



TRUSTING GOD IN ANXIOUS TIMES

In this lesson, youth will learn how faith can help them to deal with anxiety.

ENHANCER OF JOY

Prayer

DURATION

60 minutes

LESSON DEVELOPED BY

Philip Browning Helsel

GOAL

Anxiety, Worry and Feeling Better

TIPS TO PREPARE

Think about a time when you felt worried and compare that to a time when you felt anxious. Consider what role faith and spiritual practices play in your own experience of anxiety and worry. Has your image of God changed through encounters with worry and anxiety.

MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Notecards
- Pens
- Post-it notes
- Printouts of Matthew 6:25-34
- Computer with internet (optional)

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Matthew 6:25-34

Purpose

To distinguish anxiety from worry, exploring its spiritual meaning. To normalize anxiety and express it to God.

Objectives

In this session, youth will examine what makes them worried and anxious, distinguish anxiety from worry, and learn about the best way to respond to anxiety in light of faith.

Further Study

1 Peter 5:7

Robert H. Albers, William H. Meller, and Steven D. Thurber (eds.), *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and their Families*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2012.

Allan Hugh Cole, Jr. *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008.

Cynthia Franklin and Rowena Fong (eds.), *The Church Leader's Counseling Resource Book: A Guide to Mental Health and Social Problems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

Lloyd I. Sederer, *The Family Guide to Mental Health Care: Advice on Helping Your Loved Ones...* NY: W.W. Norton, 2013.

Jean Twenge, *Igen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—And What That Means for the Rest of Us*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Gather

Gather (5 minutes)

Begin the class by having students raise their hands and offer prayer requests for things that they are concerned about. Make a list of each of these and pray for them.

Mention that there are studies that notice that we are more likely to remember our headwinds, the things that seem to be against us, than we are our tailwinds, or what is pushing us along. Have the class turn to a neighbor and mention one tailwind, a thing they are grateful for or that was special to them in the last week.

Mention that this class is about anxiety and the ways that it relates to our life of faith. Discuss how no one will have to share personally if they do not want to do so.

Pass around small notecards and list the following stressors on the board: 1. Move 2. Divorce 3. Starting a new school 4. Questioning sexuality 5. Being bullied. 6. Standardized tests 7. College entrance essays 8. Worry about family's health 9. Racism 10. Environmental damage

Have students make a list from one to ten, rating whether each number is a 'big' or 'small' source of anxiety.

Emphasize that there are no right answers to these questions, but that different stressors cause different kinds of anxiety based on temperament, life events, and other aspects of life. Emphasize that God is with us in these worries, wanting us to trust God.

Practitioner's Note: If students in your group are not primarily college bound, change Number 7 above to "Preparing for life after graduation."

Engage

Engage (30 minutes)

Activity 1: Hear from a Peer

- Listen to Solome Tibebu respond to her anxiety.
- Ask the group, what makes anxiety different than everyday worry?
- Why was she concerned that her family and friends would not understand her anxiety?
- If Solome was a person of faith, how do you think her faith might relate to her anxiety.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PcdRyB8YJY>

Activity 2: Engage in a Silent Witness Activity

- Write a source of anxiety on a notecard and put it on one's forehead.
- Walk around the room silently with your post-it note on your forehead, then return silently to your seat.
- Spend a couple of minutes in silent prayer remembering the things that you saw.
- Have students keep their notecards, or gather them and place them on the whiteboard for the entirety of the lesson.
- Encourage students to pray for the items on the notecards, but urge them to keep confidentiality, not sharing these items with others.
- Explain to the group that some young people can handle anxiety by themselves, but that one in four high school students has clinical anxiety, and needs the help of medication and therapy. Worry is something that only happens occasionally, right before a big test or sporting event. Anxious is more of a constant companion, and includes deep worries such as fear of death. Anxiety starts early, with ten or eleven year-olds showing signs. God works through doctors and medication to help relieve anxiety. Left untreated, anxiety has the effect of shrinking a person's world, and getting medical help does not make you 'nuts' or 'crazy,' but can be a way of living more faithfully. People with anxiety get stuck in a fear loop, becoming afraid of being afraid, and this only deepens their isolation.

Reflect

Reflect (20 minutes)

Activity 3: Reflect on God's Care in Anxious Times

- Have students read Matthew 6:25-34 in groups of two or three, and ask students to develop questions that come from reading the passage carefully.
- Ask, what words or phrases stand out for them? How do they hear God speaking to them through the text today?
- Invite students to bring their questions to the group, and add your own to a whiteboard or butcher paper: "How do we trust God in the middle of everyday worry and more profound anxiety?"
- Encourage students to ask critical, probing, and reflective questions about the passage.

Activity 4: Casting Cares Upon God

- The writer of 1 Peter 5:7 encourages us to cast our cares on God because God cares for us. One of the chief ways that Christians do this is through prayer. "Cares" can include both anxiety and worry in this sense.
- Invite students to make a list of things that they worry about and also things that create anxiety for them, on a notecard and pray silently about these things. Emphasize that these matters will be kept confidential and that students are able to write these for their own growth. Invite students to place a star beside things that they think are ordinary worry and a check mark by things that they think are the cause of more severe anxiety.
- Ask students, when they consider the things that they have checked on their list, whether they think there is a spiritual or faith dimension to the big anxieties in their lives. Encourage students to continue praying for these things throughout the week, and also revisiting the tailwinds that are pushing them forward.
- Invite students to talk to a teacher, counselor, or a trusted mentor if they find that the check marks on their list are keeping them up at night, making them change their schedule around, or keeping them out of school. Normalize the idea of counseling and medication, telling them that these are ways that God helps us not to be too anxious.
- Encourage students to protect one another's confidentiality, but not be afraid of talking about anxiety if their friends bring it up. One of the best ways of treating anxiety can be bringing it out into the open, so that people can receive the help that they need.
- Encourage students to not get discouraged if they still feel anxious after times of prayer, since prayer does not work like a miracle frequently, and anxiety is more like a long-term illness that needs counseling help as well as faith supports.

Send Forth

Send Forth (5 minutes)

- When we worry, we have a normal response to stress, but anxiety has the power to take over our lives. Learning to trust God can include talking with a counselor about anxiety, taking medicine, and learning to pray for our anxiety.
- Closing Prayer: “Dear God, we pray for all those who experience everyday worry and those who feel dread or anxiety. We pray for those who are in its grip right now, that they would experience some relief. We pray that we would learn to be compassionate to those suffering from dread, so that we could learn to appreciate your mercy in our lives in a richer way.

Practitioner’s Note: If your structure allows, follow this session in next meeting with a dedicated time for an art project that expresses what emerged in Anxiety lesson.