

Faces of Anxiety

The Parent-Child Relationship

I find it interesting how Paul the Apostle would often greet, “Grace and Peace to you.” When Jesus instructed His disciples on mission, He spoke to them about leaving peace at the houses they visited. The enemy’s strategy is to get believers and people in general into a state of fear and anxiety so that they make bad decisions and judgement calls. Anxiety is the precursor to many poor decisions in world history and also in our lives. Think of the underlying fear behind your decision-making when you made bad decisions. Whether it’s a parent, leader, child, pastor, athlete, or salesperson, anxiety often drives four major areas: Over-control (micromanaging, over-preparing); Avoidance (not taking necessary risks); Perfectionism (overworking to avoid mistakes) and People-pleasing (excessive concern about approval). In this message we will explore the anxious parent and the anxious child, highlighting how this dynamic affects families. You can also reflect on how you were raised and explore the impact of parental or caregiver anxiety on you. As parents we have the privilege of imparting many good things to our children. Sadly, often out of ignorance, we pass on negative things, one of which is anxiety. **If many parents knew that anxiety is contagious, they would take ownership and address it.** Research supports the idea that only two fears—falling and loud noises—are truly innate. All other fears emerge through learning, experience, and context. A classic “visual cliff” experiment revealed that infants (typically 6–14 months old) hesitate to crawl over what appears to be a cliff, even when encouraged by a caregiver, suggesting a built-in depth perception and caution to prevent falls. Infants respond reflexively to sudden, loud sounds—they often flinch or cry—indicating a hardwired protective impulse for survival. This means that so many of our fears can be linked to how we were nurtured and what was mirrored to us. The Anxious Parent is generally overprotective, micromanaging every detail of a child’s life. This is often perpetuated by the fact that such an approach is often highly regarded and rewarded by those around them. They are envied by other parents as the model parents who are deeply involved in their child’s world. They have difficulty allowing children to take age-appropriate risks. Their children, as they get older, begin to clash with them as they feel they are being babied all the time. They constantly check on children’s whereabouts, grades, or friendships. They also have frequent “what if” scenarios about their safety or future. This is how anxiety works; they meditate on the worst-case scenario and then live in that emotional state. They typically feel like they are going to fail or have failed as a parent. Their sense of personal worth is tied to child’s success or safety. This results in a lot of anxiety, particularly because a lot of the child’s behaviour is beyond their control. They tend to ruminate, having multiple mental replays of past parenting mistakes. They also have a fixation and extreme fear of having regrets later in life. This fuels their behaviour. Their lives are riddled with “Shoulds” and they have no revelation of guilt free motherhood or fatherhood. A powerful self-coaching question for them to ask is, “What *shoulds* have been placed on my parenting that Jesus hasn’t?”

Job 1: 4-5 “His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ This was Job’s regular custom.”

Some scholars note Job’s vigilance may reflect both faith and underlying fear. The verse shows a tension parents often feel—concern for their children’s choices—but also the right response: to entrust them to God rather than over-control them. These three scriptures show the balance we need.

God’s care for the fearful: “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” (Psalm 56:3)

Jesus' reassurance: "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

Parental wisdom: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

1. How does anxiety impact one's parenting style?

1. Overprotectiveness & Control

- Parents with anxiety often become **over-controlling** or over-involved in their children's lives.
- This stems from their own heightened perception of threat, leading them to shield their children excessively.
- While intended to protect, this reduces a child's chance to develop autonomy and resilience.

Keep asking yourself as a parent: **How is my desire to control my child affecting their ability to become a self-regulated adult one day?**

2. Reduced Warmth & Increased Criticism

- Studies show that anxious parents may display **less warmth** and **more critical or intrusive behaviour**, especially if they fear failure in parenting.
- Children often interpret this as rejection or conditional love.
- Lower supervision and engagement with children

3. Inconsistent Discipline

- Anxiety can make parents swing between permissiveness (avoiding conflict) and harshness (acting out of stress).
- This inconsistency confuses children and undermines their sense of security.

4. Higher levels of doubt about the child's abilities

If a parent is anxious it is often due to the lies they have believed about how the world works, how dangerous it is. A child wants reassurance that they have what it takes to be successful in the world. They need to hear it from their parents, but if the parent is struggling with faith that things will work out, this comes through in their parenting. Sadly, many children internalize this as, "My parents don't think I am good enough to cope."

5. Overprotective or rejecting parenting styles

Both of these dimensions elevate children's learning related anxiety whilst emotional warmth helps to reduce it.

A rejecting parenting style is where a parent dismisses a child's emotions and is also cold and detached.

6. Stress that undermines sensitivity

There is a negative correlation between stress (anxiety) and parental awareness and responsiveness to infants' needs.

Ephesians 6:4 "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Exasperate - Greek word: *παροργίζετε* (*parorgizete*) **Root meaning:** to provoke, irritate, stir up to anger, embitter. It implies parenting in a way that **discourages or frustrates** children, leading them to resentment rather than growth.

- **Exasperating** = harshness, inconsistency, criticism, or control that wounds the child's spirit.
- **Nurturing** = guiding with discipline, encouragement, and godly teaching.

This parallels **Colossians 3:21** "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

Often when parenting is done from an anxious space the result is that children are exasperated and embittered. **"A peaceful parent is a powerful parent."**

2. What is the impact of anxious parenting on children?

1. Higher Risk of Anxiety Disorders

Children of anxious parents are more likely to develop **anxiety themselves**—through both genetic predisposition and learned behaviour. **Children often imitate parents' coping styles. If a parent models worry, catastrophizing, or avoidance, children are more likely to adopt those behaviours.** Longitudinal studies have established that parental anxiety predicts child anxiety over time.

2. Low Confidence & Autonomy

Overprotection prevents children from facing challenges and building self-efficacy, fuelling dependence and insecurity.

3. Hyper-Sensitivity to Stress

Children may become overly cautious, fearful, or perfectionistic, mirroring the parent's hyper-vigilance.

4. Emotional Burden

Children sometimes take on a **caregiver role**, trying to "calm" or "protect" the anxious parent. This parentification increases stress and guilt.

3. What is the difference between Anxiety-based parenting and Faith-based parenting?

Outlined below are 7 shifts to make in order to embrace faith-based parenting. This is where you parent from a place of rest because of your ultimate trust in God.

1. From Ownership to Stewardship

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"It's all on me. If I fail, my children's future is ruined."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"My children ultimately belong to God. I am entrusted to guide, not control."*

"Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him." (Psalm 127:3)

2. From Control to Trust

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"If I don't manage every detail, something will go wrong."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"God is sovereign. My role is to be faithful, not fearful."*

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5)

3. From Outcome Fixation to Faithfulness

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"My children's success depends on my perfect parenting."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"God calls me to model love, truth, and grace. He is responsible for the harvest."*

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." (1 Corinthians 3:6)

4. From Protection to Preparation

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"I must shield my children from all hardship."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"My children will face trials, but with God they will grow stronger."*

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

It's indeed your role to protect your children but after a certain age you have to prepare them for life through exposure with guidance.

5. From Perfection to Grace

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"I must be a flawless parent or I'll damage my children."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"God's grace covers my weaknesses, and my children learn grace through my imperfections."*

"Grace grows stronger kids than perfectionism ever will."

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

6. From People-Pleasing to God-Pleasing

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"I need to parent in ways that others approve of."* - sometimes we even seek the approval of our children.
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"I parent as unto the Lord, not to impress others."*

"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? ... If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

7. From Restlessness to Resting in God

- **Fear-based mindset:** *"I must always be doing more for my kids."*
- **Faith-based mindset:** *"God gives rest to the beloved. My peace will bless my children more than my striving."*

"In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves." (Psalm 127:2)

"Parenting from rest is parenting from trust."

Reflection

- Do I see myself more as an **owner** or a **steward** of my children?
- When I feel anxious, what would trusting God with my child look like in that moment?
- How can I model **grace** in my parenting this week instead of perfectionism?
- What practical ways can I build **rest rhythms** into family life that reflect trust in God?

4. In what ways are parents affected by their Children's Burdens?

As we study anxiety it is important for us to examine how we may sometimes create anxiety unnecessarily for others. Recently I didn't respond to a new meeting invite because I had already responded to a duplicate one that was more specific. Unfortunately, the new people involved were not aware of this and began to panic. There would have been no harm in me accepting the request a second time and perhaps overcommunicating. Another common scenario is when you have someone who loves working under pressure and leaves things until the last minute. They might be okay but the rest of the team is panicking especially when there is no communication. In the family context a lot of times children are not aware of how connected they are to their parents and how their emotional state and behaviour impacts their parents' anxiety levels.

1. Parents feel sorrow and stress when children struggle or go astray.

Proverbs 17:25 "A foolish son brings grief to his father and bitterness to the mother who bore him."

2. The emotional state and choices of children directly affect their parents' peace.

Proverbs 10:1 "A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother."

3. A child's inner life and decisions shape the emotional well-being of both parents.

Proverbs 15:20 "A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother."

4. A parent's greatest joy—and by contrast, their deepest anxiety—comes from their children's spiritual condition.

3 John 1:4 "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

5. Parents (and community leaders) experience anguish when children suffer anxiety, fear, or despair.

Lamentations 2:11 "My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city."

5. How does anxiety show up in Children and Teens?

There are often behavioural, emotional and physical signs of anxiety in children and these tend to change as the child grows older. It's important for parents to be able to identify these because accurate diagnosis results in accurate treatment. In a seminar I did recently one of the participants explained how he was taken to a psychologist when he was aged six, in order to assist him with emotional regulation. To this day he explains how it helped him to be strong when it comes to managing his emotions. This is an example of the power of early detection.

1. Anxiety in Younger Children (Preschool – Elementary)

- **Separation fears:** Difficulty being away from a parent, clinginess, crying at school drop-off.
- **Somatic complaints:** Headaches, stomach aches, nausea without clear medical cause.
- **Sleep issues:** Trouble falling asleep, nightmares, or needing a parent present to fall asleep.
- **Excessive reassurance seeking:** Constantly asking "Will I be okay?" or "Are you sure you'll be here when I get back?"
- **Avoidance:** Refusal to go to school, playdates, or birthday parties out of fear.
- **Irritability or tantrums:** Acting out when anxious rather than expressing worry verbally.
- **Over-compliance:** Some anxious children become extremely "good" and perfectionistic to avoid disapproval.

Helpful Parental Response:

- Stay calm and reassuring, model confidence
- Validate feelings: *"I know new things feel scary."*
- Establish predictable routines
- Praise brave behaviours, not avoidance
- Pray with them for peace and safety

2. Anxiety in Older Children & Preteens

- **Academic stress:** Perfectionism, procrastination, or avoidance of schoolwork.
- **Social fears:** Worrying about fitting in, embarrassment, or being judged.
- **Physical symptoms:** Sweating, trembling, frequent bathroom use before stressful events.
- **Rigidity:** Strong need for routines or rules; distress when plans change.
- **Withdrawal:** Avoiding activities, becoming quiet or reserved compared to peers.

Helpful Parental Response:

- Encourage effort over outcomes
- Teach relaxation tools (breathing, prayer)
- Role-play social situations
- Gently expose them to feared settings with support

3. Anxiety in Adolescents and Teens

- **Social withdrawal:** Avoiding peers, isolating in their room, avoiding calls/texts.
- **Irritability / moodiness:** Anxiety often shows as anger or frustration.
- **Performance anxiety:** Intense fear of public speaking, sports, or exams.
- **Perfectionism:** Fear of making mistakes, obsessive over-preparing.
- **Panic symptoms:** Racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness in stressful settings.
- **Sleep problems:** Insomnia, staying up late worrying, or oversleeping to escape stress.
- **Risk behaviours:** In some teens, anxiety may present as defiance, substance use, or rebellion—ways of coping with internal distress.

Helpful Parental Response:

- **Prayer Support**
- **Professional help if anxiety disrupts daily life**
- **Remind them of identity in Christ, not performance**

Reflection Questions

1. The Anxious Parent

1. In what ways do I see myself becoming over-controlling or over-involved in my children's lives?
2. What "worst-case scenarios" do I tend to meditate on, and how does that shape my parenting decisions?
3. How much of my sense of worth is tied to my children's success or safety?
4. What "shoulds" have I placed on my parenting that Jesus hasn't?

2. Impact on Parenting Style

5. How does my desire for control affect my child's ability to grow in independence and resilience?
6. Do I tend to swing between permissiveness and harshness when stressed? What message does that send my children?
7. How can I nurture my children without exasperating them through inconsistency, criticism, or control?

3. Impact on Children

8. In what ways might my anxiety be unintentionally teaching my children to worry or avoid challenges?
9. Have I noticed my children taking on emotional burdens for me (trying to calm or protect me)? How can I release them from that role?
10. Do I give my children the reassurance they need to believe they are capable and "have what it takes"?

4. Faith-Based Parenting

11. Which mindset shift (stewardship, trust, faithfulness, preparation, grace, God-pleasing, rest) resonates most with where I am right now?
12. How would it change my parenting this week if I truly believed my children belong to God more than to me?
13. What practical steps can I take to move from parenting out of fear to parenting out of faith and rest?

5. Parents and Children's Burdens

14. How do I experience my children's struggles emotionally? Do I carry them as if I were solely responsible?
15. How can I entrust my children's burdens to God without withdrawing my care and presence?

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