

THINK 21

# HOPE AND HELP FOR THE ANXIOUS



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**COLLEGE PARK CHURCH**

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### BOOKS

- *[Christians Get Depressed Too](#)*
- *[How Sermons Work](#)*
- *[Jesus on Every Page](#)*
- *[The Happy Christian](#)*
- *[Reset](#) (for men).*
- *[Refresh](#) (for women, co-authored Shona Murray).*
- *[Exploring the Bible: A Bible Reading Plan for Kids](#)*
- *[Why am I feeling like this?](#) (for teens).*
- *[Why is my teen feeling like this?](#) (for parents of teens).*
- *[Meeting with Jesus: A Bible Reading Plan for Kids](#)*
- *[Exploring the Bible Together: A 52-week Family Worship Plan](#)*

### ONLINE

Blog: [headhearthand.org](http://headhearthand.org)

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# 1. EDUCATION THERAPY



## SAM'S STORY

My junior year started off great. I got into the varsity soccer team and we had a great season. We even made the playoffs. And that's when my troubles began. There were lots of extra practices, games, and pressure. I'm one of the younger players in the team and my teammates criticize me when things go wrong. They don't really want me on the team.

It's taking me longer and longer to get to sleep as I can't stop thinking about what the other guys think about me. The exams are coming up and I'm so behind. I go round and round the same things in my head. I'm just exhausted with it all. I feel horrible, like I'm going to be sick all the time. I don't know what's happening to me and I don't know what to do. Am I going crazy?

Sam's story is a common story. One in three teens experience distressing and disabling anxiety. And it's not just teens. One in five adults had an anxiety disorder last year. Depression rates are also high and rising: 20% of teens have suffered with depression by the time they reach adulthood. 10% of the adult population suffer with depression in any one year. 50% of people with anxiety also suffer with depression) which means that much of what I say about anxiety is also applicable to depression). **Why are anxiety rates so high and rising? And, what can we do about it?** These are the two questions I want to answer in this address. We'll answer the first one as we look first at 'Education Therapy.'

One of the reasons anxiety and depression are such horrible experiences is that we don't know what's happening or what's causing it. That's why one of the best therapies is simply education. Understanding the causes and the condition can alleviate some of the confusion and terror. So, let's begin with educating ourselves about what causes anxiety and then look at the cycle of anxiety.

### The Causes of Anxiety

**Pressure:** Teens and young adults are under enormous pressure to perform at the highest level in every area; school, sports, church, work, friendships, marriage, career.

**Instability:** The world is more unstable and unpredictable with cultural norms changing at unprecedented pace.

**Technology:** Hyper-stimulation of the brain, information overload, cyber-bullying, fear overload, comparisonitis, and sleep deprivation.

**Spiritual:** Porn, substance abuse, unresolved guilt, no morals/meaning/purpose.



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## The Cycle of Anxiety

How do these causes impact us? Although it feels like a jumbled mess of stuff, there is usually an order to it. And if we can figure that out, we're not going to panic so much when it happens again and we'll get out of it quicker too. So, let's try to understand the **worry > anxiety > stress cycle** because that's what Sam was experiencing.

**Worry.** Worry can be a good thing if it's at the right time, for the right reason, to the right degree, and helped you take right actions. Worry is a bad thing if it becomes too big, lasts too long, or paralyzes you. If left unchecked, what usually happens next is anxiety.

**Anxiety.** After worrying *thoughts* come horrible *feelings*. The emotions of fear, dread, and terror grow. We feel on edge, fidgety, jittery, jumpy. We have a sense of impending doom. Worrying thoughts have produced anxious feeling which then stresses our bodies.

**Stress.** If worry takes place in our *thoughts*, and anxiety in our *feelings*, stress is what results in our *bodies*: heart racing or pounding, breathlessness, headaches, trembling, tension, dizziness, twitching, stomach cramps, nausea, exhaustion, etc.

And this all starts a never-ending loop because we start worrying about these physical symptoms, and so the **worry > anxiety > stress cycle** goes around again.

Some miss out the worry step and just go straight to anxiety. They're not worrying about anything specific, and yet are plagued with a general unfocused sense of anxiety to one degree or another. Let's go to the woods to figure out what's happening here.

### Fight or Flight?

If we see a grizzly bear in the woods, our God-given 'flight-or-flight' system turns on. It reacts to the danger by pumping 'fear' chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol into our system which help us run faster, fight harder, or bleed slower. Then it turns off again.

But, some people's 'fight or flight' system turns on when there's no bear there. For other people, perhaps the victims of abuse or some other trauma, their 'fight or flight' system turns on for a good reason, but stays stuck on and won't turn off. There's little or nothing people can do about this. Our bodies are broken and no amount of faith can fix them. It's a physical problem that needs a physical solution. That's where meds come in and I'll talk more about that in the next message about depression.

Sam's healing took a big step forward when he learned about the causes of anxiety and the cycle of anxiety. He learned how to eliminate or reduce some of the causes and also not to panic when the cycle began. Understanding the cycle helped him reduce the frequency, duration, intensity and impact of it.

EMOTIONAL EDUCATION  
IS MEDICINAL EDUCATION



Understanding my anxiety certainly helps.  
But what can I actually do about it?



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## 2. IMAGE THERAPY



### IMOGEN'S STORY

I don't know why, but my mind is always drawn to sad and painful stories. When I hear of something bad that's happened, like a school shooting, I can't stop thinking about it and imagining myself in that situation.

But even in my own life, I'm always thinking the worst is going to happen to me and to others I love. It's like a non-stop horror movie running on loop in my mind. Even though the things I imagine never happen, I can't stop seeing the most horrible pictures in my head. It makes me worried and sad all the time. I never feel relaxed and whenever I hear a loud noise, I jump.

Maybe you're like Imogen. You have a runaway imagination that is always creating worst-case scenarios, even though they rarely happen. You need to retrain your imagination, as Imogen did. So let's work at replacing disturbing images with God-given images of truth.

I call this image therapy, or imagination therapy. But I didn't invent it, Jesus did, in Matthew chapter 6 and verses 25-34. Although Jesus is addressing anxiety there, the same image therapy also works for depression.

### Worry Images

In Matthew 6:25, Jesus described images of worry in people's minds—what to eat, what to drink, and what to wear. Basically he looked inside people's heads and saw that they were running the same movie on loop—the worries of everyday life. But there are other images too, that play on loop in our minds.

- Images of impossible expectations
- Images of perfectionism
- Images of an angry God
- Images of past trauma
- Images of violence (media/games)

So what's the answer? We can't stop imagining. But we can change our imagining. We do that by replacing images of worry and sadness with images of peace and joy. So let's go back to Matthew 6:25-34 and get some examples of image therapy from Jesus. He replaces untrue and unhelpful images with truthful and helpful images.



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## Natural Images

First, he points his disciples to nature, to care-free birds, and how God cares for them despite how little value they have compared to us (v. 26). Then he points them to flower-covered fields and says, if God takes time to cover the fields with flowers, will he not take time to clothe you (vv. 28-29)?

These are images from nature and everyday life that Jesus used to show us how unnecessary worry is. But these two images from nature are just samples. Jesus is saying, get out in nature, walk around, take it all in, and let images from nature—the sights, sounds, and smells—stay with you and calm you.

## Supernatural Images

Jesus also paints supernatural images, images of God's character, to minister peace to us. He says, picture God as your heavenly Father (v. 26, 32), and as your King (v. 33). As your Father, he is good, kind, and protective. As King, he is in control and he will win. If I can see God as my Father and King, there is therefore no need to worry.

But again, these pictures are merely suggestive of other therapeutic images of God found throughout the Scriptures. In the Psalms, we read of God as a Warrior, a Shepherd, a Shield, a Rock, a Tower, and a Fortress, and so on. In the New Testament, Christ used many images to describe himself and replace images of worry. He is the Lamb of God, the Bread of life, the Water of life, the Light of the world, the Door of the sheep, the Bridegroom, and the Vine.

In the sacraments, we have visual symbols of the greatest truths in the world. Baptism portrays Christ washing us from our sins. The Lord's Supper visualizes Christ saving us through the pouring out of his blood and the breaking of his body. And all this points us to the most tranquilizing image of all. The Cross of Christ removes guilt and shame and replaces it with peace and joy. For the Christian, this is the most calming and joyful image in world history.

## Multiple Images

Imogen was amazed how different she felt when she got outside without her phone and ear buds and just sucked in nature through her senses. She also started looking for images of God in the Bible and again was stunned at how often God describes himself with unforgettably graphic images. Let's fill up our minds with the images God has provided in the world and in his Word.

GOD'S GIVEN MULTIPLE IMAGES  
FOR OUR MULTIPLE FEARS



**I'm more of a story person than a picture person.  
Is there such a thing as story therapy?**



### 3. STORY THERAPY



#### JOSHUA'S STORY

Joshua was at a turning point in his life. He'd been a faithful second-in-command, but now God was calling him to fill Moses's massive shoes and conquer Canaan. It would have been a daunting task for anyone, but it seemed to have been especially challenging for Joshua. Perhaps he was comfortable in his deputy or assistant role, but never saw himself as the leader, especially when his job description was "Conquer Canaan."

This was not a job Joshua wanted and he started writing a terrible story about what it was going to be like. It was a horror story which horrified him.

#### Joshua's Bad Story

Although not explicit, Joshua's internal story is implied in God's repeated words to him.

- Three times God said to him, "**Be strong**" (6, 7, 9).
- Three times God said to him: "**Be very courageous**" (6, 7, 9).
- Three times God said to him: "**Follow my Word**" (7, 8, 9).
- Three times God said to him: "**You will be successful**" (6, 7, 8)
- Two times God said to him, "**I am with you**" (5, 9)

So, what story was Joshua telling himself? Its five parts match God's five messages.

- Part One: **I'm weak**
- Part Two: **I'm scared**
- Part Three: **I don't know what to do**
- Part Four: **I'm going to fail**
- Part Five: **I'm all alone**

Obviously, such an internal story was having a huge negative impact on Joshua's mindset, his worldview, his feelings, his words, his decisions, and even his appearance and body language. He felt feeble, fearful, foolish, a failure, and forsaken. This was not good for him, and certainly not good for the two million people he was called to lead into battle.



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## God's Better Story

God tells us a better story through his Word. God saw inside Joshua, heard his internal story, and replaced it with a five-part story.

- Part One: **You will be strong** (6, 7, 9)
- Part Two: **You will be courageous** (6, 7, 9)
- Part Three: **You will follow my plan** (7, 8, 9)
- Part Four: **You will be successful** (6, 7, 8)
- Part Five: **You will have me with you** (5, 9)

Can you imagine how this Story changed Joshua's story? We don't have to imagine, for we have a record of it in the Bible. It changed Joshua and it changed history.

## Your Better Story

What story do you tell yourself about yourself? We all tell ourselves a story about ourselves. It may be a positive story or a negative story. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all telling ourselves a story, and that inner story is often the most influential force in our lives.

Joshua's greatest courage wasn't taking on giant warriors but taking on the gigantic lies in his story. That battle for the millions of neural pathways in our brain is the most ferocious battle ever waged. Whoever wrote your inner story, if it wasn't God, you need to go to war to reclaim your brain and re-wire it with God's Story (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Joshua 1 helps us to identify our bad stories and replace them with good stories. The less we read our bad stories and the more we read good stories, the better our stories will be, especially the endings.

FOR A BETTER STORY  
READ THE BEST STORY

## SUMMARY

