

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

Ministry With Stressed and Fearful Students



BROCK MORGAN
with HALLIE SCOTT, MFT

YM360

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

Ministry With Stressed and Fearful Students



BROCK MORGAN
with **HALLIE SCOTT, MFT**

PUBLISHED BY YM360

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

© 2022 by Brock Morgan. All rights reserved.

Published by youthministry360 in the United States of America.

ISBN 13: 9781954429390

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Any reference within this piece to Internet addresses of websites not under the administration of YM360 is not to be taken as an endorsement of these websites by YM360; neither does YM360 vouch for their content.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked MSG or *The Message* are taken from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

Soundtrack	11
Dedication	12
Author's Note	13
The Gift of Anxiety	15
Dilemma	27
Knowing Where We've Been to Navigate Where We're Going	41
Alexander Is Still With Us	53
Stress and Anxiety Class	63
Groovy Brains	75
Suicide	83
Pressure	93
Waiting, Listening, Seeking	101
Re-embracing Meditation	111
Wounded Healers	121
Theology and Fear	133
Programming for Generations Z and Alpha	145
Listening Is Love	155
Future Hope	163
Epilogue: You Are the Right You	167
Appendix: Prayer, Breathing, Meditation, and Other Exercises	171
Acknowledgements	184
Endnotes	186

SOUNDTRACK

I always like to include in my books a list of the music that inspired and encouraged the writing. I have a hard time even getting a word out without music playing.

So here is this book's soundtrack that kept me company.

Joshua Luke Smith - *The Void*

Larkin Poe - *Paint the Roses & Kindred Spirits*

Thrice - *Horizons/East*

Inhaler - *My Honest Face*

Jon Foreman - *Departures*

Foo Fighters - *Medicine at Midnight*

OneRepublic - *Human*

Wilder Woods

311 - *Essentials*

BROODS - *Space Island*

NEEDTOBREATHE - *Into the Mystery*

Coldplay - *Music of the Spheres*

Taylor Swift - *Folklore*

Switchfoot - *Interrobang*

Pearl Jam - *Gigaton*

Flag Day (Original Soundtrack)

Eddie Vedder - *Earthling*

DEDICATION

To teenagers everywhere who are struggling.

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you've recently turned on the TV or read anything about teenagers today, you might think, "Man, it's over! These kids don't have a chance. They're a mess!"

But if you've ever sat across the table from a teenager and really listened to them, I bet you were surprised by their depth, their heart, and the way they see themselves and the world. If you knew teens like I do, I think you'd discover that our greatest hope lies within the potential of these hurting, sensitive, and anxious young people.

I have spoken at youth conferences, camps, and retreats for decades, but I've never had to work so little at convincing teenagers that the way of the world is leading us to dysfunction and brokenness. Today's teens already know this. They may not know that the way of Jesus leads them to life, but they certainly know that this culture is leading us away from wholeness. More on this later.

The following pages are a joint effort intended to bring clarity, information, practical insight, and hope as you work with anxious teenagers. I hope you'll be encouraged, surprised, and challenged all along the way.

When I first began to tackle this project two years ago, it felt overwhelming and dark and dismal. I wasn't really sure I wanted to take a deep dive into the topic of teens and anxiety. But as a youth worker in today's world, I'm already in it. I couldn't give up. And truthfully, the longer I worked and the more time I spent with Generation Z and Generation Alpha, the more hope-filled I became. Because of the complexity and nuance of this topic, I enlisted the help of brilliant marriage and family therapist Hallie Scott, someone who has unique qualifications for making sure I'm not putting more stupid out into the world. She is also uniquely qualified to help us understand what is really going on in the lives of young people. She brings her years of experience as a counselor to offer incredible insight on this topic. Hallie will end each chapter with a thoughtful response from her perspective as a therapist. I am super grateful for her friendship and partnership. I imagine that I'm not the easiest person to work with. As an

Enneagram 7, just getting me to write cohesive chapters is quite a chore (thank you Sarah Hauge for your amazing editing job).

My hope is that this will be one of the most practical and hopeful reads you will encounter about the unique challenges of young people and mental health today. As a youth worker, joining God in lifting kids' heads away from shame for the past thirty-plus years has been my amazing privilege. I absolutely love what I do. So go ahead and turn the page. Let's do this!



The Gift of Anxiety

I began my youth ministry career in 1991 as a youth intern. It's hard to believe that I've been in youth work now for over thirty years. Some moments have been full of wonder and exhilaration while others have been characterized by dashed hopes and a broken heart. Most of my thirty-plus years of ministry have taken place inside the walls of the church. Not only have I given my adult life to it, but the church is also where I, as a pastor's kid, spent much of my childhood. It's been a lot, and it's no wonder that I have a bit of PTSD. But I'm grateful for it all. I'm even grateful for the personal anxiety that has erupted in my life as a result of my experiences. I remember clearly when that anxiety first reared its ugly head.

"Brock, are you okay? Sweetie, what's going on?" my wife, Kelsey, asked as she knocked on our locked bedroom door.

Truth is, I didn't know what was going on. All I knew is that I was having a hard time breathing.

I was working at what I thought was my dream job at a massive megachurch with great influence. When they offered me the gig, I was instantly excited to say yes—but my always insightful wife had serious hesitations.

"I'm just not sure about the pastor. He didn't even speak to us at the luncheon when we were interviewing. Plus, I didn't like how they called the people who attend the church 'customers.'"

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

I shrugged. “Well, he must have liked us. They offered me the job. But the customer thing, well, yeah okay, that actually was weird.”

Despite her concerns, I did my best to convince Kelsey that everything was going to be just fine. After all, this is what we’d been working for all of these years.

Ignorance is bliss—until it isn’t.

My first day on the job was a Sunday. I stood at the entrance of the youth building welcoming in students. I was so excited to meet them, and they seemed thrilled to meet the new youth pastor. I was pumped!

And then a man walked up behind me and tapped my shoulder.

“Hey, um, are you the youth pastor here?”

“I am,” I said with a smile.

“Well, I wanted to give you a heads up about something. I was in a meeting yesterday that kept me awake all night afterward. I just felt impressed to come and speak to you about it.”

“Okay man, what’s going on?” I questioned.

“Well,” he said, “I was in a meeting with a few of the pastors and elders yesterday and the lead pastor mentioned that he was really unhappy with the direction that you’re taking the youth group.”

I quickly interrupted. “Dude, this is my first day working here. I haven’t even unpacked my office yet.”

“Is your name Brock Morgan?” he asked.

“Yeah...”

“Well, that’s who he was talking about. I felt like I was supposed to give you a warning. And please know that I’ll be praying for you.”

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

He shook my hand and I never saw him again. To this day I don't know if he was an elder at the church or what. I dismissed this interaction, deciding he must have been confused. There's no way what he said could be true. That guy must have mixed up my name with someone else's or something.

But over the next few weeks I kept hearing from people that the lead pastor was saying negative things about me behind closed doors. Each time this happened, the lump that had formed in my throat grew larger. I didn't know what to do, so I mentioned what was going on to my dear friend over at Youth Specialties, Tic Long.

"You need to confront him and get everything out on the table," Tic said. This was good advice. So I scheduled a face-to-face meeting with the lead pastor through his admin—only to have our meeting cancelled the day of. I rescheduled—and it got cancelled again. And this kept happening for the next six months.

I went to another pastor on staff and told him what was going on. I'll never forget what happened next.

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked me square in the face.

"Brock," he said, "you're in a no-win situation. You are not the lead pastor's pick. Everyone wanted to hire you except for him. I think he might be trying to sabotage you."

Say what?!

I felt sick. *This is insane!* I thought.

"If I were you I'd ask the executive pastor to get a meeting together and just talk it through," the other pastor advised. So that's exactly what I did.

Two weeks later I found myself sitting at a coffee shop with the executive pastor, two associate pastors, and the lead pastor. I felt like I was looking across the table at the heads of the mafia, or like Tom Cruise in the movie *The Firm*. It was strange, nerve-wracking, and scary. I was hoping they

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

couldn't see my heart pounding inside my chest as I looked directly at the lead pastor and laid it out there.

“Look, I've only been here six months and we can call it quits if I'm not your guy. Just say the word. I can get another job. You don't need me here if you'd rather have someone else.”

I'm not sure what I expected, but it wasn't what he said next. “Oh no, Brock, you're our guy. I want you to succeed.”

“Well then, why am I hearing from people that you don't think I'm a good fit? That you're unhappy with the direction of the youth ministry? Look man, just be honest. I can take it,” I said.

“No, I mean it, Brock. You're my guy and I want you to do well here.”

After that meeting I hoped for the best...but more of the same continued. I began to feel the lump move from my throat to my chest. It was an unsafe feeling. I felt it every time I drove onto the church property. In every meeting and every conversation it was there, always present. The feeling became a constant ache deep inside of me, a pit in my stomach, a deep hurt and a tightening in my chest.

At the time, I didn't really know what anxiety was. People didn't talk about it much during those days. But anxiety is exactly what I was experiencing.

Back to me in the locked bedroom:

“Brock, are you okay? Sweetie, what's going on?”

I wasn't doing okay.

In fact, I was barely hanging on. Work was incredibly stressful and it was impacting me, all the time. Every youth group the executive pastor would walk in during my talk and stand in the back of the auditorium counting heads. I'd continue with my talk as best I could, but I was dying inside.

THE ANXIOUS TEEN

I learned that the place was a pressure cooker, even separate from the pastor speaking negatively about me. Everyone felt it at least a little bit. Numbers, numbers, numbers was all they spoke about. How to keep the “customers” happy and make sure they kept coming back was a prominent theme in staff meetings. All of it began to wear me down. Still, I did my best and the youth group was growing. When we took a group of students and leaders to Mexico for a mission trip, it was the largest group they had ever taken. Even this wasn’t enough to assuage the concerns or lessen the negativity.

I spent only a couple of years at the church before it was too much. I reluctantly signed an agreement saying that I would never mention the church’s name, and in return they’d pay me four months’ severance to walk away. And walk away I did, but I was a mess.

A few months later my incredible wife made me go to a counselor. One afternoon she looked at me and said, “Brock, you’re not the man I married. You’re bitter and angry, and you’re mean.”

The thing is, she was right.

I needed help. That tightening in my chest was now there all of the time, to one degree or another. Shortening my breath. Always present, always pressing in.

A couple of weeks later I was sitting in my counselor’s office when she asked a question.

“Who do you need to forgive, even if they’re not asking you for forgiveness?”

I just looked at her. “Nope,” I said after a moment. “I want that guy to pay.” Forgiveness? No thanks. I left our session with great resolve to not only *not* forgive the lead pastor, but to spread the word as much as I could about all of the youth workers and ministers whom he had deeply injured over his many years in ministry. And the list, I had come to learn, was huge!