

YOUR ANXIETY IS NOT A FLAW, A FAILING OR A LACK OF FAITH

Words by Dr Kate Middleton

What IS anxiety, and how does it sit alongside our faith?

So firstly, and most importantly, to be clear: anxiety is a normal healthy human emotion. It is essential for the functioning of your mind. No, not the crippling, suffocating anxiety we experience when it has become a problem - but a level of that same emotion is important to keep us safe. Anxiety warns us when something significant MIGHT be happening, grabs our attention to check it out, and readies us in case we need to respond.

Anxiety is also NOT a sin, failing or flaw or sign of a lack of faith. Remember Jesus? Jesus was fully divine and also fully human - God made flesh, living with the reality of what it means to have a human body and brain, but without sin. And he experienced emotions. Positive ones - and so-called negative ones like anger and anxiety.

When we're thinking about anxiety what is REALLY important is to differentiate two KINDS of anxiety. Here the Greek words for anxiety are actually really helpful - and we can learn something too in those from how the New Testament writers shared Jesus' teaching on this powerful, often problematic emotion.

The root of anxiety

So, one common Greek word for fear/anxiety is DEOS, which shares, intriguingly, the root word for doubt. This could be where the confusion linking anxiety and faith comes from - it's a pattern you see in other languages too (in French for example, redoubter means to fear or dread something - doubter is to doubt, doutes are doubts ...). But all it signifies is a sense of something being uncertain - the root word means 'two' - indicating that there's more than one way this could go - which is what anxiety is all about flagging in your mind, if one of those outcomes is not good! So in the Iliad the word is used for a situation that could go 'either way' - and in a season like we've just been through the level of uncertainty about the future means almost everyone can recognise how that raises anxiety levels.



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The New Testament has a few instances using a word that shares this root, in a slightly different word often translated as cowardly. This word talks to those moments when we feel fear FULL - when fear takes over our mind, turning down our ability to think clearly, starting to control us rather than the other way around. That overwhelming anticipatory fear we sometimes call dread has been described as one of the most difficult emotions to manage - it is by design hard to ignore or distract yourself from - and if you can't solve whatever is triggering it, that is tough.

The good news!

The good news is that it's something God wants to relieve us of. 2 Timothy 1:7 says God doesn't bring us that kind of spirit - he wants to fill us with something else that will counteract that dread and help us feel back in control when the world feels out of control or chaotic - an awareness of his power and his love. When Jesus calms the storm in Matt 8/Mark 4 Jesus uses the same word when he asks the disciples why they are afraid - why are they overwhelmed with fear, not why are they anxious. And yes - he asks them why they don't have more faith, using a word that refers to trust you build when you really get to know someone. Jesus means that in uncertain situations, even when THEY feel out of control, they can trust (have faith) that God IS, because they've been in tough times before and He's got them through. The message - with God around that fear of the unknown doesn't need to control you any more. There's a way out of the darkness of dread.

But before we think more about that - there's another important kind of anxiety or fear which comes up a lot in Jesus' teaching. Check out another boat-in-storm moment in Matthew 14 - this is when Jesus walks across the water to the exhausted, end of their tether disciples who have been fighting bad weather all night trying to get across the lake. AND he says to them 'Do not fear' - but is this a reprimand - or a reassurance? The word used here is PHOBOS - and it describes an entirely different kind of fear.

Phobos is about fear ramped up - fear that has become suffocating - fear so strong flooding your mind that you feel your only option is escape - to run. It is about panic - in fact Phobos in Greek mythology is the God of fear and panic. When Jesus says you do not need to have THAT kind of fear he is saying - yes this is bad but you are not going to be overwhelmed, you don't need to run. He is calming panic, reassuring in a moment they feel all is lost that it isn't and reminding them they can take courage because he is with them. When you face things that feel terrifying and feel pushed into panic - you can trust in something more than your own limited human ability to solve everything - which may feel totally helpless. Reaching out to God offers us a way to be pulled out of panic and onto more solid emotional ground.

What the message of the bible is, is not a way to become fearless - its a way to fear LESS. To counteract being fear FULL and feeling trapped or controlled by this so often problematic emotion.



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There's a common - and important - message here.

Life is tough and sometimes that WILL result in difficult or powerful emotions. This is an inescapable part of being human. Jesus himself cried more than once (eg John 11:35), even shouting out in grief and pain in his prayers (or screaming depending on your translation of Hebrews 5:7 ... he definitely made some noise!); he experienced emotions like anger and frustration (as a Mum of two older kids/teens I love the NIV understatement in Matthew 16:8 where the disciples are arguing amongst themselves and it says Jesus is 'aware of their discussion...' before Jesus responds. The actual language makes it clear they are bickering!) and in the shadow of his arrest and execution suffered anxiety and stress so powerful he sweated drops of blood (Both Matthew and Mark's accounts use the same word, which describes a powerful, visceral level of emotional distress).

When life is tough our emotions naturally rise. That's their job. If we add fear (what is wrong with me? Will I ever feel back to normal?) or guilt (If I was a better person/Christian/leader I wouldn't be feeling like this) all we do is make that harder. Instead of criticising another person's emotion we should validate it, hold it with them - and help them find ways to manage it.

