

Pastoring Anxious Students and Faculty

By X. Nader Sahyouni, DMin, LPC

What is my role?

As we minister to our students and faculty when they are anxious, it is important to remember that our role is to pastor them, not to be their psychotherapist. Part of that pastoral role is to help those on our campuses respond in a spiritually healthy way to anxiety, and to point them to mental health resources as needed. The decision to see a mental health professional is often driven by the level of distress felt by the student. As a general rule, if anxiety interferes with daily activities like sleeping, eating, concentrating enough to study and so on, if the anxious thoughts are intrusive, or if they extend to many areas of life, it is a good idea to at least have an initial evaluation with a counselor.



Our role is to pastor students and faculty,
not be their psychotherapist.

Regardless of whether the level of stress, worry, and anxiety requires professional help or not, we want to provide spiritually healthy responses. One of the ways to do this is to avoid responding in a way that does not promote their well-being.

Unhelpful Responses

1. **We simply tell them to not worry and have faith.** Faith is not something they can conjure up.
2. **We point them to Bible Verses as a cure-all.** Sometimes, we point them to Bible verses that they simply don't have enough faith to internalize deeply.
3. **We continually reassure someone who is anxious.** We keep telling them that the worst-case scenarios they are imagining are not going to happen. The problem is no one can guarantee that, and they know it. Usually with anxiety, the brain of the anxious person reacts to a very unlikely scary outcome as if it were highly likely.

Pastoring Anxious Students and Faculty

By X. Nader Sahyouni, DMin, LPC

This is compounded by the fact that if the person continually seeks reassurance, beyond what is reasonable, it may be a sign of unhealthy rumination. The need for constant reassurance gets to a root theological issue, can God be trusted to keep all suffering away? The problem is that the answer is no. Suffering is part of the journey as we see over and over in the Scriptures. Trying to resist the possibility of suffering creates anxiety and feeds it. It is far better to accept the possibility and what God says about it.

Helpful Models

1. **Help them refrain from constant reassurance seeking.** Provide initial assurance with empathy, and then pray with and for the student that the assurance they've received would be enough, and that they would be able to refrain from repetitive reassurance seeking.
2. **Pray to increase faith.** Let's pray with students to increase their faith. Asking God to increase our faith was honored by Jesus in Mark 9:24.
3. **Look to Jesus and Paul.** Each faced suffering. Both asked God repeatedly to take it away. In the two situations God said no. Jesus and Paul then embraced the suffering with hope that God was going to redeem it.

The experience of Jesus and Paul helped me develop a prayer model for dealing with anxiety that I call the ARP, *Anxiety Redemption Prayer*. It works like this:

- A. Jesus' response in most situations of suffering was to bring healing, so we can feel confident as a first step to bring our need before God and ask him to heal it.
- B. If the suffering is not taken away, we can then affirm that God is at work redeeming all of our suffering. We don't know how, but we do believe he is doing it. We can therefore thank him for this redemption. Giving thanks in times of anxiety, as recommended in Philippians 4:6 is very helpful as it brings calm to our brain and increases our faith in God's activity.
- C. We can also pray for that redemption that God is doing even if we don't know what that will look like.

Pastoring Anxious Students and Faculty

By X. Nader Sahyouni, DMin, LPC

- D. Finally, we can then pray for strength and courage to accept whatever suffering God may choose not to take from us. We don't know or understand the depths of his wisdom, but we do know that we follow him, and it is good to remind ourselves that we want what he wants, no matter how hard, no matter how much we don't understand it.
4. **Praying through Scripture.** I also suggest praying through specific scriptures on a daily basis and meditating on them. It is also important to emphasize that this is not a quick fix or the cure-all, which is the unhealthy response, but as a long-term approach to spiritual health. Not having the long-term view creates a risk for anxious people to feel like failures in their relationship with God because these prayers and verses are not having the desired immediate effect.
5. **Mindfulness.** Finally, mindfulness-based therapies have become widely used in treating anxiety. These approaches embrace a view that a neutral and accepting stance towards disturbing thoughts reduces anxiety. For us who follow Jesus however, we have more than neutrality. We have a great hope in the redemption that he will bring about.



Point students and faculty
to a deeper experience of scripture, prayer and hope.