

THEOLOGY

A Parent's Guide to

FEAR & WORRY

axis

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“It’s not time to worry yet.”

These words were written by Harper Lee in her classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and they certainly ring true when it comes to our own parental propensity to worry. Will there ever be a convenient time to worry? Hardly! But worry has an ugly way of rearing its head at inconvenient times, as we all know. We try not to worry, but our attempts often seem futile, which in turn makes it hard to be confident in helping our kids navigate through their own fear and worry.

Fear is real—in fact, God created it (more on this below)—but worry is never beneficial. By looking a little closer at the problems of fear and worry, we can learn where they come from, what they are at their root, how to overcome them through the power of God, and how to help our kids do the same.

What is fear?

[Merriam-Webster defines](#) fear as: “(n.) an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger; anxious concern; (v.) to be afraid of: expect with alarm.” Simply, it’s a feeling of alarm that arises in the moment. It can be positive when it warns us of a real danger, such as a car swerving into our lane unexpectedly, or it can be negative when it causes us to anticipate a danger that doesn’t exist or has a very minute chance of coming to fruition, like that every car remotely within our vicinity is going to swerve into our lane unexpectedly. The first causes us to react to something that’s actually happening—and could save lives—whereas the second causes us to react to something that *might* happen—and can and *does* steal our peace.

This is important to understand. Because fear is an “unpleasant” emotion, we tend to think of it as being bad in all circumstances; but it’s actually not. In fact, as writer Jon Bloom [explains](#):

Fear is something God designed, not the devil. God designed fear so that we would flee real danger. Fear is meant to be a mercy. Its purpose is to direct us to safety. When our soul is ordered right, we fear the Lord and turn away from evil (Job 28:28). The devil perverts reality with his lies and seeks to use fear on us

backwards. He wants us to fear evil and turn away from the Lord.

This means it's important for us to discern between healthy and unhealthy fear, so that we can reject the devil's attempts at distracting us and keeping us from the abundant life God has planned for us ([Ephesians 6:10-18](#)).

Because there will always be temptation to fear, we need to be ready to face it. If we don't, fear quickly transforms into worry.

What is worry?

[Mark Twain wrote](#), "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them have never happened." We parents have lived long enough to recognize the wisdom of this statement. It's easy to anticipate bad things happening, but many times that trouble never comes.

[Oxford Dictionaries defines](#) worry as: "(n.) The state of being anxious and troubled over actual or potential problems; (v.) Feel or cause to feel anxious or troubled about actual or potential problems." Worry is the act of meditating on the things we're fearful about and, in a sense, distracts us from facing our fears. It causes us to think around a fear and stay mentally trapped, rather than acknowledge the fear and work to move past it.

Psychotherapist Katherine Schafler offers [this definition of worrying](#) and how it relates to fear:

Worrying pretends to be necessary, but it's not proactive and it's not helpful. Worrying buddies up with your imagination to exploit your fears. Worrying is focusing your thoughts on all the negative outcomes at the opportunity cost of applying that same energy toward problem solving. Fears need a combination of acceptance and positive reassurance to be managed.

In her book [Clippings from My Notebook](#), Corrie Ten Boom wrote, "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength." Worry takes away our energy to face life and its challenges. When we give into worry, we are allowing fear to rule our lives.

How are the two different?

While worry focuses on a negative expectation, causing fear to be magnified, fear happens more suddenly and is generally unexpected. Worry is generally thought of as being ongoing, while fear is more spontaneous, something that happens in the moment. Fear is a more momentary type of alarm; worry is what keeps fear going. Fear sparks worry, while worry rehearses fears from every possible angle, allowing the fear to linger.

How are they related to anxiety?

Depending on one's circumstances, as [this New York Times article](#) explains, anxiety can be “a rational reaction to unstable, dangerous circumstances.” This is similar to what we discussed earlier as being a healthy type of fear. However, when anxiety takes hold of a person, it wreaks havoc in his/her mind, similar to worry: “Highly anxious people. . . have an overactive fight-or-flight response that perceives threats where there often are none.” In her book [On Edge: A Journey through Anxiety](#), Andrea Petersen writes, “Anxious people aren't just constantly on guard; they actually see more peril in the world.” She follows this up a few pages later by quoting Christian Grillon, who observes: “In a way, anxiety is the opposite of fear. Fear is about something that is in front of you that is predictable and imminent. Anxiety is the opposite. It is worrying about something that is in the future that may or may not happen.”

While most people experience some degree of anxiety surrounding the circumstances of their lives, more severe anxiety struggles require professional medical attention to be managed and overcome. Anxiety is an actual mental health disorder, the diagnosis of which is becoming increasingly common in Generation Z. In fact, [it has overtaken depression](#) as the most common reason college students seek out counseling.

How does culture play into our fears?

As believers, we belong to Christ, but as John points out [in his first epistle](#), “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” We see every day how culture creates, perpetuates, and even exploits many of our fears. Mainstream media tends to focus on negative things within society, of which there is no shortage, many times exaggerating them to the point of being a larger source of fear than they should reasonably be. News items covering social justice issues, violence, and political topics can all be points of contention and, if we’re not careful, sources of fear and worry. Even the music, movies, and TV we consume can cause us to worry about whether we’re hustling enough or good enough or rich enough or beautiful enough or anything enough. And many companies use our existing fears or create new ones in order to sell their products (e.g. almost every “beauty” product ever created).

Another source of fear that’s unique to the 21st century and immensely powerful is social media. Regardless of the original goal of different platforms, most (if not all) have devolved into major sources of anxiety, fear, insecurity, and worry. Of course, there are exceptions, but for most users, it’s too easy to compare oneself to what others are posting, feel like one doesn’t measure up, then post something that makes one look better, which in turn is seen by others who don’t feel like they measure up, and [on the cycle goes](#). This is something that impacts teenagers immensely. [45% said](#) they feel judged on social platforms (i.e. fear of other people’s opinions or [FOPO](#)), and 38% reported feeling bad about themselves due to their use of social media (i.e. fear of not being good enough).

What fears are common for Gen Z?

Based on stereotypes—e.g. the “selfie” generation—it would be reasonable to expect Gen Zers’ greatest fears to be self-focused, but when looking at generation-specific statistics from studies in both the [USA](#) and the [UK](#), it’s clear that their worries are much more outwardly focused. Societal issues at large are significant sources of fear for them, and this can largely be attributed to the usage of social media as a tool to get information about and discuss current social issues. In a sense, the young adults

of Generation Z (b. mid- to late-1990s to mid-2010s) are more grounded in reality, so they may feel they have more reason to fear.

According to the studies, Gen Z's greatest fears are:

- Terrorism
- School safety
- Gun violence
- The state of the government
- Debt and lack of ability to find work

These outward-facing fears have extremely inward-facing consequences, as we touched on earlier. Gen Z is highly anxious in general. They have a greater struggle with mental health issues and are stressed about rising suicide rates. In a [CNN article on Gen Z](#), Andrea Diaz reports: “Although 62% of Generation Z said rising suicide rates are also a source of stress, compared with 44% of adults overall, the survey says these young people are more likely to report mental health conditions than any other generation.” Though this can look grim, it can also be taken in a more positive direction to indicate that this generation truly cares about their mental health and is self-aware enough to know when they need help.

The [story of Jake](#) is one that's all too common for young Millennials (b. late 1980s to mid-1990s) and Gen Zers. He was a young man who battled severe anxiety with no one specific thing that seemed to have caused it. Instead, it was a pile up of multiple Advanced Placement classes and extracurriculars he felt he had to juggle in order to ensure admission into a good college so that he could ultimately have a great career. His anxiety essentially paralyzed him to that point that he believed if he failed a single quiz at school, “Then I'll get a bad grade in the class, I won't get into the college I want, I won't get a good job, and I'll be a total failure.” Thankfully, he was able to get intensive therapy and move on in his life with his anxiety under control—and he even got into his dream university.

Why do they have so much fear and worry?

Though there's [nothing new under the sun](#), each generation has struggles that are different from those of previous generations. For Gen Z, culture consistently tells

them, “You are in charge of your own destiny. It’s all up to you.” While personal responsibility is important, the pressure of controlling one’s own destiny is too much weight to bear. At the root of ungodly fear and worry is a desire to control and a belief that each of us has total responsibility for our own destiny. This is a version of pride because, by attempting to control everything in our lives, we place ourselves in a mindset of thinking we have a better handle on things than God and that He will not help us. Pride places us on the throne of our own hearts and also makes us feel like the weight of our fears and worries are ours to carry. Ultimately, if we are surrendered to God, His purpose will prevail. [Proverbs 19:21](#) reminds us, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

In addition, fear of man (worrying about what others think of us more than what God does) is something that all people of all generations struggle with, but Gen Z is living in a time when this fear is on steroids. But just like other fears, it’s prideful because it’s just another way that we attempt to control our own lives. Pastor [John Piper says](#), “Fear of men really is a mark of pride. It is presumptuous. It presumes to take over a responsibility for our comfort which God has said He wants to handle. . . .So fear takes over the role of protector and guide and comforter.” Fear of man attempts to control how others view us at the expense of keeping God at the forefront of our hearts, decisions, and actions.

What does Scripture say?

Throughout Scripture, God consistently commands His people not to fear and worry. Instead, we are to trust Him in all things. In fact, one writer [points out](#) that the phrase “do not be afraid” is found **in the NIV 70 times** and, “more often than not, is followed by an action that God is or will be taking.” These actions include promises for things such as deliverance, victory, and protection.

For example, God commands Abraham not to fear in [Genesis 15:1](#), when he says, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” Then in [Genesis 46:3](#), God assures Moses: “‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.’” In the New Testament, Jesus told His disciples: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has

been pleased to give you the kingdom” ([Luke 12:32](#)). In the book of Revelation, the apostle John reacts in fear to his vision of Jesus, to which Jesus replies: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” ([Revelation 1:17-18](#)).

These and the many other examples remind us that we can release our fears, worries, and need to be in control because the Lord is fighting on our behalf. We live our lives for the sake of Christ because He already gave Himself up for us ([Galatians 2:20](#)). He Himself is our reward. He has a kingdom He delights to share with us. He has been present since before the beginning of time, and He has conquered death. When Jesus returns, He will wipe away all of our tears (Isaiah 25:8). And above all, He is sovereign over all things (see [Isa. 55:9](#), [Lam. 3:37-38](#), [Dan. 4:17](#), [Matt. 10:29](#), [John 19:10-11](#), [Heb. 1:3](#), [Col. 1:17](#)).

Even though we have the promise of care from the Lord and, ultimately, eternal justice, we have to keep in mind that we are still currently in a battle against the forces of darkness. ***Satan would love nothing more than to prevent us from living in victory over fear.*** His ultimate goal is to destroy us and our faith. In [1 Peter 5:8-9](#), he is described as a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour;” but he often goes about devouring us in subtle and deceptive ways. Rather than risk being detected by being too forthright and obvious, He seeks to lull us into a place of stagnancy or distraction. When we’re concerned about the things of the world, we don’t view them through the lens of God’s final victory and our place in His kingdom.

In C.S. Lewis’s book [The Screwtape Letters](#), he writes from the perspective of a senior demon training a junior demon how to prevent Christians from keeping the faith and being productive members of the kingdom of God. (Since it’s written as a [satire](#), in the following excerpt the word “Enemy” is used to denote God.) Lewis writes: “There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against the Enemy. He wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.” Satan wants desperately to pit believers against Christ within their hearts and minds by distracting us with fears, anxieties, insecurities, discouragement, and worry.

In addition to what we mentioned above, some other things the Bible tells us about fear and worry are:

- Because we have been adopted as children of God, we no longer have to remain

in bondage to fear ([Romans 8:15](#); [1 John 4:18](#)).

- The fear of man traps us, but trusting in the Lord keeps us safe ([Psalm 56:3-4](#); [Proverbs 29:25](#)).
- Jesus said we should not be anxious about our lives or worry about tomorrow, but should be focused on how God has met our needs today. We do not need to be anxious about whether He will provide for us ([Matthew 6:25-34](#); [Luke 12:22-24](#)).
- There is no need to fear because God is on our side ([Psalm 118:6](#)).
- We are to be encouraged because God is on His way to save His people ([Isaiah 35:4](#)).
- When we see horrible fear-inducing things happening around us, we can have confident faith because “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” ([1 John 4:4](#)).
- We are instructed to not be anxious, but to make our requests known to God. In doing so, He will guard us with His peace ([Philippians 4:6-7](#)).

There will always be things we could be well justified in feeling fearful about, especially when it comes to raising our kids, but we can have courage and faith that God will help us through every question and struggle. We can seek to release our burdens to the Lord, and as Jesus said, “find rest for your souls” ([Matthew 11:28-30](#)). Jesus promised peace for us through the coming of the Holy Spirit: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” ([John 14:27](#)). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can have peace, rather than fear, rule our hearts. [Isaiah 41:10](#) says: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” When we have a moment of fear, we can choose to release it to God and take on His strength instead.

How do I learn to not have a spirit of fear?

Paul [encouraged Timothy](#), “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” But tapping into that power and love requires discipline and active participation on our part. We have to cultivate this habit daily, possibly even minute by minute.

First, we must release control and be humble before God, acknowledging Him as the source of all we need. When we do this, we can freely cast our anxieties on Christ, trusting with confidence that He cares for us ([1 Peter 5:6-7](#)). This requires that we acknowledge our fears and worries, rather than stuffing them away or pretending they don't exist or matter. It also requires that we take God at His word and trust that He will do what He says, even when it seems impossible or unlikely to us. This means that we step out in faith and do as He asks, regardless of what He has or has not done. [Piper describes](#) this correlation between fear and obedience: “God promises to be our comforter and protector, but [if we live in fear] we deny the credibility of God’s word and allow fear to set the limits of our obedience”—i.e. “I’ll do that after God does this.”

As children of God, when we're tempted to succumb to fear and worry, we should instead turn our focus back to God through praise and prayer. Listen to praise and worship music. Pray with a friend. Post encouraging Scriptures around your home where they can be easily seen. Do whatever it takes to make it easier for you to meditate on God's word than on your worry. Focus on God's promises. Don't pretend that fear doesn't exist in your life, but also, don't let it linger and have free reign. If you let your fear control you and dictate your decisions, that is the example your children will have to follow when they encounter their own fears.

How do I help my kids do the same?

As we just mentioned, the best way to disciple your kids into having a biblical perspective of fear and worry is to first model it to them by how you live your own life. Seek the Lord and His Word for wisdom; take a class at your church; get professional counseling assistance—do whatever it takes. In doing so, you'll be better equipped to help your kids. [Proverbs 14:26](#) says “Whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge.” When you keep God as the supreme authority in your life, not only does it make you secure, it brings stability to your children as well.

Second, allow your children to acknowledge their fear and worry—there is no shame in having those feelings, but it's not healthy to stay in that headspace long-term.

When we bring our fear into the light ([Ephesians 5:13](#)), it loses its power, so think of ways to make your home a safe place to talk about fear and worry, no matter how “shameful” they might seem. Be the one to bring up the topic first; if you don’t talk about a subject, your kids will learn implicitly that that subject is off-limits. So bring it up first by talking about your own fears (especially triumphs over them!) and second by asking them about theirs. Remind them that they are safe with you and that they will not be judged.

But don’t let the conversation end there. Talk to them about how, by God’s power and grace, they can overcome their anxieties and worries. Train them to only live in the fear of the Lord and not the fear of man. Teach them about the peace that comes from the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives. Teach them to seek the Lord and listen for His voice. Disciple them in what it means to be content ([Hebrews 13:5-6](#)). Teach them to seek the Lord for consolation in their struggles: “When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul” ([Psalm 94:19](#)). By discipling your children in the ways of the Lord, you are together building a solid spiritual foundation that will help them have the strength to hold fast to God in every circumstance.

How do I help a child who has a stronger tendency to fear, worry, & be anxious?

Just as it does in our own lives, seeing a child struggle in this area can make us want to control the situation—perhaps even more so than if it were about us, since, after all, we are their guardians. Controlling behavior doesn’t help, though. In [On Edge](#), Petersen talks about how detrimental controlling behavior can be when it comes to helping our children with fear and anxiety issues: “Overprotective and controlling parenting—telling kids what to think and feel and micromanaging their activities—sends the message that children aren’t capable, a belief that can fuel anxiety.”

Don’t beat yourself up if you have a child who struggles in this area. Petersen also points out that “researchers found that parenting explained only about 4% of the variation in anxiety issues among children.” Get your child professional help, if needed. Therapy and counseling are wonderful tools that God can work through.

Encourage your child to find Bible passages or quotations that they can put up in

their room or carry with them in their backpack when they are tempted to worry. “Anxious hearts are very heavy, but a word of encouragement does wonders!” ([Proverbs 12:25](#), TLB). Offer to help find some of the verses with them. A great verse to meditate on is [Psalm 34:4](#), which says, “I sought the Lord, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” Help your child find activities to do when they are worried, things that will send their mental energy in a more positive direction. Some people find a lot of peace in volunteering their time to help others. Others enjoy things such as exercising, cooking, or playing a musical instrument. Finally, never underestimate the power of God’s Word and the power of praying for your children ([Romans 12:12](#)).

Conclusion

There is no shortage of things we could be fearful about in this day and age. Each day there’s a new story of hardship and suffering that could lead us to worry about our children’s lives and experiences. The good news is that, in Christ, we have an open invitation to relinquish our fear and worry and replace them with His peace. Fear and worry do not have to control your life or your kids’ lives. Jesus never guaranteed us a hardship-free life, but He has made provision for our peace in the midst of life’s storms: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” ([John 16:33](#)).

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent’s Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- [Anxiety Conversation Kit](#), video curriculum to watch with teenagers
- [A Parent’s Guide to Making Your Home a Safe Place](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Generation Z](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Discipling Teenagers](#)

- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- “[2018 Report on Stress in America Generation Z](#),” American Psychological Association
- [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality](#), Peter Scazzero

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