



## Does Faith Offer a Path Out of Anxiety?

by Allison Ricciardi

Feeling overwhelmed is a common complaint these days. Let's face it, being overwhelmed goes hand-in-hand with anxiety. The sheer volume of things that come at us on a daily basis is simply staggering. With managing the many duties of work and family life, endless noise, and the pressure of social media, it's no wonder anti-anxiety drugs are the most commonly prescribed medications in America.

But what about when anxiety is more than simply being overwhelmed, when those ruminating thoughts keep you up at night, or when attempting even simple things can cause unbearable distress?

In our fast-paced culture, living the affirming, peaceful, and leisurely life that is most consistent with our human nature is hard to do. God designed us in his image—to rest on the seventh day. I don't have to tell you how few of us do that. This frantic pace, this race to keep up with the Joneses—or today, the Kardashians—leaves us little room to process and make sense of our feelings. The emotional bumps, bruises, and traumas of life get swept into the vortex of our busy lives.

And there's the problem: Feelings have a pesky way of affecting us, even when we've buried them deeply. We find ourselves unable to make sense of the anxiety and depression that has become our "normal."

The first step to conquering anxiety is to recognize it for what it is, the emotion of fear run amok—fear that has overflowed its banks and gone beyond reason. Instead of evaluating options and making rational decisions, fear takes the lead and invariably leads us to make worse decisions that provoke more anxiety.

The second step is to make friends with all of your emotions and realize that God intended each one, even fear and anger, to have a rightful place in your psyche. In order to be healthy and free of anxiety you need to experience your emotions and then guide how you express or act on them by reason. Feeling and identifying your emotions is key and that takes some quiet time, prayer, and reflection. Continuing in a frantic pace won't afford you the opportunity for real and lasting healing. You have to do something differently if you want your life to change.

The next step is to tune into your thoughts. Many assert that it's thoughts that drive our feelings and that's true to some extent, but our feelings actually precede our thoughts. Thoughts arise as we try to make sense of our feelings and that's where the trouble can really ratchet up. There's a great acronym associated with fear: False Evidence Appearing Real. Discerning reality is what's needed. Talking to someone objective such as a therapist can be very helpful in sorting out the confusion and getting a healthier perspective.

Much of what drives anxiety is a tendency to get stuck focusing on the past or the future. Regrets over past sins or decisions, lack of forgiveness for wrongs we've suffered, and worry about the future are the frequent foundation of many anxiety disorders.

Unresolved and untreated trauma has been demonstrated more and more to be a culprit for many suffering anxiety and depression. And a trauma does not have to be a huge event such as the 9-11 attacks, but instead can be any experience that overwhelms your ability to cope and that has an element of inescapability. Growing up in a violent or alcoholic home would certainly qualify, especially because a child's coping abilities are less developed and they cannot escape the situation on their own. These events get glued in a part of the brain that can be triggered easily when similar circumstances are experienced. Sadly, that explains why talking about current stressors isn't enough sometimes. The original trauma needs to be identified, healed, and deactivated.

Psychology and medication are not the only therapies that offer real relief. Faith can also offer a path to healing. Talking things out with a therapist can be helpful and medication may ease a percentage of your symptoms, but may not always bring permanent healing.

In order to be healthy, you need to be living in the present and in touch with reality. Prayer opens the conversation with the Eternal Now, the Triune God who is outside of time and space. Prayer puts you firmly in contact with The Eternal Reality, the Great I Am and that is the beginning of sanity.

Praying through anxiety can be tricky. When anxious, our tendency is to favor prayers of petition which can become a reinforcement of your fears as you repeat them over and over. Prayer must be more of a listening endeavor to conquer anxiety. Reading and meditating on scripture, spending time with Jesus before the blessed sacrament, and meditating on the Rosary are powerful antidotes to anxiety and fear. By inviting God into the troubling events of your past and asking him to apply his graces and healing can be powerful moments that free you from years of distress. Seeing his actions throughout history in the scriptures can reassure you that he has a perfect plan and that he uses evil ultimately for good. There's nothing lurking in your future that he can't help you to handle.

It all begins with a conversation.



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We've also asked our team of experts to provide resources for you to get more information. **If you are in crisis or you think you may have an emergency, call your doctor or 911 immediately. If you're having suicidal thoughts, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to speak with a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area at any time (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline). If you are located outside the United States, call your local emergency line immediately.**

With the help of professionals and those who have struggled with stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, we're offering insights, resources, and suggestions for a path to healing and a road to hope in the midst of dark and scary times.