

Unmasking Anxiety

2 Corinthians 11:14 “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” Paul uses this warning to remind believers that deception often comes cloaked in something that looks good, spiritual, or appealing — which is why discernment is so important. The context of this verse is to do with false teachers, however we can apply the principle more broadly to today's theme of anxiety. Anxiety is often masked and even celebrated because it comes under the guise of something else that's socially acceptable. Many people today suffer from high functioning anxiety and hidden distress according to research. Individuals with high functioning anxiety can often appear to be calm and accomplished professionals with great composure, however underneath all of this is inner turmoil. This is often overlooked because of their outward success. No one is aware that this great professional is experiencing non-stop worry and unease. People are not aware of their coping mechanisms, such as meticulous planning to minimize uncertainty and control. They experience intense anxiety whilst still being fairly successful in functioning and dealing with life challenges. Because they are afraid of being seen as weak and vulnerable, they have no outlet for their internal conflict. **Unacknowledged anxiety always finds a way to leak out.** We know that whatever you resist will persist, so in this case, they typically experience nagging pains, muscle tightness, clenched jaws, tooth grinding, digestive issues and headaches. Socially, they tend to be irritable. We often see this as impatience with weaker or less smart people, yet the root of it is anxiety.

Anxiety also often masquerades as physical health issues. Anxiety can mimic or be misattributed to various medical conditions. People can report palpitations, fatigue and tension. Anxiety can be mistaken for thyroid problems or heart disease. In other cases, people come across as depressed or having somatic complaints, yet often these are anxiety symptoms which are concealed under the presentation of depression and other bodily complaints. **A lot of anxious people have mastered the art of hiding it so that their behaviour is socially acceptable.** They hide their trembling hands or sweating palms, and many are not aware of the frantic mental preparation they go through before presenting or being the centre of attention. Someone I was coaching recently shared with me how her boss thinks that she can do certain things with her eyes closed yet she knows deep inside the amount of time she spends in anxiety in the build up to a delivery.

There are five major categories of masking I will share with you, and I will also show you what the Word of God has to say on each of them.

1. Over-Functioning & Control

A. Excessive planning and scheduling – looks like being organized, but it's driven by fear and is more about reducing uncertainty.

Proverbs 16:9 “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.”

Matthew 6:34 “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

While planning has value, ultimate security lies in trusting God with the future.

B. Micromanaging – taking control of small details to avoid feeling out of control.

Psalm 46:10 “He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’

There is a place for seasonal micromanaging but if that's your default leadership style, it's not empowering. **Look how Jesus led his disciples. He gave them instructions and boundaries and then trusted them.**

C. Over-preparing – rehearsing conversations, triple-checking.

Luke 12:11–12 “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

Matthew 10:19–20 “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

God promises His Spirit will provide when needed—we don't need to live in constant rehearsal mode.

D. People-pleasing – keeping everyone happy to prevent rejection or conflict. Trying to control people's perception of you.

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

Colossians 3:23 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.”

The call is to seek God's approval above man's, finding freedom in serving Him first.

2. Achievement-Oriented Masking

A. Workaholism – staying busy to distract from inner restlessness or staying busy because of fear of lack.

Psalm 127:2 – “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.” Atzavim - Toil = anxious striving, burdened labour. He gives sleep (rest) to those He loves.

Matthew 11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

“Busyness is not the badge of discipleship—resting in Jesus is.”

B. Perfectionism – making everything “just right” to calm fear of failure or criticism.

“Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.” — Anne Wilson Schaef

Ecclesiastes 7:20 – “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 – “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Learn to focus on mastery instead of perfection. Mastery says, “I might not be the father I want to be, but I am certainly not the father I was; I am a growing father.”

“Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us, when in fact it's the thing that's preventing us from taking flight.” — Brené Brown

C. Overcommitment – saying yes to everything to avoid guilt or letting others down; collapsed boundaries

You are anxious about whether you will be rejected or judged unfairly.

Luke 4:42-44 “At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.’”

Even when crowds wanted more, Jesus said “no” and moved on to fulfil His mission.

3. Relational Masks

A. Humour or joking – deflecting with laughter to cover inner tension.

Proverbs 14:13 – “Even in laughter the heart may ache, and rejoicing may end in grief.”

The “sad clown paradox” underscores how laughter can veil deep emotional pain—and anxiety is often that hidden pain beneath the smile.

“I have a lot of anxiety, but I hide it well by being funny.”— Anonymous

B. Chattiness / over-talking – filling silence to avoid awkwardness.

Some people feel anxious when there is silence. What are they afraid of?

Proverbs 10:19 – “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.”

Proverbs 10:19 (NKJV) - “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.”

Proverbs 10:19 CSB (Christian Standard Bible). “When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is prudent.”

Proverbs 10:19 The Message (paraphrase) “The more talk, the less truth; the wise measure their words.”

Ecclesiastes 5:2 “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”

Ecclesiastes 3:7 “A time to be silent and a time to speak.”

Matthew 12:36 “But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.”

I am coming to learn that too much talk often conceals fear; wisdom is found in measured words.”

C. Avoidance disguised as “boundaries” – pulling back socially, but it’s driven by fear, not healthy limits.

2 Timothy 1:7 – “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

Hebrews 10:24–25 – “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together...”

D. Caretaking others – focusing on fixing others to avoid dealing with one’s own anxiety.

Some people grew up as caretakers and this is their identity. They struggle to receive from others and find their identity in being needed by those around them. They need to learn where their responsibility ends when it comes to people.

Romans 14:12 - "So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God."

2 Corinthians 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

Hebrews 4:13 "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

4. Physical or Lifestyle Coping

- A. Excessive exercise or "health" routines – presented as discipline but motivated by anxiety. Sometimes it is an obsessive disorder.**

How do I make sure I am being a good steward of my body without making it an idol which I obsess over?

1 Timothy 4:8 – "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

Matthew 6:25 – "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"

- B. Substance use (alcohol, caffeine, etc.) – as a quiet self-medication.**

Do you see God as your source of peace?

Ephesians 5:18 – "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

- C. Constant phone use – avoiding stillness by scrolling and consuming.**

Psalm 46:10 – "Be still, and know that I am God."

Isaiah 26:3 – "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you."

People who struggle with this sometimes have Adult ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) which looks a little different in adults than in children. Hyperactivity often becomes less about physical restlessness and more about mental agitation, impulsivity, and difficulty with self-regulation.

- D. Busyness – filling every moment so there's no stillness for anxiety to surface.**

How do you feel when a holiday starts, and you have no access to the office? I have coached people who get withdrawal symptoms.

Luke 10:41–42 – "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Psalm 127:1 – “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.”

5. Spiritual Masking

- A. Over-spiritualizing – using Scripture or prayer as a *distraction* rather than genuine connection with God.

These people fill every moment to silence anxious thoughts. They use Scripture or prayer to avoid reality instead of meeting God in it.

Matthew 6:7 – “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Micah 6:8 – “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

- B. Scrupulosity (religious OCD) – endless confessing, fearing God’s disapproval.

Fear-driven confession, never feeling forgiven.

Scrupulosity: excessively repeating prayers or confessions, constantly reviewing actions and thoughts to ensure they are morally perfect, seeking constant reassurance from religious leaders, and engaging in purifying rituals or self-punishment to alleviate guilt over perceived transgressions.

Romans 8:1 – “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

- C. Hyper-service/Overdoing ministry – masking anxiety with hyper-service to avoid guilt or feeling unworthy.

Masking deep feelings of worthlessness by serving everywhere.

Matthew 11:29–30 – “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

1 Corinthians 13:3 – “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Reflection Questions

1. In what areas of my life does anxiety show up as “control” (planning, micromanaging, over-preparing)?
2. How do I know when my planning is wise stewardship versus when it’s fear-driven?
3. Do I ever seek people’s approval more than God’s? What drives that tendency?
4. When I overcommit or stay busy, what am I trying to avoid feeling?
5. How do I disguise anxiety with humour, words, or caretaking?

6. Where do I turn for comfort when I feel restless—God's presence, or distractions like my phone, work, or substances?
7. Do I ever use spiritual practices (Scripture, prayer, service) to hide from anxiety rather than meet God in it?
8. What physical signs (tension, fatigue, sleeplessness) might be revealing hidden anxiety in me?
9. How do I respond when I feel out of control—do I try to tighten my grip, or surrender to God's sovereignty?

10. What would trusting God with my anxiety look like in practice this week?

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