# Chapter 1 God’s Purpose for Anxiety

*Is anxiety a human defect? Or did God have a purpose for including this painful emotion in the human soul?*

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## Good Anxiety vs. Bad Anxiety

Hospitals, divorce courts, and cemeteries are crowded with evidence of the ravages of anxiety. Americans spend billions every year on medication, counseling, alcohol, marijuana—anything we can find to help us survive our own stress.

Why does this deadly emotion even exist? Is this God’s design? Or is it like cancer—a result of the fall of mankind and the curse?

The ability to experience anxiety is a gift from God. It’s a feature, not a bug, and an essential tool for health and success in life. But at the same time, it can destroy your body, your relationships—even your relationship with God. Jesus warned that anxiety can render God’s Word powerless in your life (Mark 4:19).

Anxiety is forbidden in Philippians 4:6 and Matthew 6:25, yet it is *required* in 1 Corinthians 12:25 where the same Greek word is used.[[1]](#footnote-1) Paul tells the Corinthians that we are to have “equal anxiety for one another.”

When something is both forbidden and commanded, that tells us there’s a bad and good kind. Before you can overcome disordered anxiety, it’s essential to understand God’s purposes for anxiety. In this chapter and the next, we’ll explore how to take advantage of healthy, life-sustaining anxiety. The rest of this book will be about how to eliminate unhealthy anxiety from your life.

## The Poisonous Medicine

You won’t have much success fighting the bad kind of anxiety if you don’t understand the purpose of the good kind because you won’t know which anxieties to fight and which to embrace.

Most people take a simplistic approach to this issue. “Anxiety is bad, so just give me something to deaden the intensity of it.” That’s a dangerous approach because you end up deadening both bad and good anxiety and you lose more than you gain.

Imagine a medicine that, if taken improperly, could kill you. But without it, you’ll become paralyzed. That’s anxiety. Take it at the wrong time, and it makes you sick. Fail to take it when it’s needed, and your life will grind to a halt and you might become suicidal. You’ll be calmer, but unhappy and unproductive. Proper use of anxiety is an essential key to a healthy, happy, powerful life.

## God’s Design

Why did God design us with a capacity for this harmful emotion?

At the most basic physical level, anxiety is necessary for emergencies. God programmed your nervous system to throw your whole body into a state of anxiety when there is danger. Quick, shallow breathing, tense muscles, release of adrenaline—all designed to put you in a heightened state of readiness for fight or flight.

## Caring

But anxiety isn’t only for emergencies. When anything you care about is threatened, you will feel pressure to do something about it. Physical, mental, and spiritual pressure. That pressure is a form of anxiety.

Physically, you may get a knot in your stomach. Mentally, your thoughts are distracted by the problem—you can’t think about anything else. Spiritually, you may feel compelled by your conscience.

But it only happens when you care. You’ll never feel anxiety over something you don’t care about. The root meaning of the Greek word for anxiety in the New Testament, *merimnaō*, is “to care.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Anxiety is the feeling you get when something that matters a lot to you is threatened or lost.

Your team is down by six, fourth and goal on the five-yard line with seconds to go in the game—if you’re a big fan, you’re all twisted up inside watching to see if they make it. But if you don’t care about football, you’re as calm as can be. No caring, no anxiety.

## Apathy

The opposite of anxiety is apathy. And apathy about important matters will ruin your life just as thoroughly as unchecked anxiety. When you stop caring, life is drained of joy. You have no motivation, no drive, nothing to get you out of bed in the morning. Without the good kind of anxiety, you really do become paralyzed. Even the simplest tasks feel impossibly difficult because you just don’t care.

If you think anxiety is a curse, be thankful you don’t have the opposite problem. It’s much easier to gain control over runaway anxiety and learn to use it to your advantage than to make yourself start caring when you’re apathetic. When you know something is important, it should matter to you, but it doesn’t, how do you make yourself care? It’s possible, but very difficult.

## The Object of Anxiety

Sometimes apathetic people pat themselves on the back for not being worriers. “My wife worries so much. I don’t know why she can’t just trust God, calm down, and be even-keeled like me.”

His wife knows her anxiety is a problem. But she doesn’t want to become like her husband because he doesn’t seem to care. His calm looks more like indifference than trust in God.

Is that the solution to anxiety—apathy? Who’s right, the husband or the wife?

It depends on the object of her anxiety. If she is up all night fretting about whether some pop star is getting along with her latest boyfriend, the husband has a point. But if their teenager is going astray, maybe the husband needs to be a little more stirred up emotionally.

Apathy is great for trivial matters. You could even call it a virtue. But apathy about important matters is sin.

Is God indifferent? Is he apathetic about important matters? No. He cares deeply, even to the point of getting emotional. And so we should care too.

If we don’t care enough to get stirred up inside about the wellbeing of people or the purposes of God in his Church, we’re in conflict with the very nature of God.

## The Lord’s Affairs

This is one area in which single people have an advantage over the married.

“An unmarried man has anxiety[[3]](#footnote-3) about the Lord—how he can please the Lord. But a married man has anxiety[[4]](#footnote-4) about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:32-33 author’s translation).

If you’re married, pleasing your spouse takes up time and energy that could have gone into pleasing God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So singles have an advantage, but all of us must strive to increase good anxiety for the things of God.

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11).

“Fervor” is another word for good anxiety. The Greek word means “to boil.” When you’re roiling on the inside—that’s anxiety. God doesn’t want us to go through the motions; he wants us to have passion.

## Unconcerned

Passion is especially important when the needs of people are the issue. What matters a lot to God should matter a lot to us. And people matter a lot to God. Ancient Israel was punished for being apathetic about poor people.

“She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).[[6]](#footnote-6)

“Unconcerned”—that’s apathy. They didn’t care about the suffering of the poor. And Ezekiel connects that sin with pride. Refusing to allow yourself to be touched by the pain of others is a mark of arrogance. It shows a heart that cares only about yourself.

Timothy is a model of the good kind of anxiety for people.

“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon … I have no one else like him, who will show genuine anxiety[[7]](#footnote-7) for your welfare” (Philippians 2:19-20, author’s translation).

When Paul says, “I have no one else like him,” he’s saying, “Of all the people I have with me, not one is qualified because none of them has enough anxiety. Except one man. I have one I can send because he has sufficient anxiety.”

## Anxiety and Love

Why was anxiety for the Philippians’ welfare such an essential qualification?

Remember what causes anxiety? Caring. Only Timothy cared enough about the Philippians to be qualified. Or, to put it another way, only Timothy loved them enough. Deep concern for a person’s wellbeing is a component of love.

Why is good anxiety for people so important? Because it’s the byproduct of love, which is the most important virtue in the whole Bible.

Paul’s point is that this was an important task. He couldn’t entrust it to just anyone. It had to be someone who loved them so deeply that he cared to the point of anxiety.

Only someone who cared deeply was fit for this work. He might even get a knot in his stomach over a struggling brother or lie awake thinking about a believer who was drifting from the Lord. It had to be someone preoccupied with the problems that threatened the church, such as disunity, quarreling, or false doctrine.

Once that anxiety did its job and he took appropriate action, the tight stomach, sleeplessness, and obsessive thoughts would dissipate. But for a time, even good anxiety can be hard on the body. That’s part of what it means to care.

Others may have had more experience, better education, sharper skills, or were more gifted than Timothy. But without that gnawing anxiety, without caring to the point of distraction about spiritual threats, they were disqualified.

So good anxiety is a function of love.

“There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal anxiety[[8]](#footnote-8) for each other.” (1 Corinthians 12:25 author’s translation).

God calls us to have anxiety for our brothers and sisters in Christ just as Timothy had for the Philippians. And when Paul expands on that a few verses later, he gives us the most famous chapter in the whole Bible on love—1 Corinthians 13. He wrote that chapter as an explanation of what he meant by having anxiety for one another. Anxiety is indeed a byproduct of love.

## Why Is Anxiety So Painful?

We usually associate love with pleasant feelings. But there are also hard feelings that come from love. Anger is what you feel when the thing or person you love is harmed or taken. Jealousy is what you feel when love that belongs to you goes to someone else. And anxiety is what you feel when something or someone you love is threatened.

And it’s miserable. Paul included his good anxiety in a list of agonizing hardships. He mentions beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, deprivation. Then he caps it off with the biggest one of all.

“Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28 author’s translation).

Why is anxiety so miserable? It has to be uncomfortable, or it wouldn’t work. Anxiety is designed to force you to address a problem you otherwise wouldn’t address. It’s like a rock in your shoe. You don't feel like taking the time to stop and untie your shoe, but pain has a way of forcing the issue. Left alone, the stone would damage your foot, so God mercifully designed our feet so that rocks hurt enough to force us to remove them.

Emotional pain is the same way. For good anxiety to do its job, it must be unpleasant enough to force you to act.

## Emotional Energy

Not only does anxiety force you to act; it *equips* you to act. It gives you the energy you need to act because that’s what anxiety is—emotional energy. It’s the boiler that powers us into motion when action is needed. Anxiety is the fire that causes our thoughts, emotions, and everything inside us to run hotter and faster so we have the motivation and energy to do what needs to be done. That tightness in your chest, the pressure, the feeling of unrest—that’s what moves you to do important tasks you don’t feel like doing.

Other problems, such as depression, can hinder that energy, but the anxiety itself is emotional energy.

This is why anxiety is so distracting. When you have a big problem, you can’t stop thinking about it. Anxiety is designed by God to hold an issue right in front of your face so you can’t ignore it.

A student doesn’t have energy to study for a big exam, but anxiety about her grades moves her to crack the books. You’re relaxed in your favorite chair watching TV. You’d like a drink but you’re too lazy to get up and get it. No energy. Then you smell smoke. “Oh no—the rolls in the oven!” Instantly, you’re on your feet, dashing into the kitchen. You went from no energy to qualifying as an Olympic sprinter in one second.

That’s the purpose of anxiety. It’s the adrenaline of the soul.

Point the Hose at the Fire

That’s why it’s a mistake to deal with your stress by just trying to deaden your anxious feelings. You can deaden anxiety with chemicals, but those chemicals don’t know the difference between good anxiety and bad anxiety. They deaden everything. And if you deaden the feelings before they accomplish their purpose, you’re shooting yourself in the foot.

Internal tension over the problems of life is like the water pressure in a fire hose. Let it go, and it will whip around and spray water everywhere. Chaos. That’s what the inside of an anxious heart looks like—emotions spraying every direction like a loose firehose. A whole lot of energy accomplishing nothing.

What should you do? Pinch off the hose so there’s less pressure? No. The purpose of that water pressure is to put out fires. The purpose of anxiety is to energize you to deal with the problem at hand.

When the hose of anxiety is whipping around in your heart, don’t try pinching it off. Grip the hose, take aim at the fire, open the valve, and use the pressure to extinguish the fire. Use your anxiety to propel yourself into action.

As I write this, tomorrow is the deadline to file my taxes. After the sale of my house and some bad tax advice, I’m now in a situation where I have a huge tax bill that I can’t even begin to pay. So I have some hard decisions. Should I take out a loan and pay on time? Or should I file an extension and hire a company to negotiate with the authorities in hopes of reducing the bill? Either option risks getting in even more financial trouble than I’m already in.

I became aware of this a few days ago. From then until now, I’ve had a gnawing feeling in my stomach over this issue. I hate working on taxes, I hate reading instructions, and I hate making phone calls. But guess what I’ve been doing the past several days? All three. My natural tendency is to procrastinate tasks like that, but I feel so much pressure from the anxiety, it’s kept me working on this.

If you have the self-discipline to give the proper time and attention to a task like this without procrastinating, then you don’t need anxiety to push you along. But we all have those tasks where discipline alone isn’t enough.

## Distraction

Not only does good anxiety compel action, it forces intensive thought. If I didn’t have that knot in my stomach reminding me of my tax problem every ten minutes, I would probably forget about it for hours at a time. But as it is, my mind is churning away, trying to figure out the best solution—which is good, because it’s a complex problem with many factors to consider.

Again, I don’t need anxiety to keep my mind focused on something I want to think about. But for something like this, I need the pressure. As miserable as it is, this anxiety is my friend. It’s forcing me to work on getting that fire out.

Not all distraction is bad. The fact that anxiety distracts your mind from other topics and glues it to the problem at hand is a gift from God. It’s exactly how God designed anxiety to work.

Suppose you face a major crisis. You find out you failed your last class and won’t be graduating. You get fired. Your spouse hands you divorce papers.

No matter what you do, the problem dominates your thoughts day and night. Your mind is just grinding away. Why did they fire me? Where do I start looking for another job? How long will it take? How will I pay my bills in the meantime? What is my family going to think? Should I go talk to the boss and see if he’ll change his mind?

These are big problems that require a lot more thought than you normally devote to any one topic. They are important, complicated, issues, and figuring out what to do will require serious brainstorming day and night until you figure it out. If it weren’t for anxiety, you would never have the self-discipline required to give it that much thought. We need anxiety to force unusually intensive thought for big problems.

## Lingering Anxiety

Suppose I make my decision, commit to an action, and send off the paperwork. After that, it’s just a waiting game to find out if I made a good decision. But what if the knot in my stomach doesn’t go away?

That’s one way anxiety can go bad—when it overstays its usefulness. How do you handle anxiety that won’t go away?

And what about when you have good anxiety but it’s tearing you up inside? Maybe you’re worried about your wayward child. That’s good anxiety. But what if it’s giving you an ulcer? What if it’s ruining your marriage? Or your relationship with God?

Caring deeply about your wayward child is mirrors the character of God. The anxiety is a by-product of the most important virtue there is—love. However, even good anxiety can go bad.

Paul had constant anxiety for all the churches. That was good, but if Paul let that fire just burn out of control inside him, it would have destroyed him. We handle our good anxiety like a blacksmith using fire. He uses it to his advantage but also wears gloves to protect himself from it.

But how is that done? How do you protect your heart and mind from the ravages of good anxiety?

## The Double Cure

Here’s the good news—in the chapters ahead, as we go through each of the major passages of Scripture that teach us how to eliminate bad anxiety from our hearts, we’ll find that the very same actions that eliminate lingering anxiety and other kinds of bad anxiety will also protect us from being harmed by our good anxiety.

Not only that, but they will also protect your heart and mind from the bad anxiety that you’re unsuccessful in eliminating. You’ll never be perfect in avoiding bad anxiety. But these practices will protect you from the harm caused by those anxieties while you’re still working on getting rid of them.

## The Key to Lasting Change

Growing in the use of good anxiety is the foundation for winning the war against bad anxiety. But how do you grow in a virtue?

Not by reading a book. Reading this book will be like reading a book on weightlifting or nutrition. The information is important, but no changes will happen without *daily training*.

“Train yourself to be godly” (1 Timothy 4:7).

We grow in godliness the same way we build muscles—repeated exercises. Reprogramming emotional responses never comes from simply deciding to do it.

At the end of each chapter, I will provide a list of godliness training exercises. This is training designed to make deep, lasting changes. They will strengthen your soul to use good anxiety to your advantage, and to replace harmful anxiety with the peace of God which surpasses understanding.

Over decades of helping people overcome problem anxiety, my observation is that people who are serious about the exercises enjoy marked improvement in a short time. But those who merely listen without engaging in the training make little progress. I urge you to commit yourself to the exercises. *Train* yourself to be godly.

## Godliness Training Exercises

* Identify several good anxieties in your life and write them down. If you’re not sure whether a particular anxiety is good or bad, that’s okay. It will become clearer as we go. Just jot down the ones that are clear to you now. Don’t just do this in your head. Having a written list will be helpful later on. Jot down several important issues that move you deeply, as they should.
* Ask God to increase anxiety in your heart in areas where it is lacking. For example, maybe you wish you would spend more time in Scripture but can’t seem to discipline yourself to do it. If you had some good anxiety over missing out on what God has for you in his Word each day, that would help you.
* Take a moment to thank God for your good anxieties. If you have driving anxiety that pushes you to work hard, like Paul, praise God for that. It’s a gift from God that many Christians would give their right arm to have more of.
* What good things should each of these anxieties drive you to accomplish in your life before you let go of them? Try to identify the next step in accomplishing those goals.
* Next, ask yourself if any of those anxieties are stalled inside you because you haven’t taken the action they are designed to drive you to take. If you feel pressure to make a hard phone call you know you need to make but refuse to do it, that anxiety just grinds away at your soul. Are there any actions you need to take?
* Memorize Romans 12:11. It helps to jot down the first letter of each word. When you can quote it using that, try quoting it from memory. Say it aloud six to eight times today and once a day going forward.

If you find memorization difficult, I recommend using biblememory.com. That site makes Bible memory and review easy.

1. All three passages use the same Greek word (*merimnaō).* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The article on this word in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged* begins, “This group covers much the same range of meaning as the English ‘care.’” F. Buschel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Greek *merimnaō.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Greek *merimnaō.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, you can please God by loving your spouse, but the point here is that the single person doesn’t have the same distractions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. God refers to Israel as “Sodom” in this passage to highlight their sinfulness in God’s sight. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Greek *merimnaō.* This is the same word Paul uses two chapters later when he says, “Do not be anxious about anything” (Philippians 4:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Greek *merimnaō.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)