

When Anxiety Strikes (Leader's Guide)

For Group Leaders

If you are using this in a study group, Sunday School, small group, or in any sort of Christian formation, here are some helpful tips:

First and foremost remember that the people who are coming to this group are likely those who may suffer from some sort of anxiety themselves, some mild, some severe. Using words like “crazy” and “losing it” are not helpful and tend to make participants feel even more isolated and alone. You want to lead the group with a sense of comfort and openness, not judgment. Remember, Jesus did not approach people with judgment, but with caring.

Perhaps you have led other small groups and are familiar with facilitating helpful group dynamics. The most important thing in a group like this is to create a safe and welcoming space. We recommend showing up early and welcoming each member by name each week. Oftentimes people will come early or stay late to talk with the leader if they have had a hard week. Engage with them as you are able and refer them to a pastor or counselor if needed, but your presence with them at this time is a huge gift!

It will be important to establish a covenant of confidentiality for the group. We also recommend setting the stage that each group member is to be listened to with kindness and respect. We are not here to fix each other or even agree with each other on all matters, but to listen to each other's reflections and experiences, to hold those with grace, and to be companions for each other on the journey.

Early on in the study, you may have certain people that are very shy and not ready to engage with the group. This is okay, just make sure that your quieter group members have an opportunity to talk. Perhaps ask them at some point if there is anything they would like to share. If not, that is fine. We just want to make sure all voices are included.

On the other hand you may have a group member that is very vocal. Whereas this can be helpful in breaking the ice, you want to make sure that the vocal group member is not monopolizing conversation. You may have to gently cut them off and ask if anyone else has something to add. Alternatively, you can change the conversation direction yourself to open a new space for others to share. This will be even more important if the group member starts speaking at length and in detail about their own personal experience or taking the discussion to a place that is not on topic for the group. It will be your job to keep the entire group from being hijacked by one person if this occurs. Again, you may have to gently cut the overly vocal member off and redirect the conversation yourself. If this happens more than once it may be helpful to check in with the overly vocal member after class. In talking one on one, you may be able to direct them to a pastor or therapist or another appropriate person for them to talk at length with.

Each week you will lead one or two exercises with your group. You can choose the exercises that we recommend or choose others that you feel comfortable leading for your group. This means that you must be familiar and practiced with whatever exercise you choose to lead. I know this may feel scary at first, but take heart. There is a good chance that you will get the most out of this course as teaching is often the deepest way to learn.

As you go facilitate this course, remember that you are not alone. The Spirit will help and guide you. And feel free to reach out for help if you need it. Find the community of *When Anxiety Strikes* leaders online or contact us through our website. Community is one of this course's greatest gifts, so make sure you have a community of support as well.

Introductory Session

We begin the class sessions before anyone has read the first chapter of the book. In part, this is because the group sessions will be one of the most powerful experiences of the course. Use this week to break the ice, build trust, calm nerves, and gradually let the group members dip their toes into this adventure.

We are strong believers in setting and managing group dynamics, so take some intentional time up front to form the group. As a way to start the class, go over the expectations for good group work. Keep confidentiality, speak with respect and kindness, listen to all group members equally without trying to “fix” anyone.

Getting to Know You

Once all members have consented to these ground rules, give a good 10-15 minutes for introductions. We like to use name tags for the first few groups, but do have everyone tell their name and what they are hoping to get out of this experience. It will help if you go first and then hand off to the person beside you.

Opening Exercise

After the introductions are complete, take the class through their first exercise together. Lead them in the belly breath exercise they will find on Day 1 of Week 1.

There are many ways that readers can practice “belly breathing”. Typically, I will have patients stand and find their belly button while I stand in front of them and do the same. Then exaggerate an in-breath with my own protruding belly. If the person has ever sung in a choir or similar activity, they will know that their director would encourage them to “breathe from your diaphragm”. Once the class members have caught on to the belly breath, just breathe together for around three minutes. After the exercise, let participants process what the belly breathing was like for them.

Questions for Discussion

At this point, shift the groups’ attention to the Calming The Storms book. Have them flip through the book as you explain the basic structure of seven daily readings and seven daily exercises. Encourage them to do as much of the reading and practice as they can while not beating up on themselves or giving up if they get behind. Allow some time for questions.

Closing Activity

Practice a variation on the exercise from Day 7 of Week 1. Ask everyone to take one or two of the “belly breaths” from Day 1. Ask those who are comfortable doing so to gently close their eyes. Encourage them to continue using the breath while you read the entire passage from Acts 2:1-13, slowly and deliberately. Wait a few seconds following the reading and ask people to use this time as prayer. Use the instructions from Day 7, “On each inhalation receive in God’s blessing for yourself, and on each exhalation send out God’s blessing for someone else. You

can name through individual family and friends on sequential exhales, members of the group with whom you have been participating in this study, or those you may know that have special need of God's nearness." The sound of this last activity may be a bit cacophonous, but it will be the sound of people reaching out to others in the group and in their community.

Listen for a pause in the prayer, and lift your own prayer for the group. Words such as these can be used, "God bless those who have been named. Bless those who were not named, but named in our hearts. Be with us as we journey together that we may know your peace and your stillness in the midst of life's storms. Amen."

Tips For Leaders

Remember to encourage group members to stick to the daily routine of the book, as this is how it will be the most benefit to them.

As always, try to arrive early and stay for a few minutes after so that if group members have a concern or struggle they can reach out to you. It may be that a few words of encouragement are all they need. However, we do recommend having referrals for a pastor or licensed mental health professional on hand.

Week 1

*Try and greet each class member by name as they enter.

Check-In

Have a five minute check in. Start positively by asking group members a one minute answer on which day of the week was most engaging or helpful for them. Try and pay attention to group dynamics so no one talks too long and ask shy members if they have anything to add.

Opening Exercise

Begin this session with the counted breath exercise that was found on Day 4 of Week 1. Give members a minute to settle themselves in and then begin leading the counted breath exercise as detailed in the book. It will be helpful to practice this ahead of time. After you are finished with the exercise, give members a minute to gather themselves. Then devote five minutes to allowing the group to process the exercise. How it helped, how it was hard, what was confusing.

Questions for Group Discussion:

Note: You may not get to all the questions. Each group will gravitate to the questions that engage them most. That being said, if you have been over a question for 5 minutes or more, it may be time to move on to a new topic.

How were the exercises for Week 1? Were any of them strange? What was the most useful? Which was the least useful?

The writers use a quote from St. Irenaeus, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” What does this quote mean to you? What does being “fully alive” look like? What might be keeping you from being “fully alive?”

On Day 2 you were asked to look for “small signs” of anxiety in your body. What are you comfortable sharing about these? (This would be a good occasion to list signs on a white board or flip board. You will find many people will share symptoms).

Jason wrote briefly about “all or nothing” thinking patterns on Day 3. Have there been times this week where this pattern emerged? How was it a barrier to you? How did you get around that barrier?

On Day 5, you were asked to breathe through alternate nostrils. While this exercise may seem odd or challenging, it was placed there to help you experience breathing in a different way. What else about this day’s scripture or reading challenged you? Where do you see God’s new work springing forth?

What did you write on Day 6 about times God has come to you instead of you moving toward God?

Were there places in Jason or Dena's stories that you could relate to? If you are comfortable sharing, how?

Looking Forward

Shift the discussion to the upcoming week focusing on the body. Reiterate that the body is strongly affected by our anxiety and what we do with our body can help or aggravate our anxiety.

Closing Activity

As a way of shifting focus to the body and to leave on a sweet note, end the class with the progressive muscle relaxation found on Day 6 of Week 2.

***Before participants leave, make sure to advise them to wear comfortable clothes they can move in for the next session as they will be doing some light movement exercises at the end of the next session. If you are in email contact with the class, perhaps send them a reminder of this the day before you meet.

Week 2

Opening Exercise

Begin with the Wave Breath exercise as found on Day 1 of Chapter 2 to gather and center the group.

Check-In

Have a ten minute check in on the readings and exercises for Chapter 2. What was the most useful? What was the most challenging?

Questions for Discussion

Read 1 Corinthians 6. What have you discovered is not beneficial for your body as it relates to anxiety? (Again, writing these down as a list the class can see would be helpful.)

What have you discovered that is beneficial? Talk about vitamins supplements and even prescribed medication if the group wants to go there. Talk about protein intake, probiotics, massage, and whatever else people find helps their bodies' health.

What were your physical habits when you were in a more relaxed and settled place in your life?

Read 1 Corinthians 12. What does it feel like to be connected to your body versus disconnected from it? What helps you feel more connected to all the parts of yourself?

Looking Forward

As a transition from the body chapter to the movement chapter share the statistic that 20 minutes of cardiovascular exercise three times a week is as effective as antidepressants.

Acknowledge this next week may be challenging if participants are not used to being active. Encourage them that even the smallest steps and progress matters. And if they just can't do an exercise, always err on the side of grace!

Closing Activity

Close by leading participants in a full sun salute with a chair as a prop. (See video on website). Be mindful that people in your group will be in varying states of health and ability, so always shoot to make the activity accessible to the least able person. Go slow, go easy. Remind them to breathe!

***Give participants a heads up that on day seven they will be asked to move with others. They may want to ask a buddy in the group to exercise with them or you may want to plan a group walk an hour before the next meeting.

Week 3

Opening Exercise

Open with the Body Scan found on Day 2 of Chapter 3 to gather and center the group.

Check-In

Have a ten minute check-in over Chapter 3. What readings or exercises were the most helpful? What were the most challenging?

Questions for Discussion

The theory of inertia tells us that bodies that are at rest want to stay at rest. What instances did you find your body or mind resisting movement?

What were the forces or barriers that most prevented your movement? Fear? Habit? Other limitations?

Were there times where you felt the inertia lift? Was there a place where you became a little more unstuck and moved forward in your journey?

If so, What helped this movement take place? Was it sheer force of will? Memory of a freer time? Something else?

If there were specific barriers to movement you could not overcome, take a couple of minutes to list them on a sheet of paper for yourself. Brainstorm any possible solutions to overcoming to bringing some small movement to this barrier. For example:

Barrier: plantar fasciitis that limits my ability to walk.

Solutions: Get new or better shoes. Get insoles. Treat the fasciitis by icing, gentle stretching, and taking anti-inflammatories. See a doctor. Take a break from my feet and swim instead.

You were asked this week to notice the small transformations happening around you and within you? Are there any small transformations you would like to share?

Looking Forward

In Chapter 4 we will be dealing with cognitive theory. This is the idea that between every event and its reaction, there is a thought that takes place. If we can learn to notice the thought that occurs in the second between a trigger and its reaction, we can change work on changing the thought and thereby work on changing our reactions. This is a big concept that we will spend two weeks working through.

Closing Activity

Lead the group in the mindfulness meditation found on Day 3 of Chapter 4.

Week 4

Opening Exercise

Open with the Breath of Release Exercise found on Day 1 of Chapter 5 (I know we are skipping ahead but chapters 4 and 5 are a bit of a pair). Invite participants to let go of all they need to release and to be filled with all the good gifts of God.

Check-In

Have a five minute check-in on week 4. What spoke to people most? What were the hard parts and or parts that didn't make sense?

Questions for Discussion

On Days 4 and 5 we were invited to consider our *Core Negative Thoughts*. Review what a core negative thought is, making sure the group understands this important concept.

Invite participants to share their core negative thought and what truth they replaced this thought with. It may help for you as the leader to go first.

On Days 2 and 3 we talked about the idea of thought loops. Often when we have an anxious thought it can snowball into anxiety avalanche. What anxiety loops did you notice this week? Were breathing and meditation able to help you end the feedback loop before things got out of control?

The other habit of our anxious mind is to favor certain anxious thoughts. Were you able to identify the thoughts that are the most "sticky" for you? Did the mindfulness practice help you to let go of these thoughts for a while?

Gratitude is one of the most powerful tools with which to fight anxiety. Invite participants to share their experience with keeping a gratitude journal and if this changed their frame of mind from anxious to content.

Looking Forward

If you need some more background on the model from which we draw here, look for the "Stages of Change" or "Transtheoretical" model online. You will sometimes see it referred to as "TTM" as well. The primary goal here is to counter some of the "all or nothing" thinking that comes with anxiety. This sort of all/nothing approach impedes our sense of progress or even our ability to break a large task into smaller steps.

In summary, as we approach the chapter of change, it is important to note that change does not happen all at once. In fact, those in the therapy fields often talk about the five stages of change.

These stages are:

- 1) Pre-contemplation
- 2) Contemplation
- 3) Preparation
- 4) Action
- 5) Maintenance

It is also important that changes are often not made in a straight line. Change looks more like an ascending corkscrew, where we revisit the same issues again and again, but transform a little more each time we go through them.

Closing Activity

Knowing that we will revisit all the elements we have talked about already (breath, body, movement, mind, spirit, and community), spend a few minutes thinking and journaling about where you are on the change spectrum with each element. Is there a place you are already actively changing? Are you contemplating or preparing for change? How can you get ready to move one stage forward on at least one element this week?

Leader Tip

***Group Leader: Note that session five requires more advanced preparation for you. Go ahead and read over the notes for session 5 and begin getting ready now.

Week 5

*****Read ahead and prepare for this special session**

Opening Exercise

Lead group in the Be Still and Know meditation found on Day 6 of Week 6. Allow the group to center deeply for the exercise to come.

Check-In

Were there any shifts for you and in you this week?

Questions for Discussion

What changes have you noticed over the past five weeks?

Group Activity (Allow 20 minutes)

Allow a good 15-20 minutes for this special activity. Come prepared with soothing music to play during this exercise, a bowl of water, a towel and some shells or other small hand held item to give out if you wish.

Begin by talking about the power of naming. Read Mark 1:9-11. At our baptisms we or are parents are asked "What name is given to you?" At Jesus' baptism he was given his true name, that of Beloved Son.

In our anxiety we often call ourselves many hurtful names. These are not our true names. In fact, like Paul, as we have changed so have our names. We have gone from "fearful one" to "compassionate one". From imprisoned to survivor. Invite participants to spend some time in quiet contemplation listening for their true name. Names like child of God, beloved, strong mother, or cherished son, redeemed. Allow the music to play over the contemplation. Remind participants that if they do not choose or receive a new name during this time that is okay.

Shift to reading Isaiah 43:1-3

Remind the group that God is always with them as they pass through the deep waters. In fact, moving through the deep waters makes us who we are. Survivors. Compassionate ones. Strong and true of heart.

Invite the group to come up to you one by one as they feel led to dip their hand in the basin of water. If you have shells or rocks, etc at the bottom of the basin invite them to choose the one that speaks to them. As they did their hands in the water repeat the Scriptures from Isaiah and Mark. "Do not fear for I have called you by name. You are my beloved child."

After all the participants have had a chance to dip their hands in the water (some may choose not to) allow a minute or two of silence and then close with a prayer.

Thank you God for always being with us. For seeing us through the waters of difficulty and making us new through your waters of baptism. May this water and these symbols of (shell, stone, etc) be a symbol to us of our true names and our true identities in Christ our Savior. Amen.

Invite the group to leave as they are ready.

Week 6

Opening Exercise

Lead the group in the Centering Prayer Exercise found on Day 1 of Chapter 7.

Check-In

Have a five minute check-in on the exercise you just practiced. It is surprisingly challenging the first time, so remind the group there is no getting it wrong. All practice counts as it trains our mind to function in a new way.

Have a five minute check-in to see how the group is doing at this point in the study.

Questions for Discussion

The beginning of Chapter 6 talks a lot about our need for control. Did you relate with struggling to release your need for control to God? Were there any ways you were able to begin to release this need for control?

What do you think healing looks like?

A lot of what we read did not talk about healing in the sense that we would never experience anxiety or difficulty, but that God would be with us in the difficult. Was this idea challenging?

The authors use words like “redemption of suffering” and talk about resurrection as God bringing life out of death. As we read the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, we will notice he still bears the mark of his wounds. The wounds by which we are healed. Likewise, our wounds and scars are often still very present in our life. Is there a way that there can be healing for ourselves and others out of our wounds?

Looking Forward

In chapter 7 we will talk about community. Community is a tricky thing as it can both hurt and heal. Some of the main ideas we will talk about in dealing with community is to be open and vulnerable when appropriate and having boundaries to protect us when we need to (and the wisdom to know the difference). If participants have struggled repeatedly with being hurt by others and setting appropriate boundaries to protect themselves from this hurt, this may be a great time for them to check out the book *Boundaries* by Cloud and Townsend. This well renowned book can be a life changer!

Closing Activity

As an act of embracing community and opening ourselves to safe people who can support us, invite the group to share prayer concerns with one another if they are comfortable doing so. Group members may make note of the concerns to pray over during the week. As the leaders, take note of each concern and close the group in prayer, praying over each need in turn.

Week 7

****Read ahead to make sure you have materials to demonstrate an energy map for the group. Have extra pens and paper for participants as well.**

Opening Exercise

Lead the group in the belly breath exercise found on Day 1 Week 1.

Check-In

This is the very first exercise you did together as a group. How was the experience the different all these weeks later? How was it the same? Are there other exercises or habits that felt strange at the beginning of the course that now feel familiar habits?

Questions for Discussion

On Day 2 the authors talk about how the best friendships share a mutual given and take of support and challenge. When are the times you have experienced these “iron sharpening iron” relationships? When are the times your friendships have been less than mutual?

As we read, sometimes we need to move on from relationships and communities that are unhealthy for us. And sometimes we are in difficult relationships that we cannot remove ourselves from so easily, such as family or work relationships. That is where good boundaries become essential. This week you were asked to practice saying a small “No.” How did that feel? Can you imagine yourself saying a big “No” when you need to?

Group Activity (Allow 20 minutes)

Energy Map

Lead the group in the relationship pictograph exercise found on Day 7 of Week 5. Use some examples from your life you feel comfortable sharing as you make your pictograph on a medium the whole group can see. Now modify this pictograph as we did on Day 3 of Chapter 7. Add in groups you participate in such as work, church, or school. Highlight how the groups in your pictograph either bring you or drain you of energy. Some of course will do both.

Now invite the group to make their own energy pictograph. Give them a good ten minutes to think, pray, and draw. After everyone seems finished with their drawing, invite the group to redraw the circles around them as they wish they could be. Make the groups that bring life larger and more prominent. Make the draining people and groups smaller. Ask the group to brainstorm silently how they can make these changes a reality. If you have time at the end of this exercise, you can allow group members to process this exercise together.

Closing Activity

Lead the group in the Breath of Blessing exercise found on Day 7 of Week 1.

Week 8

*****Make sure you have a tea light or other form of candle for each participant.
Also, matches!**

Opening Exercise

Lead the group in the three part breath, or the complete breath found on Day 2 of Chapter 1. As this is the last meeting of the group, celebrate your completion of this study together with full, complete breaths.

Check-In

As this is the last meeting, give a gracious amount of time for check-in. How was the experience for participants? Was it what they thought it would be? Where have they grown? Are there places they still struggle? Remind them this is a journey and celebrate any growth and allow for struggles to be opportunities for future healing. Every time Dena and Jason teach this class, they grow and heal in some new way, so if something is still hard, that is not failure, it is a normal part of our life's journey.

Questions for Discussion

The authors talk about "The Eighth Day" for Christians. As we leave the safety of this group we want to take all that has been helpful and redeeming and bring it along on the path going forward. What do you know you want to take forward from this study?

Thinking back on the stages of change, we remember that we have to plan ahead to make our new life-bringing habits a part of our life going forward. How have you made plans to keep the habits that heal you part of your life?

As much as we learned about anxiety and ways to manage it over these past weeks, we have also learned about ourselves? Have you learned anything new about yourself, your specific needs and how to care for them?

Where have you experienced Christ in these past several weeks?

How can you share the peace and grace of Christ you have received with others as you go forward?

Closing Activity

Candle Blessing

Pass out a candle to each group member. Have a large candle sitting on a table that all the group can see. As you light the candle give thanks for the group and the time you have had together. Give thanks for all you have shared and learned together. Some churches pass the light from the Christ candle from member to member at Christmas and Easter, representing the light of Christ that dwells within each of us. Similarly, mark this candle as the light of Christ that

has shone in and among this group in this time and invite the group to receive and give this light to each other. Light a taper candle from the large candle already lit. Use the taper to light the candle of the person closest to you. Let that person light the candle of the person beside them. Proceed onward, with members lighting each other's candle until the circle is completed and someone lights the leader's individual candle. As the candles burn, allow group members to pray silently remembering the past weeks and asking God to be with the group as they go forward. After a few minutes, thank God that as you go forward, you will never be alone. God will always go with you. And remind the group that the love and support of the group will go with them also. Remind them they can light their candle whenever they wish and remember the support of the group and pray for their group members' journeys. As you say amen, blow your candle out. Let each member remain in prayer until they are ready to extinguish their own candle.

Allow time for hugs, chatting and feedback as you all disperse.

****Leader Tip***

Some groups will want to keep in touch via email or some other social media. If this request arises, allow members to share their contact info if they are willing and coordinate getting members into a follow-up group contact medium.