

A stylized blue icon of a house with a chimney, positioned centrally above the text.

CLOSE TO HOME

DEALING WITH
**extreme
anxiety**

A series of abstract, light-colored brushstrokes in shades of orange and yellow, sweeping across the lower half of the page.

From fear to compassion

From the beginning of his life, the world was a difficult place for Ted.¹ When he was in the womb he had a rapid heartbeat and was extremely active. As an infant, he was very colicky. When his mother picked him up from preschool, he asked her secret questions every day to make sure she wasn't a kidnaper wearing a mommy-mask. His early years were filled with worry despite his mother's consistent attention and care. He was very sensitive to hot and cold, and to physical pain. Anxiety, at least partially, came from his genetic makeup.

Ted's anxiety also came from several environmental factors. His mother was quite anxious herself. They often spoke together about their anxieties but rather than soothing his fears, their conversations made Ted more worried.

Ted's religious upbringing may have played a role in his anxiety. He grew up in a strongly religious home and went to a high school run by his denomination. In church and at home, Ted was taught about a powerful God who was waiting to punish anyone who went astray. He came to believe that suffering was the punishment for human sin. The emphasis was on fear of God rather than the love of God.

As Ted entered college he learned more about suffering in the world particularly in Africa, in inner cities, and also in personal situations involving family and friends. Ted tried to make sense of this in his worldview where suffering was a result of God's punishment. He became overwhelmed with the power human beings have. He felt that God's grace was severely limited by sin. Ted was filled with anxiety about avoiding God's punishment, and he doubted God's ability to save him in the everyday situations of a sin-

ful world. This caused Ted to feel responsible for control and safety of his environment. He was left feeling helpless and despairing.

As an adult, Ted realized that he had a problem with anxiety. He compared himself to his friends, who had worries of their

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own, but were not consumed by them. Ted's anxieties were limiting his ability to try new things and enjoy life fully. He decided to go to a therapist who helped him identify current and childhood patterns of relating to others that increased his anxiety.

Over the years Ted has seen a number of different therapists who helped him focus on the thoughts and beliefs underlying his anxiety. He came to a greater understanding of why he was anxious, and it helped him cope with his anxiety, but it never disappeared.

Psychiatrists prescribed medications of various kinds to help Ted. Some drugs decreased his anxiety, but they also caused weight gain and decreased energy, spiritual connection, and sexual desire. Other medications were ineffective or even increased his anxiety. Still others helped him achieve a measure of balance.

Ted still lives with anxiety and struggles to find the best strategies for living with it. But he also notices that, with his heightened sensitivity, he can better understand the suffering of others. In fact, this gift of empathy has influenced his calling to work among others with special needs.

¹ An assumed name.

What is anxiety?

Some level of anxiety is a normal part of everyday life for us all. But when you have a consistent inability to relax, irrational fear, irritability, muscle aches, repeated uncontrolled thoughts, inability to sleep, or worry for no apparent reason—then you may have what is known as an anxiety disorder. Your anxiety feels overwhelming and beyond your control.

Myth: People with anxiety problems are mentally weak and lack faith.

Fact: An anxiety disorder is not a character weakness but a psychological condition that can be treated. Many dedicated and faithful Christians have an anxiety disorder.

Types of anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders affect approximately 15% of North Americans. People experience them in a variety of ways. The most common are:

- **Panic attack:** a sudden onset of intense fear or terror, accompanied by symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pain or discomfort, and fear of “going crazy” or dying. Some people think they are having a heart attack when, in fact, it may be anxiety.
- **Phobia:** exposure to a feared situation (such as social or performance situations) or object (such as heights or spiders). A phobia can lead to extreme anxiety and panic, even when the person knows the fear is irrational. Avoiding these situations or objects reduces the ability to lead a normal life.

Some facts about anxiety disorders

- People with an anxiety disorder are three to five times more likely to go to the doctor and six times more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric disorders than non-sufferers.
 - Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with a generalized anxiety disorder.
 - Rape is the most common trigger of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Childhood sexual abuse is a strong predictor for developing PTSD later in life.
 - Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is usually diagnosed in adolescence, although symptoms are often observed in childhood.
 - Behavioral retraining is more effective for persons with specific fears than those who have a general sense of anxiety.
 - People with a negative image of God as passive or harsh report high levels of stress and anxiety.
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- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** characterized by obsessions (intrusive and anxiety-producing thoughts) and/or compulsions (behaviors such as frequent hand-washing or checking).
 - **Post-traumatic stress disorder:** re-experiencing an extremely traumatic event or its long-term effects.
 - **Generalized anxiety disorder:** persistent and excessive worry across many situations or environments over a period longer than six months.

Anxiety, the Bible, and the Christian story

The Bible makes it clear that God wants us to experience safety and security. “Peace I leave with you,” Jesus tells his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Just as God cares for the sparrows and the lilies, God will care for human creatures too (Matthew 6:25-34).

So why does anxiety continue, even for Christians? Ted’s story shows how difficult it can be to feel peace in this world. If you struggle with anxiety, you may feel guilty because you think that something is lacking in your faith.

While you can learn to find comfort and strength through your faith, complete relief isn’t guaranteed by having enough faith, praying consistently, or reading Scripture. As in so many areas of our lives, the promises of God need to be worked out slowly, with personal discipline and mentorship from others, and possibly with the help of professionals.

Every one of us is wonderfully made in the image of God—even if we suffer from extreme anxiety. While Ted often felt his anxiety was a “thorn in his side,” he also began to experience it as a part of his Christian life. Ted noticed that, with his heightened sensitivity, he had a unique ability to understand the suffering of others and to care for them. He sometimes felt a special connection to the heart of God because of this.

Anxiety is often a fear of danger. Sometimes the anxiety is realistic, but at other times it is not. For Christians, a sense of safety comes from trusting God, rather than pretending that everyday life has no risks. When anxiety results from wanting

too much control over ourselves or our environment, this may be an opportunity to yield to the will of God, letting go of our need to control. God is ultimately in control and wants our burden to be light (Matthew 11:30). At the same time, God can help us

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feel confident in our ability to make decisions (2 Timothy 1:7).

Anxiety can come from a lack of relationship with others. God provides a secure base when all other relationships and situations bring anxiety. When you worry that others are thinking bad thoughts about you, it might be useful to remember that they struggle, too, even though they are made in God’s image. Their judgment of us cannot separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:39).

Steps toward healing

Because of the different origins and forms of anxiety, each person will follow a healing path that is unique to him or her. If you are experiencing anxiety that disrupts your life, consider these steps toward healing:

- 1. Learn about anxiety disorders.** See the links on page 11 to determine whether you may be dealing with an anxiety disorder, and what sources of coping or healing are available.
- 2. Don't suffer alone.** As difficult as it is to open up to others, gaining the support of others is essential to your healing journey. Others are standing by as a source of empathy, encouragement, and practical help.
 - Find a friend to share your concerns.
 - Meet with a pastor or caring leader at your church.
 - Seek out referrals to a psychologist or other professional counselor.
 - Join a small group at your church or a counseling center.
 - Call a local crisis line; numbers are often listed at the front of your phone book.
- 3. Seek professional help.** Anxiety disorders have biological, environmental, emotional, and spiritual components. You may need medication to help calm you down so that you can work through the deeper issues. But this likely won't be enough.

A therapist—a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other mental health professional—will help you understand what causes the anxiety, and will help you find a solution that fits your situation.

Your therapist will ask you to share

your history and experiences around anxiety. For example, if your anxiety is a result of trauma (such as war, an accident, or death of a child), sharing about those events can be helpful. Approaches that therapists take include the following:

- In behavior therapy, you learn to control unwanted fears through retraining and coping skills.
 - When the anxiety appears in automatic thoughts, cognitive therapy can help you monitor your thought patterns and determine whether your anxious thoughts are realistic.
 - Psychodynamic psychotherapy works best with those who want or need to explore the unconscious factors or relationship patterns that contribute to their symptoms, especially early childhood experiences.
 - Your therapist may also teach you relaxation skills.
- 4. Practice positive behaviors.** Intentionally practice relaxation or plan enjoyable activities. These can help you avoid getting stuck thinking about or experiencing anxiety, while enjoying life more.

Anxiety may be a part of your life, but it does not need to cripple you or your relationship with God. Seeking help means that you are being a faithful steward of the body and mind God gave you.

For further awareness

Books

Hart, Archibald D. *The Anxiety Cure*.
Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001.

Clinton, Tim & Gary Sibcy. *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do*. Brentwood: Integrity Publishers, 2009. See especially, G. Ohlschlager's chapter, "God and you: Embracing the relationship that transcends all others."

Websites

Anxiety Disorder Association of America
www.adaa.org

Canadian Mental Health Association
www.cmha.ca

Mental Help Net
www.mentalhelp.net

National Mental Health Association
www.nmha.org

The National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

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**Local resources for help with
extreme anxiety:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome

