension headache) or in the cheap remedies that sin manufactures to make us feel better (e.g., gobbling ice cream, or an overpowering desire for a stiff drink). Spot the signs. How can those things become cues to you? "I'm losing it, I'm forgetting God, my flashlight is going dim."

3. ASK

Third, ask yourself, Why am I anxious?

Worry always has its inner logic. Anxious people are "you of little faith." If I've forgotten God, who or what has edged Him out of my mind and started to rule in His place? Identify the hijacker. Anxious people have fallen into one of the subsets of "every form of greed." What do I want, need, crave, expect, demand, lust after? Or, since we fear losing the things we crave getting, what do I fear either losing or never getting? Identify the specific lust of the flesh. Anxious people "eagerly seek" the gifts more than the Giver. They bank treasure in the wrong place. What is preoccupying me, so that I pursue it with all my heart? Identify the object of your affections.

4. LISTEN

Fourth, what better reason does Jesus give you not to worry? What were those promises we just talked about? Go back and pick one to take to heart.

I listed seven for you, seven things Jesus guarantees about how God runs His universe. We highlighted the sixth, "Your father is God," because it was the best of those better reasons. But they're all good reasons. That's why Jesus mentions every one. We're pretty uncomplicated people. It's tough to remember seven things at once, so pick one. For me, over the last month, the most helpful one has been, "If God feeds the crows, won't He provide for you?" It makes me laugh even to think about it, and anxiety can't coexist with hearty laughter! Those Crow Boys intercepted a lot of temptations to anxiety; they did me good. Grab one promise and work with it.

5. TALK

Fifth, go to your Father. Talk to Him.

It's not as though your Father doesn't care about the things you worry about: your friends, your health, your money, your children, and so forth. Your Father knows what you need. You can go to Him with the things that concern you. Cast your cares on Him, because He cares for you. You'll have to leave your worries with Him. They are always outside of your control!

- How will your kids turn out?
- Will you get Alzheimer's?
- What will happen with the economy?
- Will you ever get married?
- Will there be an anthrax attack?
- Will your dad come to know the Lord?
- Will you have money for next month's bills?

You have good reasons to be concerned about such things, but you have better reasons to take them to Someone who loves you. Like that toddler whose mom trailed her, even the deep end of life is safe.

6. GIVE

Finally, give. Do and say something constructive. Care for someone else. Give to meet human need.

In the darkest hole, when the world is most confused, when there are barbarians in the streets, when life's the toughest, there's always the right thing to do. There's always some way to give yourself away. The problem might seem overwhelming. You could worry, worry, worry, worry. But what you're called to do is small, just a little itty-bitty thing. There's always something to give yourself to, and some way to give. Jesus said more about this in Matthew 6, the parallel passage to ours: "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day thereof." Give yourself to today's trouble. Be about the business of today. Leave tomorrow's uncertainties to your Father.