

Anxiety

opening up to God

Anxiety | Communication | Relationship

*On the surface, **Br. Jack Crowley** seems like an affable, ease-going monk. In this heartfelt piece, he shares the truth of his own struggles with anxiety. A surprising help in this journey? Entrusting the truth of this experience to others and to God.*

The first time I had a panic attack it felt like I was having the worst case of heartburn imaginable while simultaneously trying to breathe through a tiny straw. I was sitting at my desk in my dorm room during my junior year of college. I remember it was a beautiful fall day, and I had the window open. I was struggling to finish a paper when suddenly it all hit me.

My memory of that first panic attack is blurry, but I remember coming out of it laying on my bed looking out the window. I just kept begging myself to breathe deeper and deeper. My hand was on my chest, feeling my heart pounding away.

I have had a long, winding journey with anxiety. I'm in a much more stable place in my life now, but I still need to work on my anxiety on a daily basis. It is something I normally do not like to talk about, but in my last five years as a monk, I've been overwhelmed by the number of people I've talked to who have experiences with anxiety. I do believe we are in the midst of a mental health epidemic, and it does not help us to stay silent about our experiences. I do hope what I say can be of benefit to someone.

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When I tell my friends and loved ones that I deal with anxiety on a daily basis, they are often surprised. I know on the surface I appear to be a calm, collected monk. One thing I have learned in my experiences with anxiety is you never really know how anxious someone is. Sometimes the most anxious person in the room is the last person you would suspect.

Because our appearances never tell the whole story about ourselves, it is important we open up to those closest to us about how we are feeling and doing. This is especially important when we are not doing well. I find even a brief conversation with a friend about something I'm anxious about can alleviate my anxiety tremendously.

One of the worst parts about anxiety is that it can fester. Anxiety can grow and grow inside of ourselves ad nauseum. We can have a tendency to tell ourselves to buckle down and think our way through what's concerning us. We can also tell ourselves that we don't need to talk to anyone else about what's on our minds or that we don't want to bother them. We may also fear that if we really open up to those around us about how we feel deep down, they may think of us differently.

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Consider how you felt the last time someone close to you opened up to you about what was bothering them. If your experiences have been anything like mine, it was probably an intimate experience. You really got to know the person even better, and your relationship grew as a result. Next time you are hesitating to open up to a loved one, consider what benefit it can be to be the other person and your relationship with them.

The same goes with your relationship with God. Try talking to God about your anxiety. I do it all the time. Frequently throughout the day, I will say, "God, I am really anxious about ____, please help me out with it". I will often repeat some version of this prayer many times until I feel like it has soaked through my anxiety, and I can think and breathe clearer.

I often find that anxiety can cut off my relationship with God. In times of great stress or anxiety, I will forget to ask God for help, thinking that I need to solve everything myself. This is a dangerous pitfall of self-reliance.

I also find it helpful to reflect on how Jesus dealt with anxiety. It's too easy to forget that

What emotions do you notice when you reflect on your own limitations? How do you find yourself responding?

Jesus was fully human, which means that he dealt with everything that goes with being a human being, including anxiety.

Think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. I always have this uncomfortable yet intimate feeling whenever I reflect on Jesus' mood at Gethsemane. I imagine Jesus being anxious over what was about to happen, yet simultaneously trying to communicate with his Father. We frequently have this image of Jesus being permanently calm, cool, and collected, yet it's clear at Gethsemane that he was going through turmoil.

When Jesus asks his Father to "let this cup pass" from him, it is an incredible moment of vulnerability and anxiety from Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is so anxious that he is trying to get out of the situation that he is in. On the other hand, he goes on to accept his Father's will for him, and is faithful to the trust that it will be for the greater good.

We are often in similar situations in our lives, times when we say to ourselves, "Oh God, I'd rather be doing anything else or be anywhere else than right here and now." It's incredibly difficult to then accept our situation and ask God for help in making our way through it.

Yet we will keep coming back to these moments again and again in our lives. One thing I have learned in monastic living is that there is no escape from anxiety. Yet there is a way

of faithful living through anxiety. Anxiety is a part of our lives, and we have no choice but to learn how to pray with it.

Try talking to God about your anxiety. I
do it all the time.

For Further Reflection

Do you have struggles that you hide from God? What keeps you quiet? What would it take to share them?

How do you respond when others speak to you of their hidden struggles? Is it easy for you to share your own challenges with others?

What helps you to navigate through anxiety - or the other mental health challenges you might face?

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