

ANXIETY – Is it an Emotion or a Coping Strategy?

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The term, or word, “anxiety” is very common to hear today. With that said, have you ever considered whether anxiety was an emotion (feeling) or a coping strategy? Maybe you’ve never had a reason to consider which it was, so you just assumed it was an emotion. What if anxiety is a coping strategy? What would be the benefit of seeing it as such?

Well, let’s first define “coping strategy.” Coping strategies are learned ways that I developed (usually in my early years) in which I am trying to get love, acceptance and security, and/or avoid pain, rejection, and insecurity. While God’s plan is that we would get these things from Him, we developed these strategies apart from Him and have confidence in them because throughout the years it seemed as though they worked. But did they really?

Emotions (feelings), on the other hand, don’t “cope” or “do” things; they just respond in the moment to whatever we’re thinking. The reason you may think anxiety is an emotion is because there are, most definitely, emotions involved in anxiety, which is probably what makes it so hard to stop.

Webster’s defines “anxiety” as a noun (thing), as “apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness over an impending or anticipated ill; mentally distressing concern.” Apostle Paul mentions it in Phil. 4:6: “*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*”

In the coping strategy of anxiety, there are several components involved, each with resulting emotions. If we know what the components are, we have several opportunities to recognize when we are trying to cope instead of allowing God, through Christ, to handle our concerns.

Components of Anxiety as a Coping Strategy

First component: in order to need this coping strategy, there first has to be something **upcoming** in my life that ***I don’t know how it will turn out***. I begin to think about it, resulting in an emotional response: ***out of control, afraid, insecure!***

Example: I have a big test to take on Friday that will determine whether or not I can begin my new job with a salary and full benefits.

Second component: as a result of feeling out of control, afraid, and insecure, I begin to cope by **imagining worst-case scenarios** in an attempt to be prepared, resulting in an emotional response: ***rejection, worthless, failure, insecure!***

Example: I’m gonna fail the test.

Third and final component: As a result of **believing** I’m gonna fail, I **begin planning for what I will do**, resulting in an emotional response: ***out of control, inadequate, rejection, insecure!***

Example: I’ll break my lease because I won’t have a job and move back home with my parents. If they say no because they are disappointed in me, I’ll live in my van until I find somewhere else to live.

Then we loop: start again with other worst-case scenarios, or other plans for the initial worst-case scenario...and on and on!

Seems exhausting, right? You may say “why would someone do this to himself?” Well, believe it or not, it’s a mental (thinking) way of staying busy by which I can disconnect from not knowing how something will turn out. It’s meant to try to get a sense of control and create security. Usually, a person who uses anxiety to cope on a regular basis had some sort of trauma in his early years, resulting in extreme emotions. This person will then develop this strategy to try to avoid encountering those extreme emotions in the future.

So, as mentioned earlier, why would it be beneficial to see anxiety as a coping strategy? Well, if I know what I’m trying to cope with and why, **I can know what to trust Christ in me to be!** As described, we have three opportunities to see when we are using anxiety to cope so that we can resist and allow God to meet our needs instead.

First...if I have something that’s upcoming and **I’m thinking about it too much** and start feeling out of control and insecure, I could recognize it then and, in that moment, begin to trust Christ in me, that He’s in control so I can live from His peace and security no matter how things turn out!

Or...if I miss it there, I can recognize **thoughts that I’m having that sound like worst-case scenarios** and begin feeling inadequate and insecure, and, in that moment, begin to trust Christ in me, that He’s in control and live from His peace, adequacy and security.

Lastly...if I miss it in the first two opportunities, I can recognize **thoughts of planning/deciding what I’m going to do** because of the worst-case scenario, and, in that moment, trust Christ in me, that He’s in control so I can live from His peace, security and provision no matter how things turn out!

Reasons I Can Rest from Using the Anxiety Pattern

Phil. 4:6-7: “*Be **anxious** for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And **the peace of God**, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds **in Christ Jesus.**”*

When I’m anxious, I’m **living in the future**, attempting to control my security, which results in fear.
When I’m **talking to God about it**, He gives me His thoughts, resulting in **inner peace!**

Ephes. 2:14a: “*For He Himself is our peace,*”

Peace is a Person (Christ) **in me!**

Col. 2:10a: “*and in Him you have been made complete,*”

I have everything I need **in me**, through Christ, so no matter what my future, **He will be enough!**