

**This essay is presented as a work in progress.  
Please do not cite without the author's permission.**

## **Mentoring Youth for Joy in Anxious Times**

**Allan Hugh Cole Jr and Philip Browning Helsel**

### Introduction

He arrived to the weekly youth group gathering a few minutes late, as he often did. Zack's home life had been erratic for a couple of years, ever since his parents separated and divorced; and getting himself to most places, including church, required planning and included frequent disappointments.

Zack had wavy brown hair that touched his shoulders and outlined his handsome masculine features. His tall, solid build revealed athleticism and a commitment to fitness but outpaced his age of barely fifteen years. His early physical maturity aligned with the precociousness of his soul. Large existential questions and ethical dilemmas consumed him, as did concerns for authenticity and social justice. Maladies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, homelessness, economic disparities, bullying, and perhaps most of all, apathy about these things by so many people made his blood boil.

He'd pondered these concerns for as long as he could remember, and his quest for understanding drew him to the church. In fact, Zack demonstrated having as much passion about these matters as he did his beloved high school basketball team, for which he played point guard; and he felt frustrated when his peers lacked the same degree of interest.

Zack often struggled to maintain eye contact when speaking, especially with adults, and to the observant eye he displayed a general restlessness that took the forms of finger and foot tapping,

squirring in his seat, and occasionally interrupting others in conversations. He also reported having difficulty staying focused in school, especially when he was “stressed,” and he felt like his grades were lower than they should be.

Despite these challenges, Zack seemed to thrive. One could easily see that he had many friends, a quick wit, a pleasant, even playful, disposition, and the potential for a bright future. He enjoyed being a part of the youth group and rarely missed a meeting or an activity.

Many people who work with youth as mentors, ministers, coaches, teachers, or friends will encounter those who live with anxiety—adolescents such as Zack. National research data show that anxiety among youth is not only common, but increasing; and some social and behavioral scientists have declared that we currently live with an *epidemic* of anxiety among adolescents.<sup>1</sup> Those who have relationships with youth, and who care for them, benefit from knowing more about experiences of anxiety, including how it presents itself, why it occurs, and, of course, what can help support anxious persons in ways that help them feel more confident, hopeful, and at peace. With these goals, we describe the characteristics of anxiety, how it can relate not only to psychological concerns but to spiritual concerns as well, and how cultivating and sharing in spiritual practices that promote deep joy may provide ameliorative effects.

### The Epidemic of Anxiety and Its Relationship to Joy

If you spend time with adolescents, you will encounter anxious persons like Zack. Consider these findings. A comprehensive large scale national study found that among U.S. adolescents aged thirteen to eighteen, 31.9% were found to have an anxiety disorder, with 8.3% of those having severe impairment.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of any anxiety disorder was similar across age groups, with a median age of onset is being eleven years-old. We know further that while anxiety disorders often begin in childhood, they usually persist into adulthood. An estimated 19.1% of U.S. adults (~62.5 M)

reported having an anxiety disorder in the past year, and an estimated 31.1% of U.S. adults (~102 M) experience an anxiety disorder at some time in their lives. Furthermore, of those adults with any anxiety disorder in the past year, note that over half of these adults reported moderate to serious impairment (22.8% serious impairment; 33.7% moderate impairment; 43.5% mild impairment).<sup>3</sup>

We know, too, that having high levels of anxiety correlates with other difficulties, such as depression, eating disorders, substance use, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and that between eight and ten percent of school absences can be linked to a struggle with anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to explain joy theologically and offer a brief definition before proceeding. Paul lists joy as the second fruit of the Spirit, a chief piece of evidence of the life lived attuned to God's presence (Gal 5:22). In the gospel of Matthew, a parable concludes with a vision of joy as one of the chief ends of life (Matthew 25:24). Likewise, in Hebrews 12:2, Jesus endures the cross "for the sake of the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). Joy is at once a sign of life's delight, an end of life, and an inspiration that is worth even sacrifice to attain.

For adolescents, joy means something distinctive. It goes along with knowing who you are and knowing that your life matters. It seems to accompany a relaxed trust that lets you know life is okay and that you do not need to work in order to prove yourself. We define joy as a sense of at-homeness that joins with impassioned trust in one's inherent value as a human being. It goes hand-in-hand with feeling that the world is bigger than oneself. Joy includes appreciating the present with little self-consciousness, including a break from the pressure to perform. For adolescence, genuine joy is the issue. It cannot be happiness that disregards the truth of one's experience, but it needs to take an entire life into account.

Joy may coexist with anxiety, and travel alongside of it. Indeed, there is no reason why joy and intense suffering do not travel together at times. Nevertheless, clinical anxiety can also blunt the full experience of joy because of it turns all of your attention on yourself. Anxiety, as fear of fear,

includes the angst that the world is a deeply threatening place and even meaningless as a result. One response to anxiety is to attempt to fearfully secure one's place in the world doing everything you can to forestall. This response can diminish joy. Yet the treatment of anxiety can include joy, as one begins to experience the world opening up.

Joy is by nature relational—it includes being able to open up to others and see their experiences—while anxiety serves to dampen awareness of others because of fear for the self. Joy is a part of the life of the Spirit, both theological and psychological, and by understanding better the life of anxious adolescents like Zach we learn to foster joy among adolescence in whom its expression may be inhibited.

### Adolescent Development

Anxiety is pressing for teens like Zack, but so is the potential for joy as they go through monumental changes and move out into the world. High school aged teens have different abilities and bodies than middle school teens. Adolescent development is an area God works to bring out the capacity for joy in the midst of change. Sometimes youth surprise themselves by what they can accomplish and who they are becoming.

Teens' bodies put on a full fifty percent more mass and the brains of teens are quite plastic. Gray matter peaks in the teenage brain at thirteen in boys and twelve in girls, and then is pruned back through lack of activity. The pre-frontal cortex that controls decision-making is poorly developed, meaning they are less capable than adults at taking into consideration the perspective of others.<sup>56</sup> Teen brains seem primed for pleasure, with peer acceptance lighting up the same areas of the brain as sex. So adolescence is a time of development where joy is a possibility, found in the unfolding potential of body and mind.

Because of the ways their thinking develops, there are certain themes that come up frequently with teens: many teens feel self-conscious. Others want to join the cause, advocating for justice.<sup>7</sup> Many teens have a personal fable, or a sense of something special that no one else can fully understand. A personal fable is the inner belief that many adolescents hold that he or she is special/unique, omnipotent, invulnerable and therefore he or she can take special risks.”<sup>8</sup> The feeling that adolescents often relate of not being adequately seen or understood pertains to their personal fable not being taken seriously.

Teens slowly begin to wonder who they are and put together an image of themselves that they hold in their mind. The developmental theorist Erik Erikson defined this self-image as identity, a “consistent enough sense of self as unique individuals in terms of roles, attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations.” Parents and grandparents play a crucial role in identity development, helping young people imagine aspirations. Erikson also thought one’s cultural background, including whether one was fully accepted, played an important role in identity development. One kid might try out a new haircut, a different style of shoes or hat, and subtly wonder whether people notice.

Eventually young people leave home, and it seems that the ability to leave home is rooted in whether or not one was able to attach to a caregiver in the first place.<sup>9</sup> A kid who can take new risks, branching out in their style and identity, is often more stable in close attachment relationships. Surprisingly, adolescents who feel supported enough in who they are might actually rebel more. Conversely, adolescents who lacked dependable caregivers when they were young children might become anxious, clingy, or aggressive when it comes time to give up the old and enter the new parts of life. The inevitable losses of grandparents that come in adolescents may stress out teens that lacked emotional support early in life. So adolescence, a time of trying out new identities in preparation for the task of leaving home, is also a time of connection and change in which teenagers are building on an internal security to encounter new things in the world around them.<sup>10</sup>

What adolescents believe about God and how they think about God is closely related to changes happening in their bodies and brains. Some kids take their faith literally and then learn to question it. In his *Stages of Faith* James Fowler described how moral reasoning and faith development built on biology, psychology, and social context in order to fashion a faith imagination. Since it has been covered elsewhere, I will briefly describe the childhood and adolescent stages. Between birth and the second year of life, what Fowler calls *undifferentiated faith*, an infant is wrapped in the basic trust of care, surrounded by a responsive or abandoning environment. Children between two and six or seven enter *intuitive-projective faith* in which children are concrete thinkers, asking why and putting things in mental boxes. Stories of faith become important place holders for powerful feelings. By the time children are ten they bring faith imagination into story form—the mythic-literal stage often concerning relationships and roles. There is a strong sense of fairness here, and faith is often reflective of parents or caregiver’s viewpoints. *One* boy in the mythic-literal stage believed in Noah’s Ark and became afraid of flooding that occurred around his house. As he moved into the synthetic-conventional stage he asked himself about the story, wondering what seemed true about God from the narrative and what was painful about it. After puberty teenagers question the basis of their faith and become aware of the unknown in the *synthetic-conventional stage*, in which faith largely conforms to the outlines of what important groups think. At the stage teens may reflect on big ideas and search for authenticity, but also may not have individual points of view yet. Teens who move into young adulthood sometimes begin to question the boundaries of their faith—how do I know this story is true? Who am I when I’m not in this community?” Leaving home and moving away from family can lead to *individuated-reflective faith*, in which teens question social systems and institutions and take responsibility for their beliefs. Some young adults never engage in this level of reflection, but remain content with an unquestioning faith. The reason why the stages of faith are important is that each stage includes a particular anxiety and also a particular capacity for joy. There’s a paradox in the role

of faith communities. Developing richer faith imagination can happen when churches and schools collaborate to help teens question, fit in, belong, and not conform.<sup>11</sup> Adolescents need to ask questions that are stage appropriate. Joyful teen flourishing means taking into account questions, but not rushing into them before teenagers are ready. Faith development is natural since it is built on changes in the body and brain, in interaction with society.

What role does racial identity play in adolescent development? My youth group growing up integrated by inviting teenagers from the nearby housing projects into the youth group. This led to many new families joining the church, and many of these teens experienced regular disrespect from others on the basis of their race. One of the teens in my youth group had a mother in prison, a father who was absent, and a stepfather who was demanding but engaged, and we connected through a church-sponsored Tae Kwon Do program, learning confidence and boundaries in a safe environment. This regular experience of exercise and mentorship offered new places for identity formation for this adolescent boy.

In adolescent development, it is important for teens to have respect for others and respect *from* others. Adolescents form early and largely intuitive impressions about whether they have your respect. For black, multiracial, Latinx, and Asian teens, often there is a struggle with wondering how to fit in while also being respected, wondering when and whether to challenge a society that uses stereotypes about your racial group. In her book *The Hate You Give*, Angie Thomas tells the story of Starr Carter, a teenager who has to decide whether to speak out about violence done against her community.<sup>12</sup> Immigrant teens who are struggling to fit in may be stuck between the generations, acting as interpreters while trying to fit in themselves.<sup>13</sup> For LGBTQIA teens who are susceptible to suicide, finding a safe place such as a queer/straight alliance can help foster pride in the process of growing up, and these organizations reduce harmful bullying across a school.<sup>14</sup> Marginalized teens

may have a different pathway to adolescent development. In some communities adolescent development means simply surviving to adulthood.<sup>15</sup>

Chastity Salas, a homeless teenager from the Bronx, writes poetry that brings her situation to life and resists oppression.<sup>16</sup> She grows up in an impoverished community, but through the mentorship of a school guidance counselor gets into a prestigious Ivy League university. Education seems to be an important tool for low-income children to develop and create in ways that transcend what their parents were able to achieve. Adolescents from poor communities may need the help of mentors to imagine possibilities such as college, since their expectations may be based on what they see around them.

Joy comes as a surprise, like the gift of a poem or the thrill of breaking a board in Tae Kwon Do. Joy, the calling card of the Christian life, is present as teens move from family to friends to society, finding purpose along the way. Many teens need a break from self-consciousness for a time in order to find joy. One biracial teenage girl whose mother, a Puerto Rican, had died, was rebelling and put into treatment. Her journey of wholeness involved researching her cultural background and reclaiming the vitality that came from it.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes joy requires doing something different with one's life, questioning the norms and visions of one's community.

Joy is relational and should be discovered in community with parents and other mentors. Scholars of adolescence note how important parents and caregivers continue to be in adolescent's lives and how adolescents need to hear stories about their parents in order to understand their own teenage experience. In order to get the focus off themselves, anxious adolescents can ask parents these kinds of questions: "What were you like in high school? Tell me about a fork in the road in your life." "Who inspired you the most?" And "What advice would you give your sixteen year old self?" In order to understand the experience of teens like Zack, it is crucial to know how they are

being asked to move out into an entirely new world, in addition to the major changes they are going through in body, mind, and spirit.

### How Anxiety Appears

It's crucial to recognize how anxiety presents itself, how it looks and what it feels like. Here are some clues.<sup>18</sup>

#### Relationally

- Overzealousness to please people, particularly older kids, mentors, and adults
- Earnestness to complete tasks that disregards appropriate process and/or consulting with others
- Perfectionism that may result in rigid decision-making or, alternatively, result in procrastination
- Propensity for assigning blame or responsibility to others when desired results are not forthcoming
- Hypercritical responses to relatively insignificant matters
- Aggressive attitudes or behaviors, particularly when criticized
- Intolerance for receiving appropriate criticism, which is often received as a personal affront
- Nervous speech or behavior, particularly in more public settings
- Addictive and compulsive behaviors: substance abuse, gambling, eating disorders, and hypersexuality
- Avoidance of others or isolating oneself from others
- Poor listening, abrupt and/or unpredictable pace and tone in conversation
- Conflicted relationships (family, peers, teachers)
- Lack of trust joined with suspiciousness of others' motives, aims, and actions

- Feeling that their life is unstable, unpredictable, misunderstood
- Difficulty relaxing; being constantly “on edge”
- Poor sleeping patterns, which often include ruminating about concerns
- Hypervigilance with respect to planning for and anticipating outcomes

### Physically

- A nervous stomach, perhaps to the point of nausea
- Tightness in the chest
- Increased heart rate and breathing patterns, especially shortness of breath
- Experiencing of hot or cold flashes
- Clamminess, chills, feeling sweaty, dizzy, or faint
- Wringing of hands, clenching of teeth (especially during sleep), rocking, shaking of a foot or leg while sitting
- fatigue

### Cognitively/Emotionally

- Inability to concentrate or focus; a racing mind
- Vulnerability to distraction from thoughts or tasks
- Intense feelings of vulnerability
- Fixation on a particular project, event, concern, plan, or other matter to a point of obsession (anxiety often correlates with OCD)
- Inability to focus, concentrate, or otherwise stay on task
- Chronic worry, which includes persistent “what ifs?”

- Generally negative view of life, with belief that “catastrophe” is ever looming
- High degree of resistance to most forms of change, with a corresponding fixation on maintaining the status quo
- Pessimistic outlook on the future
- Lack of confidence
- Feelings of childishness or immaturity
- Feelings of isolation and aloneness
- Questioning of one’s identity: Who am I?
- Fear that one is a disappointment to others
- Lack of clarity about where anxiety comes from or why it happens, even when it has been experienced often for extended periods of time
- Emotional fatigue
- Erratic behavior: anger, indecision, insistence, persistence, avoidance
- Fear that one is “going crazy” or “losing one’s mind”

Although anxiety may assume various forms and it looks and feels different among persons and situations, we want to focus on a particular kind of anxiety—*the disquieted soul*. This type of anxiety goes deeper than worry, fear, or longing, and it arises from something more ubiquitous than the stressors of contemporary life. The anxiety that we have in mind lies centrally in the “core” of our being, in our souls. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard described it, this anxiety involves “inner strife and disharmony.”<sup>19</sup> It has less to do with the situations that we encounter and what could happen to us—the characteristics of worry and fear—and *more* to do with who we are, by whom we are valued, and to whom we belong.

## Anxiety in the Bible

The Biblical writers recognized the debilitating power of anxiety, which is to say that it's been with us a long time.<sup>20</sup>

The prophet Daniel reveals, "My spirit within me was anxious and the visions of my head alarmed me" (Daniel 7:15-16, RSV), and the prophet Isaiah declares, "Say to the anxious of heart, 'Be strong, fear not; behold your God! Requital is coming, the recompense of God— He Himself is coming to give you triumph'" (Isaiah 35:4; *Tanakh*).

Paul writes, "There is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches," and when discussing the Christian's "present affliction" and "future glory" he notes, "While we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 5:4, RSV). Further, Paul urges, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7, RSV). The author of 1 Peter writes of anxiety, too, calling on his audience to "Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7, NRSV).

Jesus speaks of anxiety, too. He exhorts his followers, "Do not be anxious about your life," and he asks, "Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" and he urges, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself." He adds, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Matt. 6:19-21, 25-34; Luke 12:22-34, RSV).

We would emphasize that Jesus offers a particular word of care to the anxious, showing that living anxiously contradicts what he and God would have for us. Yet, like the prophets before him,

Jesus recognized that many people struggled with this painful and at times debilitating condition. He urged his followers to live in a different way: “Do not be anxious about your life” (Matt. 6:25).

### Anxiety as a Spiritual Condition

Suggesting the disquieted soul as an apt metaphor for anxiety, we want to identify four concerns that inform anxiety for many people, but *especially* those that affiliate with faith communities—people like Zack.<sup>21</sup> In other words, we want to distinguish the kind of disquieted soul that many church folks have from other forms of anxiety. Finally, we want to suggest ways for supporting and nurturing disquieted souls by engaging in practices that promote joy.

There are numerous ways in which to understand anxiety, including its causes, expressions, and its relief. One of us (Cole) has written about several perspectives on this condition in *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls*.<sup>22</sup> Here, we highlight that anxiety has *multiple* sources and *various* expressions. It may arise for different reasons, appear in various ways, and be joined to a variety of psychological, relational, physiological, and environmental states. It’s also the case that particular forms of anxiety and severe anxiety may call for medical and/or psychological interventions and resources to relieve it, such that the anxious persons *may* require more than what a faith community alone may provide.

Nevertheless, the concept of “angst,” sometimes referred to as *existential* angst, best captures the type of anxiety that will receive our primary attention. Though often used synonymously with concepts such as *fear*, *worry*, or *anxiety*, words like *anguish* and especially *dread* better capture the meaning of *angst* and the kind of anxiety we highlight here. This anguish or dread has less to do with circumstances, including what may *happen* to us or to those we love, and therefore has less to do with identified dangers that one may avoid. It has more to do with *who one is or wants to be*, especially in relationship to significant others. The point to underscore is that anxiety involves more than worry

or fear, as painful as those experiences may be. Matthew's and Luke's Gospels portray Jesus as having understood this, as did Paul and the authors of Isaiah and Daniel.

We hold that the soul's disquiet is a condition influenced chiefly by one or more of the following *four* concerns that overlap and even merge.<sup>23</sup> The first concern involves one's beliefs and assumptions about who God is, meaning God's attributes, powers, and manner of being — God's nature or character, in other words. This the *theo-centric* concern. The second concern stems from a sense that one may lack an appropriate relationship to God, fidelity to God, or clarity about God's claim on one's life — in other words, one's standing before God. This is the *theo-relational* concern. The third, connected concern involves a sense that one's life requires (but lacks) a core foundation, basis, or grounding, and thus meaning or purpose. This the *vocational* concern. The fourth concern stems from what modern psychology has often identified as the root of anxiety — namely, one's fear of death — but includes concerns for (1) life after death; (2) how much of life is yet to be lived before death; and (3) whether life has been/will be meaningful, faithful, and true. This is the *mortal* concern.

Our view is that, in the case of many anxious persons who affiliate with religious communities, one or more of these concerns give rise to and perpetuate their anxiety.

### Joy as Balm for the Disquieted Soul

When one of us (Hesel) was a camp counselor he read Psalm 139:14, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" with an insecure teen, and she asked, "Was that written about me?" The answer is yes. Ministry is the practice of reminding one another of this answer. God gives life meaning, regardless of what we do in response.

We think of joy as stemming from a feeling of at-home-ness in the world that joins with impassioned trust in one's inherent value as a human being. Adolescents experience joy when they

feel kept in mind by another. This helps them believe that God remembers them. Psalm 17:8 states that we are “the apple of God’s eye.” Reminding one another of this fact is central to ministry with anxious teens.

This section will focus on practices of joy with adolescents experiencing anxiety. Practices are those things we do that create new forms of seeing, knowing, and being in the world, and non-competitive play helps us take ourselves less seriously. It is especially well-suited to the overscheduled adolescent being raised in a success-saturated environment. For teens like Zack, this approach might work if it was combined with education and support for his anxious thoughts.

Joy helps teens feel at home in the world and also experience the transcendence of surprising themselves. Joy can be practiced, not through denying the reality of suffering, but deeply attending to what is, coming alongside our adolescents and bearing witness. In a highly competitive and image-conscious culture, adolescents need to have a break from evaluation and play. Playing with teens, beyond helping them relax and feel known, also helps them have triumph in their imagination over things that frighten them in real life.

Anxiety-reducing care among teenagers is only possible when we focus on God’s love for us. This love remains present regardless of what we can do or accomplish. Practices such as centering prayer and *lectio divina* remind mentors and adolescence of God’s grace, help them find a still-point and center, and discern wisdom.

Joy deepens in relationship with empathy and gratitude. Empathy is the gateway to joy so that teen girls who could respond to a friend’s distress were also more likely to experience joy with them.<sup>24</sup>

Joy often goes hand-in-hand with gratitude and a feeling of the world being bigger than oneself and one’s experiences. We are much more aware of the headwinds we perceive to be against us and less so the tailwinds that have pushed us along.<sup>25</sup> Keeping a gratitude journal or having a

chance to share tailwinds around a fellowship time can foster gratitude. Tailwinds-talk reminds us of how we are all connected to one another, and that our success depends upon the gifts and effort of others.

Anxious teens live too much in the future, and they are forced to compete every day, in public and on social media, for precious and valuable resources of status and reputation.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, youth ministry should be a time of play. Practices of joy with adolescents should invite them to be less self-conscious, losing themselves in the fun while still attending to their personal fables, the unique meaning that they make out of their lives. Joyful play integrates empathy and gratitude, reflecting who is at play in the act of creation.

Joy gives space for growth, allowing troubled kids, the ‘identified patients’ that parents want you to counsel, to flourish without fixing. Finally, joy allows rebellious teens to question the group and your ideas, breaking the mold of what we expect them to experience.

Joy relates to the significant aspects of adolescence, including the search for identity and leaving home. It allows teens to try out who they are, not holding too strictly to any of these identities. It might not be comfortable since it invites teens to let go of control. Joy is also part of leaving the family constellation, trading it for new peer and romantic adventures. In this context, youth group helps teens feel the joy of being recognized for who they are, and this is a joy that they can return to even if they seem to grow out of the group. A crucial element in using joy for teens facing anxiety is the ability to reclaim the imagination from the constant pressures of a competitive environment.

Arguably, our teens are going through an era of subtle social competition, when they uniquely exposed to an image conscious culture fostered through digital media, and these forms of communication seem to deepen mental distress and unhappiness.<sup>27</sup>

In this time, when they feel pressure to perform as a certain kind of person, they may benefit from a chance to use their imaginations and relax the need to control. Aletha Solter developed attachment play as a way for children to release tension and experience joy.<sup>28</sup> Consulting with her in writing this chapter, she confirmed that many elements of attachment play can be helpful to teens. Her games release tension and allow for working through difficulty emotions in an environment free that hopes to reduce feelings of failure or self-blame. Here are the kinds of attachment play described in her book. In what follows, I will apply here types of play to a youth ministry context.

- Non-directive. Non-directive play is when you leave objects or props in a room and see what teens do with them
- Symbolic play involves an externalization of something a teen is struggling with, such as a test or a relationship, contingency play is when teens choose their own adventure and control the direction of events
- Nonsense play is that release that comes from making no sense for a while
- Separation play includes chasing and hide-and-seek, both games where teens are reunited and grapple with abandonments.
- Power-reversal games are the dunk tank or head shaving of leaders
- Regression games let kids goof off for a while and give them a break from their dignity, imagining for a little while what it might be like to be young
- Bodily contact games build off closeness and human connection. These should be done with respect to personal boundaries and the sacred nature of touch.
- Cooperative games purposefully revise the rules so no one wins. Many games can be changed to include cooperative elements.

These games give over-stressed and highly programmed teens a chance to release energy in an atmosphere that builds tolerance for mistakes. In treatment for anxiety, it does not work to avoid fears, but one must slowly address them in a context of safety. These attachment games can help relax some of the tensions associated with tests, relationships with friends, and problems in the family. You can tell these games are going well if there is humor and everyone can unwind, lose track of time, and drop their guard. Some teens will need to slowly get used to a group before joining in.

Playing with anxious teens can feel like a paradox. Anxious teens can feel uptight worrying that they will get in trouble if they play, but mentors can offer space for failure and a way to work through these fears. Imagination is the cure, allowing teens to release energy and stress that they must constantly use to shore up the self. By relaxing into the future, play becomes non-competitive and cooperative rather than a form of getting it right. God playfully enjoyed the act of creation, and teens can learn to do so as well.

Mentorship can combine these elements of attachment play, including an attitude of gentleness and hope that imagines more than the teenager thought possible. Joy is built upon changes in brain and body, identity and community, and it can be fostered through non-competitive practices that reflect God's playful nature. Joy is linked to empathy and gratitude, and comes from both being respected and showing respect to others. The potential for joy, for both being at home in the world and transcending oneself, is a rich gift of faith that opens the horizons of adolescents towards what is possible, making them more curious and engaged students of the world and their own experience.

Mentoring for Joy

In addition to fostering a non-competitive youth experience, leaders can engage in mentorship with one-on-one mentorship with anxious teens, a practice that shares aspects of discipleship. We think of mentoring as a spiritual practice that can promote joy, and a practice that lends itself naturally to supporting adolescents. Mentoring is defined as intentional social interactions in which non-parental adults or older peers without advanced professional training (in mentoring) provide guidance and other forms of support to youth that is intended to benefit one or more areas of their development *and* fosters ongoing significant interpersonal ties and mentoring activities that occur regularly.<sup>29</sup>

Mentoring is a practice that has spiritual overtones, much like Christian practices of prayer, worship, discernment, and hospitality.<sup>30</sup> Spirituality is a process of human life and development focusing on the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being; in relationship with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood (e.g., in animistic, atheistic, nontheistic, polytheistic, theistic, or other ways); orienting around centrally significant priorities; and engaging a sense of the transcendent (experienced as deeply profound, sacred, or transpersonal).<sup>31</sup> We think mentoring adolescents in ways that include these identified qualities of spiritual practices holds ameliorative potential for anxiety.

Of particular interest to us is an approach to mentoring—and to spiritual practices—that promotes what is termed positive youth development, a way of relating to and working with youth that begins with a focus on strengths, as opposed to deficits, and on potentials as opposed to limits. The particular approach we advocate focuses on promoting six “Cs”: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution.<sup>32</sup>

To promote *competence*, focus on your mentee’s interests and support him/her in these activities without dominating the agenda. Recognize what your mentee excels at and encourage him/her to invest in activities that emphasize associated skills. Point out to your mentee see that

his/her skills can be applied to other areas of life, including where he/she feels less competent. Perhaps most important, seek to turn mistakes into occasions for learning and growing.

To foster *confidence*, help your mentee find a community of support that honors, loves, and values him/her unconditionally. Help youth form connections with institutions and people he/she values, seeks solidarity with, and can make contributions to.

In a similar manner, fostering *connections* may follow from mentors helping mentees to speak out about what they value and for which they are passionate, which also builds confidence as they feel like they are listened to and, in turn, are valued.

Adolescence is a time when *character* development becomes more psychologically and spiritually consuming, meaning adolescents want very much to figure out who they are, what they value, how they wish to behave, and who they want to be as they mature into early adulthood. They benefit from mentors sharing their own values and modeling behaviors consistent with the kind of character the mentor embraces and seeks to impart to others. If you don't approve of a friend, a relationship, or an activity, speak out! Let your mentee know your values and explain why some behaviors aren't acceptable, and be sure that you act accordingly as you are a primary role model for your mentee.

*Caring* invites others to care. As some youth will display an "I don't care" attitude, mentors can offer an alternative, namely, "I care deeply about..." Moreover, mentors can invite mentees to act on their passions to become involved in the work of their schools, congregations, or local, national, or international organizations that champion caring and social justice.

A focus on helping mentees make meaningful *contributions* to others' lives and to the public good also follows from advocating publically for youth and for their participation in the leadership of communities and institutions to welcome youth participation and by helping garner resources for helping youth realize their goals to contribute. We hold that mentoring should involve intentional

efforts related to advocacy on behalf of mentees interests as well as broader interests in service to the public good.

### Conclusion: Joy Requires Deep Connections

A deep sense of joy joins with a feeling of being connected to others, which mentoring relationship foster. According to the psychiatrist Edward M. Hallowell, strengthening our ties of *connectedness* hold the most promise for alleviating worry and, by extension, anxiety. Hallowell thinks of *connectedness* in terms of being in relationship to something larger than oneself. These relationships will certainly be with other individuals, but also with groups of people as well as with institutions and organizations, including those with interests tied to transcendent, spiritual, or religious values and experiences.<sup>33</sup>

Whether to other people, institutions or movements, or to God, our connections serve as grounds for reassurance. Hallowell says this reassurance takes the form of “a voice that says everything will be OK.”<sup>34</sup> Mentoring relationships that promote connectedness can be a conduit for this ongoing reassurance, so that youth such as Zack may find more quiet for their souls.

We think this quiet comes by way of finding deeper joy in one’s self-understanding, relationships, and sense of purpose, all of which, for spiritually-oriented youth, relate to their perceptions of God and of themselves in relationship to God and others. Mentors become representatives of divine love, and as such, they may help youth experience something akin to what is written in the scriptures: “I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” (Philemon 1:7).

### Additional Resources

Davidai & Gilovich (2016), "The headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry: An availability bias in assessments of barriers and blessings," *Journal of Personal & Social Psychology*, Dec, 111:6, 835-851.

Robert Emmons (2007). *Thanks: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Amanda J. Rose & Karen D. Rupolph, "A Review of Sex Differences in Peer Relationship Processes: Potential Trade-Offs for the Emotional and Behavioral Development of Girls and Boys," *Psychological Bulletin*, 132:1, Jan 2006: 98-131.

Aletha J. Solter (2013), *Attachment Play: How to Solve Children's Behavior Problems with Play, Laughter, and Connection*. Shining Star Press: Goleta, CA.

Chris Taylor (2010), *A Practical Guide for Caring for Children and Teenagers with Attachment Difficulties*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Jean Twenge (2017), *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 and Schuster.

Stephanie Burnett Hayes & Sarah Jayne Blakemore (2009), "The Development of Adolescent Social Cognition," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1167: 1: 51-56.

Marlene M. Moretti & Maya Peled (2004), "Adolescent-Parent Attachment: Bonds that Support

Healthy Development,” *Paediatr. Children’s Health* Oct, 9:8, 551-555.

Bernardo Ruiz, Angie Thomas (2017), *The Hate U Give*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susanna Schrobsdorff, “Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright,” *Time*, October 26, 2016: <http://time.com/magazine/us/4547305/november-7th-2016-vol-188-no-19-u-s/>; Jeffrey Bernstein, Ph.D., “The Rising Epidemic of Anxiety in Children and Teens,” *Psychology Today*, posted January 23, 2016: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/liking-the-child-you-love/201601/the-rising-epidemic-anxiety-in-children-and-teens>.

<sup>2</sup> A diagnosis of anxiety disorder means a person’s experience of anxiety meets diagnostic criteria as specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (DSM-V).

<sup>3</sup> Harvard Medical School, 2007. National Comorbidity Survey (NCS). (2017, August 21), <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Village Behavioral Health: <http://www.villagebh.com/disorders/anxiety/symptoms-signs-effects#Statistics>

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Burnett Hayes & Sarah Jayne Blakemore (2009), “The Development of Adolescent Social Cognition,” 52.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Clea McNealy and Jayne Blanchard, *The Teen Years Explained*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Evangelia P. Galanaki, “The Imaginary Audience and the Personal Fable: A Test of Daniel Elkind’s Theory of Adolescent Egocentrism,” *Psychology*, 2012, 3:6, 457.

<sup>9</sup> Consuelo Arbona and Thomas G. Power, “Parental attachment and self-esteem,” 40.

<sup>10</sup> Marlene M. Moretti & Maya Peled (2004), “Adolescent-Parent Attachment: Bonds that Support Healthy Development”, 551.

<sup>11</sup> James W. Fowler, *The Stages of Faith*, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Berry, Phinney, Kwak, and Sam, “Introduction: Goals and Research Framework for Studying Immigrant Youth,” 6.

<sup>14</sup> Melinda Miceli, *Standing Out, Standing Together*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Bernardo Ruiz, *Los Graduados*.

<sup>17</sup> Monica McGoldrick, “The Legacy of Unresolved Loss.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzY-njtfX-U>

<sup>18</sup> See Allan Hugh Cole Jr., *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22.

<sup>20</sup> See Allan Hugh Cole Jr., *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> This view is influenced by the rubrics put forth by Paul Tillich in his classic book *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952/1980).

<sup>24</sup> A. Rose and KRudolph, “A Review of Sex Differences in Peer Relationship Processes,” 100.

<sup>25</sup> Davidai and Gilovich, “The Headwinds/Tailwinds Assymetry,” 835.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Twenge, *I-Gen*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104.

<sup>28</sup> Aletha Solter, *Attachment Play*, 13-25.

---

<sup>29</sup> David L DuBois and Michael J. Karcher, “Youth Mentoring in Contemporary Perspective, *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> For a fuller treatment of Christian spiritual practices, see Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Sheridan, M. J. (2011). The Spiritual Person, in Hutchinson, E. D., et al, *Dimensions of human behavior: Person and Environment* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.),163-208.

Canda, E.R. & Furman, L.D. (2010). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 75.

<sup>32</sup> See Richard M. Lerner, Christopher M Napolitano, Michelle J. Boyd, Megan K Mueller, and Kristina S. Callina, “Mentoring and Positive Youth Development,” in David L. DuBois and Michael J. Karcher (eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring, 2nd Edition* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 17-27.

<sup>33</sup> Edward M. Hallowell, *Worry: Hope and Help for a Common Condition* (New York: Random House, 2002), 275.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.