

ANXIETY

Finding the Better Story

LIZ EDRINGTON



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**31-DAY DEVOTIONALS
FOR TEENAGERS**

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CHELSEA KINGSTON ERICKSON
Series Editor

For Marthy Ro, Becky Lanks, and Jenny Stew:
your wrestling encourages me,
your resilience inspires me,
and your friendship enlivens my soul.
God's faithfulness becomes clearer when I think of you.

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Introduction

HOW TO UNDERSTAND ANXIETY

Stomach like a clenched fist. Palms sweating. Difficulty breathing. Merry-go-round mind spinning out of control.

These are classic symptoms of anxiety.

When I was in high school, I had to eat a meal at least three hours before my soccer games. Otherwise, a spaghetti dinner would haunt me throughout the entire game—and potentially make an ungraceful reappearance midfield.

My pregame anxiety was intense. And try as I might, I couldn't *talk* the nervousness away. I couldn't control it. It was powerful, annoying, and frustrating. I hated the way I had to organize my entire day around it.

As a teenager, I was just trying to survive my anxiety. Now, as a mental health counselor, I wonder what might have been different back then if I had better understood it. I've written this devotional so that, for the next thirty-one days, you might experience clarity and comfort in your stress and anxiety as you read about the hope God offers us through his Word.

From one anxious struggler to another: you are not alone. Let's dive in.

What Is Anxiety?

Most basically, anxiety is an emotion. It *isn't* part of our identity or personality. We can feel anxiety in our bodies when our hearts race, our breathing gets shallow, and our stomachs tense. Anxiety causes us to go on high alert whether we want to or not. Sometimes we pick at our skin, pull at our hair, or chew our nails. Anxiety often comes with worried thoughts and fear.

Anxiety may seem like an enemy, but it's actually our bodies' natural response to stress. Too much stress can be bad for us, but we all need good stress in order to grow. Think about how we learn to walk: our muscles have to go through stress to get stronger. We experience stress when we learn new skills on an instrument or in a sport or when we risk making new friends or having hard conversations. Anxiety may be uncomfortable, but it isn't *always* a bad thing.

When stressful things cause anxiety, the way we *respond* to that anxiety can make a huge difference in how overwhelming it becomes.

Here is an image I want you to remember: anxiety is like a big wave in the ocean that you have to ride out. Like anxiety, a wave is powerful. It is neither good nor bad. Yes, a wave can destroy sand castles—but it's also great for bodysurfing.

Imagine standing in front of a wave with your hand out in front of you and saying, "Stop, wave!" This would be completely ridiculous (although potentially entertaining), and we all know it wouldn't work. But this is how we often treat anxiety. We tell ourselves to just calm down already. In the end, our "Stop!" doesn't work; our anxiety bowls us over like an ocean wave would. We are defeated. Frustrated or embarrassed, we assume something must be wrong with us.

Having anxiety does not mean you don't have enough faith or are a "bad Christian." You are not *wrong* for having anxiety. Almost everyone feels anxious at some point or another. So if you can't stop the wave of emotion by force of will, how do you get through it?

Like waves, emotions rise and fall and take their course. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. When you learn to ride out your emotions with God, to feel your way through them, they don't tend to knock you down quite as often. It may sound strange, but this may mean you need to *lean in* to your anxiety—as if you were bodysurfing that wave. Leaning in to your anxiety may be

as simple as talking about it with someone you trust. Working through this devotional, whether alone or with a parent or youth leader, will go a long way toward this goal. Instead of wearing yourself out by yelling at the wave to stop, you're invited to look at God-given ways to live with your anxiety, to ride these emotions out from beginning to middle to end.

Sometimes the waves of anxiety just keep coming. Even then, this doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. It's a reminder that we're all works in progress. It's true for me too. I'm still not a professional anxiety bodysurfer, but I now have many stories of how Jesus has met me in beauty and power as I've struggled.

How Jesus Meets Us in Our Anxiety

The Lord is no less present with us when we are anxious and stressed out. In fact, he loves us *right in* our anxiety, and he offers us hope. He even gives meaning to our anxiety in light of his bigger story of redemption for humankind. To find that love, hope, and meaning, we look to the Word of God:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established [or grounded] in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16–19)

In the counseling world, we talk a lot about *grounding* when anxiety comes up. Tips, tricks, and techniques can be super helpful (and we will cover our fair share of these in this book). But ultimately we need to be grounded in something more powerful than ourselves. We need a trustworthy, grounding source of love and identity that isn't dependent on us—one that isn't dependent

on our own knowledge, abilities, or emotions. Like Paul says in Ephesians, we need a love that is wider than our worst fears, longer than our what-ifs, higher than our greatest anxieties, and deeper than our pain. We need the love that surpasses knowledge, and we find it in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we find comfort and hope for our struggle with anxiety. We find a God who can completely understand what it's like to experience stress, because he experienced it as a human himself. In fact, he was so overwhelmed at one point that he actually sweated blood (Luke 22:44). Jesus doesn't leave us on our own or impatiently tell us to "calm down." Instead, he draws near to us with deep compassion. He is the God-man who is *for* us and *with* us.

Not only can Jesus empathize with us, but he took it one step further. He sacrificed his life and was resurrected so that our story might be enfolded in his. In his story, death can never win. This means the lies and fears that haunt us in our anxiety won't win either. Our promised future is full of beauty and joy. As we walk with Jesus, he grounds us in his love. He is sinking our hearts, minds, and bodies deeper into his story of love: he died and rose so that we might come to know the freedom of living as his beloved people. In Christ, we are ultimately secure.

My prayer is that through this devotional you will come to find hope, purpose, and comfort for your anxiety in the person of Jesus. As you read the Scripture passages and practice prayerful breathing (see the Anxiety Toolkit), I pray you will find yourself more and more caught up in the big story of our triune God. He is one God in three persons: the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The story of his unstoppable, unfailing, death-defeating, life-bringing love is *your* story. And the outcome is dependent on God's work and not your own—which means there is peace for you in this bigger story, even when you feel anxious.

Sometimes anxiety becomes so overwhelming that it interferes with normal life and may even cause panic attacks.

A panic attack is a surge of intense fear or terror that may be accompanied by a racing heart, shaking, nausea or dizziness, tightness in the chest, and scary thoughts like “I’m about to die.”

If you are experiencing this extreme level of anxiety to the extent that your regular daily activities are interrupted, it is time to seek professional help from someone like a biblical counselor, a mental health counselor, a doctor, or a psychologist.

There is no shame in this—in fact, it is one of the most courageous steps you can take.

ANXIETY TOOLKIT

Jesus the Great Physician has given us some tools that can help us to move through our anxiety. As you read this devotional, return to this Anxiety Toolkit for practical grounding skills as you need them.

Tool #1: Grounded in Breath

It sounds too simple, but intentional breathing is one of the best tools for dealing with anxiety.

God designed our bodies to calm and settle themselves. When we first realize we are anxious, the very best thing we can do is take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Feel free to try it right now: breathe in through your nose while counting to four (“one, one thousand, two, one thousand,” and so on), then breathe out through your mouth for four seconds. Try this a couple of times.

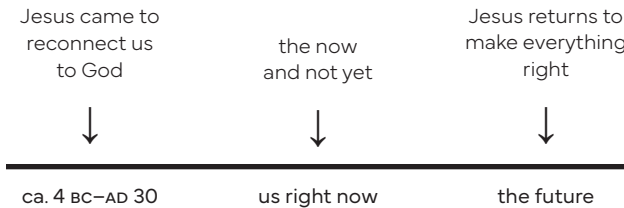
The same God with the power to create the world out of nothing breathed life into Adam’s lungs in Genesis 2:7. He is the Creator and Sustainer of our lives, and he is closer to us than our breath as he walks with us.

Each entry of this devotional invites you to breathe in and breathe out while thinking of words that remind you of what you’ve just read. I recommend that you set your timer to at least sixty seconds to practice breathing with these truths in mind as you finish your time with Jesus.

Tool #2: Practicing Gratitude in the Now and Not Yet

The world is not all that it should be. Things are not perfect. Cars get into accidents. Friends betray us. We break promises. Our bodies don't work well all the time.

Right now, we live in a time that we call the *now and not yet*. This is the time period between when Jesus came to earth and when he will return. This is a waiting period. Jesus is *now* at work to bring hope and healing as king, and he has *not yet* come back to make everything right.



Sin and Satan are still at work in the *now and not yet*. This is why, even if we are Christians, we still experience the discomfort of anxiety and wrestle with doubts. This is why death still exists. But God the Holy Spirit is with us in the *now and not yet*. He walks with us as we pray and wait for Jesus to return to make all things new. When Jesus comes back, sin and anxiety, death and doubt will be no more.

Gratitude is a very helpful practice in the *now and not yet*.

In our anxiety, it is good for us to look around and count the many ways God has seen us, loved us, and provided for us. It is okay if our gratitude lists don't fix or stop our anxiety. We make them in order to set our eyes on someone more powerful than our anxiety. Giving God thanks for specific blessings can help to distract us from intrusive thoughts and set our minds instead *on things above* (Colossians 3:2). We can be thankful for the clothes

on our bodies, the sun in the sky, and the air we breathe, for our furry friends, our functioning feet, and our favorite foods. Be specific with the items on your list! Big or small, all gratitude is worth offering to God. He receives it with fondness and delight. Consider writing a list of ten things you are grateful for at the end of each devotional day.

Tool #3: Taste and See That the Lord Is Good

Psalm 34:8 tells us, “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”

In his wonderful creativity, the Lord gave us bodies that can reconnect us to the present moment when we feel disconnected. When we are overwhelmed by anxiety, we can use our five senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing) to experience God’s goodness and take shelter in him.

The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise is a great way to do this. Look around and name five things you can see, four things you are touching, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. It’s okay if you need to imagine the things you can smell and taste.

Getting outside in nature is an ideal way to practice using your senses. It can also be helpful to slow way down and zoom in on the details of whatever you’re noticing.

Science supports what Scripture tells us. God wired our bodies to help us to regulate our emotions and calm our minds. He made us for deep connection—to himself, one another, and ourselves. These exercises impact us biologically as we practice them. They bring healing by helping to reshape our patterns of thinking, feeling, and doing.

MADE FOR DEEP CONNECTION

*"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts
are restless until they rest in you."*

Augustine, Confessions

Anxiety makes us restless. It makes us desire all sorts of things. We want relief. We want comfort. We want hope, security, and love. We want to know if our lives have purpose and meaning.

In Scripture, we learn that God hardwired these desires into us. We have been designed for deep, secure, life-filled relationships with God, creation, ourselves, and one another. We also learn that all humans are image bearers of God, which means each one of us is valuable, lovable, and worthy of belonging.

When our anxiety whispers lies to us about our lives, we lean in to our relationship with our Creator, the one who crafted us lovingly in his image. We rest in the truths he tells us about our story.

Day 1

JESUS IS REST

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28–29 ESV)

You will find rest for your souls.

It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? If I were one of the worn-out people in the crowd at Capernaum listening to Jesus say these words, I would probably be thinking, "Bold statement, man. Who are you to say you can give rest for my soul?"

Good question! Jesus was the man who had drawn large crowds with his teaching and preaching. He had given sight to the blind, healed the sick, and performed many other miracles. And he was also the man who, outrageously, had just claimed to be God himself (Matthew 11:27).

As both God and man, Jesus knew exactly how anxious and burdened the people around him were, and he said, "Come to me." His heart went out to them, and he offered them what they needed for rest: himself.

Anxiety can be an incredible load. It weighs us down. Sometimes it is silent, pressuring us from the inside. Sometimes it nags like a pesky sibling who keeps tapping us on the shoulder. The more we ignore it, the more disruptive it gets. The meaner we are to it, the stronger it gets. Anxiety makes us feel heavy-laden.

Like the people at Capernaum, we are surrounded by many things that try to convince us we'll stop feeling heavy-laden if we *come to them*. Social media whispers, "If you get enough likes, you'll be worthy!" Political groups urge, "Join us, then you'll be on the right side of history!" Social mantras invite us: "Live your truth, and you'll be happy!" Consumerism entices us: "Buy this product, then you'll fit in!"

Some of these things may be helpful in the short run. They may provide a place for us to belong, a sense of cultural acceptance, and a hope that our lives will improve. But they lack the ultimate power and relief that the God who created the universe offers us when he says, “Come to me.”

Here is what we find when we come to Jesus:

The peace of knowing that our anxiety will not defeat us; because in Christ, we know the end of our story, and it is one of beauty and joy (Revelation 21:1–5).

The assurance that our anxiety does not define us; because in Christ, our identity is that of sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:14–17; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:5).

The promise that our anxiety is not pointless; because in Christ, God never wastes our struggles. He is at work redeeming painful and broken things (Romans 8:28).

The comfort of a God who meets us where we are; because in Christ, we aren’t left on our own to figure things out. We are never alone; God is always with us (Matthew 1:23).

The *me* in “Come to me” makes all the difference in the world. Jesus himself is the only true rest for our anxious souls. He is so much more than a philosophy, a brand, an ideology, a self-help mantra, or a therapist. Jesus is love incarnate, God with skin on. He is gentle and lowly. He is kind and generous. He doesn’t ask you to earn his love by performing well in school, by being the ideal son or daughter, or even by getting rid of your anxiety. He offers you his love with no strings attached. And he offers you something to *do* with even your worst anxiety: come to him.

Breathe in: *God is with me.*

Breathe out: *Jesus is rest for my heavy soul.*

We are invited to come to Jesus with all of ourselves—our thoughts, emotions, and bodies. What might it look like for you to draw near to God with your mind? With your emotions? With your body?

THE BIGGER STORY

In the beginning God created. . . . God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:1, 25)

Any time we hear “Once upon a time,” we know we’re about to hear a great story.

Similarly, “In the beginning” invites us into a story. But this is no fairy-tale introduction. Instead, we’re welcomed into the true and beautiful story of God’s love for his people and the world.

In this story, God is the author. He brings all things into being with creativity and intentionality. He doesn’t haphazardly throw some plant, animal, and human ingredients into an earthly soup pot and stir it up, hoping for the best. He forms. He crafts. He creates with purpose and delight, and he calls his creation good.

King Jesus is at the center of this story, holding all things together (Colossians 1:17). When we put our trust in him, we become participants in his glorious plan to redeem all things. Our lives become defined by the grace and love of Jesus. We become a part of Christ’s body—his family—and every hard, painful, and confusing chapter we experience becomes valuable in the wildly mysterious and beautiful story God is writing.

What sort of story is your anxiety telling you?

My anxiety is pretty nearsighted. It’s a lot like the woman I saw at the bus stop yesterday. She’d clearly forgotten her glasses, so she was squinting about two inches from the map. She may have been able to see one small part of that map, but she couldn’t see the whole thing. She was missing out on the bigger picture.

Anxiety tends to zoom in on specific worries without our even realizing it. When I write out the stories my anxiety is telling me

or talk to a friend about them, I'm often surprised at what I discover. I hear fear after fear about my worth, my identity, my safety, and my future. And I hear only negative endings to each of my concerns.

“What if I introduce myself and they think I'm awkward?”

“What if I can't finish this assignment on time and fail?”

“What if my foot never heals and I can never run again?”

When our noses are pressed to the map as we try to figure our way out of our anxiety, we lose sight of the bigger story we're a part of. When we notice our stomachs tense, our minds spin, and our hearts race, it is time to return to the deeply good and beautiful story God is writing that began long before we were born.

This story is rooted in history, not mere philosophies or ideals. And in this story God has chosen you. He had a plan for your life before he even made the earth (Psalm 139:16), and he has promised to work all things toward his good (Romans 8:28).

When our anxiety shrinks the big story into smaller, fearful, more negative plotlines, we can look to Scripture to remember that we are a part of the more glorious story God is writing. In this story, our worth is secure. Our identity is secure. Our future is secure. In this story, our anxiety never has the final say over our lives, because God has the final say. He's already written the ending. Death will not win, and all will be made right (Revelation 21:3–4).

Breathe in: *God is a good author.*

Breathe out: *His story is my story.*

If you could see the thought bubbles of your anxiety, what would they be saying?

Day 3

ORDER FROM CHAOS

In the beginning God created. . . . And God said, "Let there be. . ." (Genesis 1:1, 3)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. (John 1:1–3)

Anxiety is a type of internal chaos.

When I'm anxious, I long for someone to bring peace to my body and mind—the way my seventh-grade teacher brought order to my class. She would cup her hands around her mouth and shout into the rowdy room: "And a hush fell over the crowd!" All the commotion and chatter would stop as we responded together, "Hushhhhhhhhh!"

There was great power in Ms. Doubet's words. They brought stillness and silence where there had once been chaos.

A similar dynamic is at work in the power of God's words—"Let there be"—in Genesis 1. The first thing they accomplish is to bring order from chaos. Genesis 1:2 describes the world as "formless and empty" at the beginning of time and says "darkness was over the surface of the deep." Without any shape or order yet, earth was like a swamp without borders.¹ When the writer of Genesis used the word *darkness*, he was referring to a chaotic place. Up wasn't up yet. Down wasn't down. It may not have been a class full of thirty chatting tweens, but things were wild.

God's words weren't just nice-sounding syllables that floated away on the wind. They tamed the dark confusion and formed all creation. They ordered day and night, land and sea. They gave shape to our world.

If I had tried to use Ms. Doubet's magic phrase in our class, my peers would have rolled their eyes and kept talking. I didn't have her authority and power. But as the author of our world,

God holds ultimate authority. His words can *bring life* to dead people, as when Jesus told Lazarus to “Come out!” (John 11:43). They can also *bring light* to blind eyes, as when he told the blind man to go and wash at the pool of Siloam (John 9:7). They can even *bring stillness*, as when he calmed the storm (Mark 4:39).

Jesus’s words aren’t just tips on how to live a happy life. His words actually *make* and *give* life itself. They provide structure where there is none. They also provide us with hope for our internal chaos as we struggle with anxiety. This is a huge part of why we read, listen to, and speak God’s words (from Scripture) to one another.

When we just can’t seem to turn down the volume of our anxiety, we can turn up the volume of God’s words to us. We can listen to what he says *about* us: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1 ESV). And we can listen to what he says *to* us: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

God also gives power to *our* words. Naming, describing, and sharing our anxiety with someone we trust can help to tame it. Then we can offer it to the One who has the power to do far more than we can imagine. He is the One who gently loves and tends to us, offering himself as a “Hussssssh” in the chaos as we learn to trust him with our anxiety even when it doesn’t seem to change.

Breathe in: *The Word has the power to calm.*

Breathe out: *He loves me in the chaos.*

Spend some time putting words to your anxiety. Songs, poetry, and psalms can be helpful with this.