

Hi, I want to talk this month about fears and anxiety and how they can be joy robbers which threaten to overwhelm our freedom to live in the present trusting God for the future.

I am naturally quite timid and was painfully shy as a child. I have learned to accept that truth about myself without letting it control my choices or life – *well, for the most part*. But every now and again something crops up to completely surprise me and old faithful fear and anxiety turns up to hang around for a while. Everyone experiences fear or anxiety differently. For me it often feels like a heavy knot in my chest, or as I say sometimes, ‘it feels like I have swallowed an elephant.’ Being able to recognize my bodily reaction and know how to name the feeling helps somehow. When you experience anxiety how do you feel it in your body?

The next thing for me after recognizing and naming the anxiety is to make friends with it. That may sound odd but I have discovered that if I try to threaten or bully my fear it either gets worse or it goes underground and I will end up sick in some way or shooting out emotion at poor unsuspecting people around me that has little to do with them. How can we make friends with an emotion we perceive as negative? Again everyone may have different ways but the best thing I have found to do is to ask myself questions like ‘What are you anxious about?’, ‘What lies under that emotion?’ ‘Where is the fear coming from?’, ‘Why are you so anxious about ...?’ ‘What images come to mind when you think about being anxious?’ and ‘Are there any particular memories that this brings up?’ Questions like that and you will know your own, help me understand where the issue is setting off an anxious fear response in me. I try to write about it, draw about it, even put on some music and dance or sing about it. I also try to share it from a place of honesty with people I trust and who I know will listen and allow me to have that feeling without necessarily trying to fix it; although authentic affirmation from others can be a gift.

I also try to be especially gentle with myself at times when I’m feeling anxious. Not to bully myself, but to give myself time and a little more TLC. I often find it hard to be settled in prayer when I am anxious about something. I find I like to pray as I walk or vacuum or iron. Prayers like the Rosary can be soothing and repetitive as I walk and allow me to focus on God and His promises and work in our human story, rather than on my own issues. Simply breathing the name of Jesus rhythmically or the prayer “My Jesus I trust in you” can also help when fear threatens to overwhelm me. What are some ways you find helpful to pray and reflect when you feel anxious?

The word ‘fear’ appears in the Bible 555 times, 92 times in the New Testament. I find that incredibly encouraging because it says that God knows all about my human tendency to be afraid and is constantly trying to encourage us to trust God. Jesus invites us to focus on God and the power of the Holy Spirit in every situation we face in life, rather than on what intimidates us. The words are relatively easy to say, I know. My head can understand the wisdom of it, but the feelings take longer to catch up.

The other thing I have noticed about anxiety is that unlike genuine fear such as if a lion were about to charge me, anxiety is future oriented. It is based almost always in my imagination. I imagine what a future event will be like and then let the fear and anxiety take hold as if it was happening right in front of me now. Of course it isn't and a technique that I have found helpful is to notice where I am, who I am talking to, what the ground feels like, how the sun feels on my skin or the chair on my legs. To try to consciously be present in this moment right now - breathing deeply, but calmly, can tame the anxiety that wants me to jump into my imagination and some future that may or may not ever happen. I do not have an accurate ability to read the future so whatever scenario is triggering my anxiety is purely imagination. Just owning and acknowledging that truth can be freeing.

Another thing that is related, is the expectations I put on myself and the expectations I imagine other people will have of me. Once I recognize that it is my *imagining* about what *might* happen, or my imagination about what the expectations of others might be, some of the power of the anxiety is reduced.

You know I speak in public and give retreats and God blesses that work in ways I could never have imagined. Isn't that a lesson! My imaginings are almost always grounded in potential mistakes or failures, not in the provision and amazing presence of grace and gift in my life. I was once told that to speak in public is the most common fear amongst people. The speaker went on to quote *1 John 4:18*

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

I am certainly not perfected in love but that is surely the goal of our walk with God. To know and love him perfectly and when we love him, we cannot be afraid of him. Fear of dying is so common even amongst Christians and it shows that we are not fully in love with God - but that's ok. The good thing is we are on the way and God loves us perfectly just as we are and is always inviting us to know His love more deeply. When I speak to a group or even to one person who I feel anxious speaking with, I try to focus on loving them and on letting God love them through me. This takes my eyes off me and onto the other person, their needs and how much God treasures them. That helps me forget about myself and my own anxious imaginings and equips me to serve them gently, simply by being myself.

I hope that sharing a little about my attempts to overcome my fears in simple, practical and spiritual ways that are available to anyone might help and encourage you. I hope you can all share something of the ways you manage and overcome fear and anxiety. I know that God will always keep encouraging you to grow in love; from God, for God, for yourself as God loves you and for others as God wants to love through you. In this month of Mary who faced so many challenges and troubles with faith and trust let's pray we all keep learning to walk in courage with Mary.