

ANXIETY

the prodigal son journey

an anxiety reduction exercise
intended for use with mild to
moderate anxiety



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Disclaimer:

This material is not intended to take the place of medical management for anxiety, but rather, it is designed to be a complimentary anxiety-reduction-tool.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to anxiety, we all experience the effects. That's because anxiety is a byproduct of the brokenness and fallenness of this world as a result of sin.

In 1 Peter 5:7 we see the following: Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. This is one of those verses in which all the action begins and ends with Jesus. We cast our troubles in response to His loving invitation, and then Jesus replaces it with His peace, grace, and compassion. Yet how often do we pour out our anxiety but not experience Christ's peace? This may lead us to believe our faith is too small, or that there is something wrong with ourselves or our relationship with Jesus. The result is anxiety on top of anxiety instead of finding the peace of Christ.

How does this happen? Our negative self-talk gets the better of us. Whether it be from our mistakes, insecurities, or even how we interpret the difficulties that come our way, these things and so much more begin to shape how we see ourselves. As a result, we have a difficult time believing that we are a fully accepted child of God. Why? Because surely if we were, we would not have anxiety, right? Wrong.

Towards the end of this exercise, we will return to 1 Peter 5:7, hopefully with a more sustaining experience of our identity in Jesus. But first, let's take a closer look at The Prodigal Son. Please take a minute to read The Passion Translation (TPT) of Luke 15:11-32

ANXIETY REDUCTION EXERCISE

STEP 1

jot down your answers

1. Examine the prodigal passage and underline any anxiety producing moments.
2. When did the prodigal son create his own problems?
3. What and who made things worse for him?
4. Jot down a mistake that you have made that seemed to have had some fairly significant consequences.
5. What and who made things worse for you?
6. What do you imagine was the worst thing people were saying about the prodigal upon his return?
7. Now return to your mistake. What was the worst thing you imagined people were thinking about you?
8. Based on your mistake, what was your most negative thought about yourself?

Take at least a 5-10 minute break before moving on to Step Two. Do something that gets your mind off of your Step One responses.

Modifications: Instead of writing your answers, go for a walk and consider your responses. You can use art to draw your responses.

STEP anxiety reduction exercise

Read this Psalm out loud before you continue with Step Two:

Psalm 139: 23-24

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Return to question 6 in Step One:

Take a look at your reaction to that question. Which category or categories of thinking (listed below) do you think your response could fall under?

- All-or-nothing thinking: any mistake makes a person a complete failure
- Over-generalizing: everything always goes wrong
- Discounting any positives: if something good happens, anybody could have done that
- Jumping to conclusions and mind reading: readily interprets the reaction of others in the worst possible way
- Catastrophizing: exaggerate weaknesses
- Emotional reasoning: feelings are reality
- Inappropriate should statements: example- people should avoid people
- Self-labeling: people are their mistake
- Self-blame: events outside the person's control are their fault

Now repeat this process with questions 7 and 8 from Step One.

Take a moment. Did you notice any patterns here? Did you identify a thinking pattern that seems to be common for you?

STEP 3

anxiety reduction exercise

The list in Step Two was a list of cognitive distortions. A distortion is when our mind convinces us that something is true. These distortions add to our anxiety. This next step is designed to dial down some of the anxiety related to our distorted thinking.

To do this, let's return to the prodigal passage.

Notice when the prodigal son is making his way back home. Before he gets to the house and before he speaks, look what happens: *“and great compassion swelled up in his heart for his son who was returning home. So the father raced out to meet him. He swept him up in his arms, hugged him dearly, and kissed him over and over with tender love.”* Note that all of the action is from the father.

The way the father engages his prodigal son is the way that Jesus engages us in the midst of our anxiety. Our anxiety and our cognitive distortions are no match for Jesus. Much like the prodigal son and before we can utter a word, Jesus already knows what we need. Most importantly, He knows that more than anything else in the world, we need more of Him.

With this in mind, you get to claim these words as your own:
and great compassion swelled up in his heart for _____ who was returning home. So the father raced out to meet _____. He swept _____ up in his arms, hugged _____ dearly, and kissed _____ over and over with tender love.

Write your name or a favorite nickname in each blank. Read it out loud. Print off a copy and take it with you. Share it with others.

STEP 4 anxiety reduction exercise

Let's face it: when we have anxiety, we may not physically run from our home, but we sure wish we could. We want to hide. We want to ignore our pain and may even resort to our own version of reckless living to mask it. Oftentimes the last thing we believe is that Jesus would run to us.

It is time to go full circle and return to 1 Peter 5:7.

1. Read the verse: Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.
2. Next, read your personalized version of the prodigal text from Step Three.
3. Hold out your hands, palms up, fingers spread, and then slowly turn your hands over as you say the following:
4. "Lord, I let go of _____ (name something specifically and if there are any cognitive distortions, include those as well), because You care for me."
5. Also add if you would like: "Receive from me whatever I did not even realize that I need to let go of."
6. Then declare the truth: "Jesus is receiving my anxiety, because He said that He would. He is not disappointed in me if I am still feeling anxious. He meets me with compassion."

Practice Step Four as many times as needed each day. In 2-3 months, it will become a habit if you stick with it.

