



Close to Home Study Guide

Dealing with Extreme Anxiety

1. Opening (1 minute)*

Dear God, you invite us to bring our burdens to you and you will give us rest. Help us to believe. Help us believe that you love us, and are always with us even when we cannot feel your presence. Give us peace, faith and courage. Amen.

2. Story-telling (4 minutes)

Summarize Ted's story, highlighting some of the factors that led to his anxiety. Or if someone in the group struggles with anxiety and is willing to share, invite them to share their journey.

3. Review of pamphlet (8 minutes)

- Review the description and types of anxiety disorders given on pages 4-5. How do these disorders differ from the anxiety we all experience? Which type was Ted likely experiencing?
- Note that some anxiety disorders (especially generalized anxiety disorder and panic attacks) are experienced alongside depression, alcohol abuse, or eating disorders. (See <http://adaa.org/AboutADAA/PressRoom/Stats&Facts.asp>.)
- Look at the facts about anxiety disorders given on page 5. What stands out to the group as they look at these facts? What questions arise? Point out that a good source of additional information can be viewed online or downloaded at: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

4. Reading of Scripture text (16 minutes)

The pamphlet gives several Biblical passages which provide comfort and assurance when we are anxious. Invite the group to share other verses or Bible stories which have been helpful when they are worried or distressed. If possible, make a list of these verses and give copies to the group the next time you meet.

Ted struggled with his view of God, as One who punishes people with suffering. If these views are common in your group it may be important to explore this. One option would be to explore why there is so much suffering in our world. A good resource is Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Anchor, 2004).

Another option is to focus on our images of God. What image or characteristic first comes to mind when people think of God? List responses on a blackboard or newsprint and discuss which images are loving and which ones are judgmental or condemning. Where do these images come from? How do they match the way Jesus portrayed God?

If there is time, study how the prophets and Jesus portrayed God and God's anger. For example, in Isaiah 3:14-15, 9:8-10, 10:1-2 and Jeremiah 7:1-11, God is angry but not in a unpredictable or unreasonable way. Rather, God is earnestly seeking the welfare of all, especially those who are most defenseless.

*The suggested time frames are for a 45-minute session. With more discussion and storytelling, you will need to adjust upward, and possibly extend to a second session.

This is especially clear in Jesus' life and teaching. Throughout the gospels, he emphasized coming to save the world, not to judge or condemn it (John 3:17, 12:47). His mission was to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

When he became angry, it was because people were using religion to keep people in bondage. In Mark 3:5, for instance, religious leaders wanted to keep him from healing a man on the Sabbath. In the temple, Jesus became upset due to the way it impoverished the people and diverted attention away from true worship (Mark 11:15-17). Because people thought they had to make sacrifices and temple contributions in order to receive God's forgiveness, this system enriched the priests and other religious authorities, but failed to create right relationships with God and one another.

In Mark 3:28-30 Jesus declared that "whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness." Many sincere Christians fear they have committed this sin. Yet Jesus gave this warning to religious leaders who claimed it was not God at work in Jesus but Satan. This was a total rejection of Jesus and his life and teaching, something which cannot be done accidentally or without realizing it.

What does your congregation emphasize about Jesus and the salvation he offers?

5. Steps toward healing (15 minutes)

- Provide information on local resources, therapists and support groups which assist in dealing with anxiety disorders.
- Review the *Steps toward healing* on pages 8-9. Are there any questions or additional suggestions from the group? For those who know someone with an anxiety disorder, what has been helpful to them? How have they found healing?
- Think about how the congregation models God's love. Are there some additional ways the group would like to share God's love with others? How can they address messages which portray God in harmful ways?
- Pray together for all those struggling with anxiety, as well as their family members and friends, that all would find comfort and peace.

6. Closing (1 minute)

Close by reading Psalm 23 together. To make this more personal, ask everyone to use "you" to refer to God throughout the Psalm (as in verses 4-5). Example: "*You* are my shepherd, I shall not want, *you* make me lie down in green pastures. . . ."



This study guide is written by Linda Gehman Peachey, Director for Women's Advocacy in the Peace and Justice Ministries section of Mennonite Central Committee US. It is one of a series of free downloadable study guides for the Close to Home pamphlets, which can be ordered from the Mennonite Publishing Network of the Mennonite Church (see www.mpn.net/closetohome) or the Mennonite Brethren Kindred Productions (www.kindredproductions.com/closetohome).