



## Sorting Our Anxieties

In I Peter 5:7 we are invited to cast all our anxieties on God because he cares for us. This is a beautiful All Access Pass to God's compassion for everything that unsettles our soul. I believe when most of us read a passage like this we can exhale and let our shoulders relax a little bit. But then, we're not quite sure why this sense of peace does not last.

Imagine a situation like this. You have a project to do, but you don't have the tools to complete it. A neighbor says to you, "You can use any tool in my garage." Or, you have a three-week pile of laundry, and your washing machine doesn't work. A friend says, "You can wash it all in my washing machine." These are wonderful blessings that give you access to what you need. You initially feel loved and relieved. But you realize something else is needed.

Access to tools doesn't mean you know which tool to use or how to use it. Permission to use the machine doesn't mean you know how to sort the laundry or which setting is best.

This helps us see the importance of asking, "What is the first step towards responding to anything well?" Assessing accurately. If you have a stomachache, you need to know if it's caused by an ulcer, food poisoning, or lactose intolerance. There are many "good remedies" for a stomachache which may not be a "good fit" for your stomach pain.

Our **goal in this lesson** is to *learn how to respond to our COVID-related anxieties by accurately assessing the type of anxiety we are experiencing*. Not all anxieties are the same. It is not just that we worry about different things. There are also different types of anxiety. We want to help you sort through the types of anxiety you may be experiencing and give you some basic guidelines for responding wisely to each. We will consider **three ways to sort our anxieties**.

### 1. Factual vs. Hypothetical Anxieties

An example of **factual anxiety** would be, "How am I going to pay my bills now that I've lost my job?" An example of **hypothetical anxiety** would be, "How *would* I pay my bills if I lost my job?" *Factual anxiety is an emotional response to something that actually happened. Hypothetical anxiety is an emotional response to something that might happen.*

This is not to say that one is important and the other is trivial. Both forms of anxiety are real (i.e., elevated heart rate, increased pace of our thinking, released stress hormones). But how we wisely engage with each is different.

For *factual (now) anxieties*:

- We should *name and quantify* the challenge as much as possible. This limits the amount of hypothetical anxiety that emerges from the factual anxiety.
- *Invite friends to support you* in this journey (Gal. 6:2) and to help you think through possible responses (Prov. 11:14).
- *Lay out a response plan on a timeline* of when you can take key actions. This helps you identify how and when you need to actively engage in remedying the challenge.
- During the times when you cannot enact parts of your response plan, engage with God, family, and friends in wise ways that allows for optimal enjoyment of life.

For *hypothetical (possibly later) anxieties*:

- Realize that you are bracing for possibilities. *Human creativity means we can create more negative possibilities than will occur*. This means our sense of alarm is unduly high. We're trying to put out a dozen fires that will never be lit.
- Be honest with friends about what you're thinking. *Hypotheticals are less convincing when we speak them out loud* than when we allow them to bounce around in the silence of our private thoughts.
- *Replace "what if" with "even if"* and identify the relevant attributes of God that would be relevant. For example, instead of thinking, "What if I lose my job" replace that with, "Even if I lose my job God will still be faithful and has given me a church family to walk through those times."
- Engage yourself with enjoyable activities.

### 2. Rational vs. Irrational Anxieties

An example of a **rational anxiety** would be, "I am concerned I may contract the virus when I go to the grocery." An example of an **irrational anxiety** would be, "I am concerned I may contract the virus in my home where no one else is sick." *Rational anxieties are an emotional response to something that is possible (not necessarily probable). Irrational anxieties are an emotional response to something that is impossible or highly unlikely.*



Again, both experiences of anxiety are real. Bodily changes occur that alter our mood. But *we must be careful not to interpret the bodily experience of anxiety as a validation that an irrational anxiety is true*. Just because my body is playing the theme music to *Jaws*, doesn't mean there's a shark. The experience of anxiety can be real without the belief that fuels the anxiety being true.

For *rational anxieties*:

- *Acknowledge the realness of the concern*. Many psalms do this. Find Psalms that match your concern. It is not a virtue to pretend real potential dangers don't exist. Proportional concern is wise.
- *Discern what responses help alleviate the potential danger* (i.e., social distancing, hand washing, etc.) and practice those responses. Our goal in these situations is to respond wisely without trying to control the uncontrollable.
- Then continue to engage with God, family, and friends in wise ways that allows for optimal enjoyment of life.

For *irrational anxieties*:

- *Don't mistake "irrational" for "crazy."* Using stigmatized language to label your experience only tempts you to further cut yourself off from other people, which magnifies your fears.
- *Learn to doubt these fears*. Initially, don't try to fully disbelieve them. Just be willing to doubt them. Doubting irrational fears is the first step of faith towards healthiness.
- *Identify the actions that would evidence a doubt of your irrational anxieties* and increase the frequency of these actions.
- Engage yourself with enjoyable activities.

Let me introduce **another metaphor** here. *How do my children best express their trust in me as their father during COVID?* They play. When they play, they show they feel safe and cared for. Yes, they should do their chores and homework. But in light of what we've been discussing, once we have done what we can do to respond to our rational and irrational anxieties (the equivalent of our chores and homework), we express our trust in God best by engaging with enjoyable activities. *This metaphor is not meant to trivialize COVID, but to alleviate the guilt many people are feeling when they cannot be as productive as they want with their time. This guilt is often what prompts us to fixate on our anxieties.*

### 3. Temporal vs. Ultimate Anxieties

An example of a **temporal anxiety** would be, "If I get sick, I will be miserable for days and I'm not sure how bad it will get." An example of an **ultimate anxiety** would be, "If I get sick, I might die and that terrifies me because then everything is over." *Temporal anxieties ruminate over discomfort. Ultimate anxieties despair over a lack of hope or meaning in life.*

*Christians have a propensity to treat temporal anxieties (aversion to discomfort) as if they are necessarily ultimate anxieties (doubting God's goodness and faithfulness in hard times).* When we do this, we feel guilty for any unpleasant emotional response to a distressing situation. Being sick feels bad. It's not a lack of faith to dread that possibility.

For *temporal anxieties*:

- Identify something you don't enjoy but respond to relatively well (i.e., a school test, a work evaluation, a hard conversation, etc.). If your temporal anxiety is comparable in intensity to these responses, realize you are having a normal response to an unpleasant possibility.
- Make sure you have what you need in the event of the adverse circumstance and know what to do if a bad situation gets worse.
- Then continue to engage with God, family, and friends in wise ways that allows for optimal enjoyment of life.

For *ultimate anxieties*:

- *Put your despair into words*. Until you can articulate it, the sense of dread will haunt you.
- Realize that, *apart from Christ, ultimate anxieties are true*. We live in a broken world where tragedy happens. We have a sin nature that separates us from God (Rom. 3:23). Death is the culmination of our opportunity to respond to the gospel (Heb. 9:27).
- But, also realize that *with Christ, ultimate anxieties are false*. Jesus died to pay our sin debt (Rom. 6:23). God promises to be with us in the hardest, darkest times (Psalm 23). God promises to wipe away every tear in heaven where there will be no more sickness (Rev. 21:3-4).
- *Embrace the remedy for ultimate anxiety by receiving Jesus as your savior*. Talk to a Christian friend about this decision to receive encouragement and learn to grow in this newfound hope.



With these categories you can begin to name and sort your anxieties in order to respond to them in more effective and God-honoring ways.

My Fear: _____	
<b>Factual</b>	<b>Hypothetical</b>
<b>Rational</b>	<b>Irrational</b>
<b>Temporal</b>	<b>Ultimate</b>

### Conclusion

Does this brief lesson give you a comprehensive response to anxiety? No, there are other distinctions that could be made. But hopefully it does teach you how to differentiate various types of anxiety that often emerge and how your faith can help you respond to those anxieties.

You probably noticed two themes that emerged in almost every response plan. **First**, *talk to people you trust*. Anxiety festers in isolation. The loneliness of quarantine can fuel anxiety as much as the fear of COVID-19.

**Second**, *when you've done what you can do, enjoy life*. Bracing against fear, after you've done what you can do, only leaves you emotionally exhausted in the event your concern actually happens. Enjoying life allows you to build your emotional reserves for the unpleasant possibility.

### Follow-Up Resources

- [Anxiety Daily Symptom Chart](https://bradhambrick.com/depression-anxiety-daily-symptom-chart) // Assessment Tool - bradhambrick.com/depression-anxiety-daily-symptom-chart. If you have a hard time tracking your experience of anxiety without getting overwhelmed, this tool can help.
- [Overcoming Depression-Anxiety: A Suffering Paradigm](https://bradhambrick.com/depression) // Seminar - bradhambrick.com/depression. This 9-step seminar is the G4 curriculum for approaching depression-anxiety from a suffering perspective.

### Questions for Small Group Study

When studying this lesson as a small group, we recommended that: (a) each participant reads this article in advance, (b) the group watches the 20-minute lesson together, and then (c) the group discusses the following questions:

1. What is an example of when you were given a great offer but lacked something in being able to use it?
2. Do you ever get frustrated that Bible application can feel too one-size-fits-all? If so, what effect does this have on your Bible study and sense of trust for God?
3. What are the things that have been stressful or anxiety provoking for you during this COVID season?
4. What are the benefits you see in differentiating (a) factual from hypothetical, (b) rational from irrational, and (c) temporal from ultimate anxieties?
5. How does the image of showing our trust in God's care by giving ourselves to the things we enjoy help you alleviate guilt you may feel because of decreased productivity?
6. When or how have you seen Christians overuse the category of ultimate anxiety and create an unnecessary sense of guilt or a sense of unrest related to temporal anxiety?
7. How has talking about your stresses and learning multiple ways of effectively engaging them created a greater sense of resilience for this difficult season? [It may be a few days or a couple of weeks before you answer this.]