

A Leader's Quick Guide To Anxiety

Anxiety on the rise

“One-third of Canadians have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression since the onset of COVID-19

- Prior to the pandemic, almost one-fifth of Canadians have experienced a personal or family diagnosis of anxiety (18% personal, 20% family) or depression (20% personal, 20% family). Other mood disorders are less common, with 6% having a personal diagnosis, and 8% a diagnosis in their family.
- Since the onset of COVID-19, another 7% say they have personally been diagnosed with anxiety and another 7% with depression; another 9% and 8% say a family member has been diagnosed with anxiety or depression, respectively.
- When it comes to anxiety, Canadians between the ages of 18 and 34 years (12%) and racialized Canadians (11%) are more likely to have been diagnosed since the pandemic. Those with financial troubles (14%), alcohol and cannabis dependency (26% and 28%) are also more likely to have received this diagnosis.¹

“Younger Canadians between 18 to 34 years old (13%), students (15%) as well as those who are unemployed (16%), have a low income (<30K ,15%), experiencing financial trouble (33%), members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities (16%), and racialized persons (13%) are more likely to report high levels of anxiety.

- This poll saw that those living in urban centres had higher levels of high anxiety than those in rural setting (11% vs. 6%).
- High anxiety is also more prevalent among Canadians struggling with mental health or consuming cannabis or alcohol at a level considered to be harmful or dependent, affecting at least one-third of individuals among those segments.”²

In today's society, you will likely encounter someone with anxiety in your ministry. You may be called upon to answer questions of faith, fear, what is happening, what God thinks about anxiety,

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f31a311d93d0f2e28aaf04a/t/63f77e0f69db2134f34a4f3a/1677164048777/Full-+MHRC+Mental+Health+During+COVID+Poll+15+Report.pdf>

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f31a311d93d0f2e28aaf04a/t/63f77e0f69db2134f34a4f3a/1677164048777/Full-+MHRC+Mental+Health+During+COVID+Poll+15+Report.pdf>

and what the Bible has to say about it, and you may even be called upon to help someone through a panic attack.

This quick reference guide aims to help you feel more prepared should someone walk into your office with a new diagnosis, or a panic attack.

Before reading the rest of this guide, we recommend reading through the four week small group curriculum on fear, worry, and anxiety found in your resource section. In it you will find a more thorough treatment of what is happening in the body and spirit when anxiety strikes. However, we will give a quick refresher here as well.

Terms

Fear - the God given response to danger. This can be healthy when in its proper place. We need fear responses to keep us safe. However, we often let fear expand into areas where we need to give up our sense of control and trust God with whatever we are fearing.

Worry - Worry connotes a spiritual problem of turning healthy fear into unhealthy fear. Worry is often shown in the Bible to be a lack of trust in God to take care of our lives.

Anxiety - The word anxiety will be used to speak about the physical aspect of fear. It will be used to describe what is happening in our bodies when we have an overabundance of fear, whether that is created by worrying or by a physical ailment causing the body to create the hormones that cause fear and anxiety.

What is happening physically

When a fear response kicks in, a part of your brain called the Amygdala takes charge. The Amygdala starts pumping cortisol and adrenaline into your body, giving you the strength you need to run away from or fight the danger you are facing. This is a good, God-given system to keep us safe.

However, sometimes our Amygdala takes charge when we are not in true danger. This can happen for many reasons. Someone could be dwelling on danger, there could be perceived danger due to past experiences, stress can trigger the release of these hormones, or there could be a physical ailment that causes an overabundance of cortisol and adrenaline. When these hormones are released but not needed to run away or fight, they sit in the body, often causing panic attacks or the feeling of anxiety in the body.

What is happening spiritually

No matter the reason for the person's anxiety, they need to be assured of the presence of God and the comfort of Scripture. We suggest going through the small group curriculum with them to be immersed in Scripture and learn more about what is going on in their bodies.

Many verses tell us not to fear in the Bible. Often these verses have been used to shame people with anxiety and can be confusing for those struggling with a physical disorder or anxiety due to trauma. When we are reading these verses to people, as we should, what we want to focus on is the fact that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1). Instead, we want to look at the common denominator in these verses. Almost every one of them tells us we don't have to fear because of the presence of God. If it's not right beside the "do not fear" part, it is usually in the same paragraph or passage.

These are not condemning commands, but instead, compassionate assurances for those who are struggling. Leading your people to rest in the presence of God will be helpful to them no matter the reason behind their anxiety.

Many people who struggle with anxiety are living with a physical ailment, not sin. They often have high levels of faith and are living godly lives, trusting God even in the middle of their anxiety. Going automatically to a condemnation of sin will often miss the mark in what they truly need to deal with their anxiety.

How to tell if someone is having an anxiety/panic attack

Here is a list of common symptoms of anxiety

- Increased heart rate
- Shallow breathing
- Stomach pain
- Tingling in the limbs
- Foggy thinking
- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Trembling or shaking
- Sweating
- Irritability

How to help

Co-regulation

When someone is having a panic attack or high anxiety, we say they are dysregulated. They cannot regulate their own nervous system. However, God made our nervous systems amazing because they can regulate off of someone else. Knowing this gives you the confidence to calm someone else down.

It is important that you stay regulated throughout this process, because the other person is depending on you to co-regulate with them. Keeping calm, doing the breathing exercises along with them, and depending on the Holy Spirit are all important components of dealing with a panic attack.

Compassionate presence

Often people need to know they are not alone. They need to be reminded of the presence of God, but also of your compassionate presence. Being willing to sit with them, offer compassion, and follow up with them consistently is a major component of what is needed to make it through anxiety. Sitting with someone - without necessarily touching them as they might find this to increase anxiety - is an important comfort.

Breathing

One of the fastest ways to bring someone back to calm or regulation is through breathing. Start with some slow deep breaths together. Box breathing can be especially helpful. To do box breathing with someone, breathe in for the count of 4, hold for the count of 4, breathe out for the count of 4, then hold for the count of 4 again. Do this several times until the worst of the panic ceases. Encourage the person experiencing anxiety to do it at the same time as you, slowing down their heart rate and breathing. This may be the majority of what you do with them, so take your time.

Calming the Amygdala and activating the Prefrontal Cortex

If you remember our earlier discussion, when fear happens, the Amygdala takes charge in the brain. When that happens, our Prefrontal Cortex takes a backseat. One way to calm the Amygdala is to reactivate the Prefrontal Cortex. We do this by challenging the mind. Once the person can breathe well, you can ask them to do simple thinking tasks like counting by 3s, counting backward from 100, reciting memory verses, or even telling you a story. This causes the thinking centre of the brain to activate, calming the fear response.

Exercise

When someone is filled with adrenaline and cortisol but does not need to fight or run, they can often be helped by using that adrenaline physically. Going for a walk or doing something like jumping jacks can help negate the effects of adrenaline in the body.

Grounding

Reminding someone that they are safe and in the present moment can be very helpful in mitigating panic. You can ask the person experiencing anxiety to find five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell, and one thing they can taste. The order and numbers don't matter as much as just helping the person slow down, notice their environment, and remind their body that they are safe.

Prayer

While we definitely need to care for the body during panic and anxiety, we never want to forget to care for the spirit. Asking for the supernatural peace of God is always important.

Going through this formula will generally help the person calm down. However, you must know the limits of what you can do; sometimes a doctor's help is needed.

Resources

[Breath as Prayer by Jennifer Tucker](#)

[Untangling Emotions by Alasdair Groves](#)

[A Small Book for the Anxious Heart by Ed Welch](#)

[A Teen's Guide to Anxiety: Lifting the Weight of Worry by Eliza Huie](#)

Philippians 4:4-9

Psalm 16

John 14:26-27

Psalms 46:1-3