

What Do We Do With Anxiety?

Hand out index cards and write on them these three statements:

What I need to remember –

What I need to stop doing –

What I'm going to try –

-Begin by telling Sam's story.

-all good until after spring break, then crying and pulling off our leg. Jason started taking him. In prayer a friend had the thought of a movie. Finding Nemo. He gets lost on the first day of school. He was worried we would leave him behind. Came up with strategies.

-This was the beginning of our journey...we noticed that whenever something big came up, our son would have these funny "tics" I call them. Things like gulping, looking up at the ceiling, licking his hands. Anxiety is a funny thing.

There are different types of anxiety. And we all feel anxiety at different levels. I just want to reiterate here what Kris said in his message a few weeks ago, **feeling anxious is not a sin!** God created us with feelings and they tell us something important. In fact our feelings are meant to be a smoke signal. They tell us that something is happening inside us, they are meant to inform us that something got stirred up inside. They are meant to inform us, but not to rule us! When we feel high levels of anxiety or anger or shame...it should alert us that something is going on inside and we need to spend some time thinking about what is going on, we may need help to do that and we probably need someone to help us too – perhaps go for inner healing with our personal ministry team. But feeling anxious is not a sin. However, God does say "Do not be anxious about anything". God does not want us stuck in our anxiousness. So I'm going to show you 2 main ways we can work on our anxiety.

But first I just want to show you the 4 main categories of anxiety....

1. **General worry** – what's on the news, your child's future, vacation...

2. **Panic/separation anxiety** – panic attacks, kids who have lots of trouble leaving you (now this is a normal stage of development in kids but when kids are unable to calm or they miss out on good, fun things because they are afraid)

3. **Obsessive** – it's where you have to do something a certain number of times in order to feel safe. You use behavior to try and calm fear. Let me just say here, we can all have some obsessive tendencies and we joke about being OCD. But for people who struggle they find they can't stop doing these behaviors because it somehow meets a need for them. I want to add, after sharing about our son

and reading, lots of boys tend to have some OCD tendencies, especially young ones. They will line up cars, be particular about where things go. Don't stress about it! And they will have funny tics. They are coping strategies sometimes to deal with stress...don't make a big deal about them. It won't help! Pray, see if there is a trigger you can talk about with them.

4. Social/relational anxiety – let me try something here. Close your eyes for a second. I'm just going to ask you to put up your hand if you ever felt this way since having kids.

-put up your hand if you ever felt like you don't have any friends

-put up your hand if you felt like everyone else has places to go and people to do things with except you

-put up your hand if you felt hurt by someone when they didn't say hi or invite you someplace

-put up your hand if you sometimes feel insecure or out of place coming to Selah or church

So open your eyes and look around. We all feel this way! You are not alone in feeling this. One of the big things we want for Selah is for it to be a place of community and belonging. But the devil sure doesn't want us to be encouraged or feel like we have places to go when we struggle. He wants us lonely, insecure, hurting, feeling sorry for ourselves. Can we not do that anymore? Can we see that everyone else is the same as me – and reach out, give each other the benefit of the doubt when they don't smile at us, talk back to the devil when he tells you, you don't have people to be with and you don't really fit in. Because you do! Here!

A. The Three-Headed Monster

I learnt this from the Turnaround program that I went through with my son. So let's think of anxiety as a three headed monster. There are wacky thoughts, yucky feelings and zany behaviors. So often when dealing with anxiety in our kids we just focus on the zany behaviors because it's what we see, it's in our face. The screaming when we leave them at church, the weird tics and funny things they do. But the behaviors can't be our starting point.

And really with us as adults, don't we have zany behaviors too sometimes when it comes to fear? We just chose more socially acceptable ones like spending oodles of time on our devices so we don't have to think about stuff. Or eating, even healthy eating or sleeping more or loads of exercise. Whenever something in our life is too much – we would actually say "they're obsessive about..." it's a smoke signal to us to ask why? What's beneath that?

So I'm actually not going to talk too much on the zany behaviors or our ways of coping. I'm going to talk about the other two heads because I think once you deal with those two, a lot of the ways of coping go away naturally.

1. So let's look at wacky thoughts, **how you think**.

Romans 12:2 says "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think"

One of the ways that fear and worry can creep into our life is through wrong thought patterns. A great way to begin helping your child deal with their wrong thought patterns is to deal with your own first. There are two main reasons for this. The first being, we unknowingly pass on these ways of thinking to our kids. You've heard the phrase "more is caught than taught"? We model so much to our kids and they pick it up just by living with us day in and day out. So changing our wrong thoughts will have a positive effect on our kids because as we change, we will naturally pass that on to our kids too!

The second reason is that as we think through and deal with our wrong thought patterns we then have life experience and stories to share with our kids. When we can tell them that we struggle with that lie too it helps our kids feel they are not alone in something. And when we show them how we dealt with the wrong thoughts it helps them follow our lead. Plus it is so much easier to teach something we know about personally rather than teaching something we have just read about.

One of the reasons we need to deal with wrong thought patterns is because they can make us feel scared, worried or sad. So I want to give you time to go through these. I'm going to let you read through them yourselves and identify ones you see. Then write down what those types of thoughts sound like in your brain...what exactly do you say to yourself. Then stop! We're going to share them at your table. (15 min)

-Lead them through confess and listen in prayer section from the front.

-Then have them read through steps to correct wrong thinking and chose one. Share at tables what they want to work on. (15 min)

One thing that is hugely helpful in correcting your thinking is daily prayer and journaling. Take time to journal what you are thinking, what is worrying you for the day. And then talk to God about it. Get his perspective. Even little things – like I was worrying the other day about my boys not passing swimming and how they would take that, I was trying to figure times to go practice. This was always swirling around in the back of my conscious thoughts but I never said it out loud or really acknowledged it until one morning in my devos. And it was so good to talk to God about it!

Second head of the monster:

2. Yucky feelings or how your body reacts

We have talked about this a lot at Selah but I want to hit it again from the anxiety side now. The way to work on how your body feels or reacts to anxiety is by **working on quieting and scheduling rest**.

Here is a beautiful and amazing thing about how God created our body and mind. He made them to communicate with each other through our nervous system. So the brain tells the body to RUN because there is a big dog and your adrenaline kicks in so you can sprint. We all get that way of communicating- the brain talking to the body. But the body also talks to the brain. When your stomach aches, your heart beats faster, your palms get sweaty, you have a headache, maybe your shoulder muscles are tense, those things can all be messages telling your brain that you are worried about something. But often we don't listen to our bodies and what they are telling us. It is two-way communication and we need to learn to use both methods of communication. So we can talk about our fears and pray about them and deal with them on the brain side, but we can also tackle fear from the body side by learning to quiet our bodies. Things like tensing and releasing your muscles. Deep breathing. Listening to worship music.

Our brains are made to go high speed and low speed. And they are made to do that in cycles, not to stay at high speed all the time. What can happen when people suffer from anxiety is that their brain stays at the high speed and cannot find a way to get back to low speed. But God designed the connection between our brains and our bodies in such a way that we can tackle it from both ends. So talking about it helps, but so does learning to quiet the body which then sends the message to the brain to S-L-O-W down and switch to low speed. This is why it also works well to talk slowly to your child, in a lower voice when they having a particularly anxious moment. As they hear you and see you breathing deeply while you are talking to them it sends a message to their brain to slow down too.

But learning to quiet our bodies is something we have to practice and get good at. In our society today we do not naturally take time to rest, be quiet, turn off all devices, slow down. We don't sit and reflect, be still. And so our kids are not learning that either. They are moving fast, being constantly stimulated, and rushed around. So again, it starts with us as parents learning to quiet and beginning to see the value of quiet in our own lives first and then teaching it in smaller chunks to our children. But if we aren't willing to slow down ourselves, they won't either.

Can I suggest something here...one of the best ways to work on quieting is having daily devotion time. We as parents need to know how to find peace in Jesus before we can teach our kids to go to Jesus when they are afraid. This needs to be a regular time, consistent in order to be effective. Start small. Start with 15 minutes and get consistent with that.

One of the things we can do for our children who struggle with anxiety is to create a home that is calm and peaceful. What would that mean for you? Turning off music or TV during the day? Scheduling in quiet time for your kids? Looking at your calendar and dialing your life back so that you have space to breathe, relax and rest? Ask God to show you how much quiet your child needs and what that looks like. If your child is already exhibiting some zany behaviours they are showing you that their brain is whirring at high speed too often and they don't know how to get it to low speed. Help them by creating calm in your home. Your child needs you as their parent to guard how much they do and how much you do as a family. It may just be for a season, or maybe not. Maybe you are cringing at having to say no to things and spend more time at home? OH please try it! This is something you can DO for your child. Isn't that exciting and hopeful? It's a step you can take! And who knows, you may actually find you love how the change of pace changes your family and your own patience level.

I've included a scheduling rest prayer sheet for you to work through later.

B. How to view your child and their fears.

One of the things we need to do as parents is let go of a few things. **We need to let go of some of our expectations.** Fear and anxiety are often not quick fixes. And the behaviour that results from these strong emotions can be disruptive to your family. So you may have to let go of whatever you hoped or wanted for your family or your child in this season of life.

You need to let go of your own guilt and worry that it's your fault your child is dealing with this. Yes, do your part, but don't give the devil another foothold by letting guilt and worry infest your thoughts. Allow yourself to feel convicted of things you need to deal with and then repent and move forward thanks to God's grace and mercy.

You also need to accept that this is your life right now and that you will have to work with it rather than trying to fight against it. Rather than shoving your fearful child into Kidzland again, perhaps you need to go in there with them for the next while. Work with it rather than fight against it.

One final thing I had to let go of was my pride. Fear makes kids do some funny looking things. Like crawling under the bench for their first recital. I was sweating bullets trying to think of how to get him out. Or singing in the choir but fidgeting and counting the lights because it helped him cope! But take courage moms! Last Easter he went on stage and recited Romans 8 for all 4 services! How good is GOD!

A second thing to **consider is whether you have the right picture of fear/anxiety.** Fear is a normal emotion. God created this emotion and on the sixth day He said that everything He created was "good". We need to help our children normalize their experience of anxiety. LOTS of kids and adults struggle

with fear and anxiety. It is normal. What we don't want is for the fear to control us and keep us from doing what is good, normal, healthy and what God is calling us to do. We as parents need to have the right perspective on our child's fear because if we don't we will unconsciously treat them in ways that shame them which will make them feel alone causing them to withdraw and escalate the anxious behaviour. We need to accept that to them their fear is real and that they are not being manipulative or unreasonable because if we think they are being either of those two things it will lead to frustration in us as parents or seeing our child as a hopeless cause. Neither road will lead anywhere good for us as parents. If your child is being either of those things - then allow God to reveal that to you and then you will have a different issue to deal with rather than fear. But the best route to go is to assume this is real and to show your child compassion, grace, mercy and unconditional love.

One of the best things you can do for your child is to **be an encourager and not a critic. Be their advocate.** They have enough to deal with on their little plate in coping with this strong fear emotion. So be their champion and try to make things easier and smoother for them by advocating for them. Talk to their teachers, leaders, and explain what is going on with your child. Give suggestions of how they could help your child and see if they have any ideas as well. And most of all, love them unconditionally in how you talk to them and treat them. Most likely your child does not want to feel like she does or struggle with fear like he does and they could be embarrassed, ashamed, defeated or any host of discouraging emotions. Stand beside them and love on them, lift them up any chance you can, speak words of unconditional love over them. "You are such a gift to our family, you are so precious to me, I love you so very much, it doesn't matter what you do or don't do sweetie, I love you the same..." At all costs avoid the extremely destructive words of criticism and contempt.

A third thing to consider, and you might not want to hear this, but **things may get worse before they get better.** You start dealing with stuff, trying quieting techniques, building in rest, praying, and things are progressing until all of a sudden things seem to be getting worse. It may feel like things are falling apart, that you are going backwards, but really you are in the transition zone of going to the next phase of birthing something new. You are not spiralling downward, you are spiralling up! Don't give up, don't quit. Get a community around you to support you and encourage you as a parent so that you keep going!!!!

C. How to lead your child through their fears:

It's important not to take on too much. Your child needs to gain mastery over their environment. When possible, **let your child solve their own problems so that they gain confidence.** Behavioural inhibition, or over-protective parenting (helping too much) is linked to child anxiety. So don't do things for your child that they can do on their own. Let them do things for themselves. Your child has to learn to suffer well. They need to learn that they can go through hardships and

be ok. And you, as their parent, need to allow them to learn that. Stand back, watch from the fence, but let them learn this incredibly important lesson. Think about how Jesus “parents” us. He doesn’t jump in and do things for us that we need to do for ourselves. He lets us try, make mistakes, fail, get hurt, because He knows it will be good for us.

And then be there to encourage them and **help them frame their failures in a positive light!** **Remind them of the times they made it through!**

Help them come up with strategies to deal with their fears. Teach them to take baby steps. On the morning of camp my son flatly refused to go to camp. So I asked if he could get dressed this morning. Then we ate lunch. Then could he get into the vehicle. Baby steps all the way to camp!

You also need to **acknowledge your child’s feelings**. Validate what’s going on for them. Let them feel it even when it’s hard to watch. But there will also come a point where you notice they are stuck. Then help them by distracting them and getting them to focus outside themselves. One easy way to do this is have them drink ice water.

Some final random tidbits:

Pay close attention to what your child reads, watches or the types of video games they play. Prayerfully ask whether anything they are filling their mind with in the way of entertainment is causing them anxiety.

Make sure everyone is getting enough sleep. As a parent you need lots of sleep to have the mental energy to walk with your child in their fears. And your child needs enough sleep so their brain is rested enough to make the changes it needs to make in order to get past their strong fears.

Don’t forget to pray and fast!

Fasting allows us to take concentrated time to press into God on an issue and to get His heart and change our hearts. It acknowledges that we can’t do anything to fix this for our children but we know SOMEONE who can!

Very often as parents we can spend lots of time researching, talking and worrying about our children. And we neglect one of the most powerful gifts and tools we have as parents – prayer and fasting! Can I just encourage you in praying about this? God loves to work together with His people to bring about his purposes on this earth. And we know that God does not want our children to live in fear. It says in **Philippians 4:6 “Don’t worry about anything, instead pray about everything, tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done.”** We are not meant to worry. Not us, not our kids. We are meant to bring it to Jesus. And it starts with us as parents bringing our worries and fear to Jesus and our concerns about our kids. As we grow in doing this we can help our kids grow in it too and we can talk to them about our journey and what we are learning about God’s faithfulness. Kids love to hear stories about their parents trying something

and failing and then trying again and learning. It speaks to their little hearts that we were once like them and feel with them in their journey. So let's pray about everything! Show our kids how it's done.

I included a prayer sheet for you too.

Share what you wrote down on that index card...what you want to take away from this session.