

Help for anxious days during the COVID-19 pandemic



As cases of COVID-19 increase and social life is more and more restricted, levels of fear and anxiety increase. A wide range of common reactions will be visible over the next few days and weeks. These may include:

- Anxiety, worry, fear
- Difficulty concentrating and/or sleeping
- Feeling helpless and confused
- Frustration and even anger
- Scepticism and bravado
- Social withdrawal
- Excitement and curiosity

Even Christians who know the One who holds the future will also fear the unknown. Very few of us have lived through anything like this before. Christians will experience fear (2 Cor. 7:5; 12:20; Gal 4:11), but just as we have joy in the midst of sorrow (2 Cor. 7:4; Phil. 2:17–18; 1 Th. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:6), Christ gives us confidence and hope amidst fear and worry.

How our brains respond

It helps to understand something of the way our brains respond to the current crisis. This might give you perspective on your own feelings and on reactions from other people.

Everyone experiences fear and anxiety at some point in their lives. Anxiety is a protective mechanism to help us avoid anticipated or potential threats. Fear is a response to a perceived or imminent threat. Both are normal and include cognitive and behavioural responses.

Normally, our brains manage fear and anxiety without allowing them to interfere with our daily functioning. If there is a nearby threat, the brain

assesses it and may amplify or suppress our anxiety and fear. In order to function well these normal responses have to be moderated through an accurate perspective about our environment. Within the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, this can be difficult even for people with no previous experience with anxiety.

Anxiety employs multiple areas of the brain, cognitive and emotional. The amygdala, a small area buried deep in the brain is consistently active in anxiety. It is responsible for, among other functions, processing our emotional response to what is happening in our environment.

It seems that when the amygdala is over stimulated, as it will be just now, we are less capable of a realistic perception of threats and of regulating emotions. If you have found yourself particularly jumpy or weepy this week, that's your amygdala (over) functioning.

In the current context with constant anticipation of negative events, our brains recruit several parts together referred to as the 'fear network'.

During periods of anxiety, this network amplifies our feelings and draws us into a cascading cycle of anxiety and fear. It takes a conscious effort to stop that cascade as the brain functions to help us get very good at whatever we spend our time doing. If we reinforce fear and anxiety, that is what we learn. We need to actively refocus attention on other things to break the cascading cycle. This same mechanism then is used by the brain to strengthen accurate and adaptive thinking patterns.

Strategies to stop anxiety and fear growing

It is appropriate that we should trust in God in this situation, but we know this is not always easy to do. Here are some practical ways in which we can care for ourselves and others.

1. Remind yourself of God's loving care for His people

Think about what you know is true and most secure — God and his promises. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism states that we are not our own, but belong to Jesus, who has fully paid for our sin with His blood. What is more, He watches over us in such a way that not a hair can fall from our head without the will of the Father in heaven. We can take great comfort in knowing that no matter what the situation, nothing happens that is outside of God's sovereign will. That does not mean that we will never get sick, but we know that even in the midst of illness, He is with us and will not leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

It is worth memorising some Bible passages that remind you of these truths. There are some suggestions at the end of this sheet, a separate page you can tuck into your Bible or wallet.

A helpful way to keep focus on this truth is to set a regular time aside each day to spend with the Lord in prayer and reading the Word. Pray specifically about your areas of anxiety and disappointment — your own health, finances, family and friends, changing plans.

2. Seek reliable information and keep the situation in perspective

If you expose your brain to constant alarming and exaggerated warnings of threat, you reinforce constant over-reaction. Your reactions will be far healthier if you find reliable information and take time to analyse your fears. It is very easy to imagine worst-case scenarios that will escalate your anxiety. Make sure your information comes from credible sources such as the Australian Government site or WHO. Don't dwell on rumours and alarmist reports. Set some limits on how much media and social media you consume. (If you have children or teenagers, help them to do the same).

Remember that following the basic hygiene and distancing precautions will go a long way toward keeping you and your family safe.

3. Look after yourself

- Care for your physical health: get sufficient sleep, eat a healthy diet, get outside, exercise.
- Even if you are in self-isolation, make an effort to connect by phone, email or video chat with family and friends who can support you and whom you can support.
- Monitor your internal dialogue as well as how you speak to others. Avoid using catastrophic language. Try saying 'that's concerning', rather than 'that's awful'.
- Practice simple relaxation techniques such as progressive muscular relaxation and calm breathing.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, and use of other non-prescribed drugs.
- Anxiety usually seeks out confirmation which could make anxiety worse. It is good to acknowledge and understand your emotions and then to turn your mind to things that are achievable e.g. make your bed, get dressed, go for a walk, listen to upbeat music, read a book, do some cooking or gardening. Focus on things that you can do or find someone to talk to who will give you an accurate perspective.
- Be aware of your assumptions. Someone who coughs does not necessarily carry the virus.
- Be aware of behaviour that reinforces anxiety. Don't stay in bed. Keep your areas clear and clean. Get yourself to outside and enjoy the sunrise and the trees, stretch your muscle, smile and hum.
- Practice gratitude. This is an opportune time to call someone to thank them for something they do, say or model that encourages you.

You can know the presence of God in this crisis. He promises his protection, guidance and love. Psalm 73 says "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory". As we have to depend on the Lord more fully, we will become more conscious of his presence and care. That may be the best outcome of a terrible crisis.

A useful resource: Edward T. Welch, *A Small Book for the Anxious Heart: Meditations on Fear, Worry, and Trust*

<https://newgrowthpress.com/a-small-book-for-the-anxious-heart-meditations-on-fear-worry-and-trust-ebook/>

Wisdom from God's Word

Matthew 6:25-27

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

John 14:1

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me."

Proverbs 12:25

Anxiety weighs down the heart,
but a kind word cheers it up.

Isaiah 26:3

You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.

Jeremiah 17:7-8

But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
whose confidence is in him.
They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.

Psalms 55:22

Cast your cares on the LORD
and he will sustain you;
he will never let
the righteous be shaken.

Psalms 94:18-19

When I said, "My foot is slipping,"
your unfailing love, LORD, supported
me.
When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.

1 Peter 5:7

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Psalms 73:23-28

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides
you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my
refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds."

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.