

How Should Christians Deal With Anxiety: TGCA Webinar

AKOS BALOGH: Well, good evening everyone, and welcome to The Gospel Coalition Australia webinar. It's great to have you online with us. If we haven't met, my name is Akos Balogh, and I'm the CEO of The Gospel Coalition Australia. I'll be your virtual host tonight. Our special guests are: the Reverend Paul Grimmond and Dr Carolyn Russell. Paul Grimmond is a theological lecturer at Moore College, in Sydney. Paul has thought a lot about anxiety from a Christian perspective. As we'll hear in a moment, his understanding came in large part due to his personal experience with anxiety. Paul will help us understand anxiety from a theological perspective. Welcome, Paul.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Hi. Nice to be here, Akos.

AKOS BALOGH: Now, Dr Carolyn Russell, our other guest, is a GP and counsellor based in Brisbane, with years of experience with mental health issues. She also teaches a counselling subject at the Queensland Theological College, also in Brisbane. Carolyn will help us understand anxiety from a medical perspective. Welcome, Carolyn.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Thanks very much. Thank very much for having me, Akos. Welcome, everybody.

AKOS BALOGH: Okay, now we'll start with Paul. We're going to talk to each guest individually, for a while. We'll start with Paul for around fifteen, twenty minutes, and then move to Carolyn, for around fifteen minutes. So Paul, starting with you. Now you've encountered anxiety in a deeply personal way. Could you tell us a bit more about your own journey with anxiety?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, sure. So, for me it probably stems back to being a teenager, although I didn't know at the time that anxiety was what I was struggling with. I just had some episodes as a teenager, actually before I became a Christian, thinking about life and death, where I got—I realise now that I was having a panic attack, although at that time I didn't know that that's what it was called—I just felt kind of slightly crazy and out of control. And my mind was going wild, and I felt almost like my body was going to explode, and I didn't quite know how to control it. And I would just get—try to think of something else, until my body calmed down.

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So I had that happen to me a number of times, as a teenager, but didn't, you know ... that wasn't all of my life or anything. I just had some of those episodes. Then it really went—as I got into kind of my early to mid-twenties, I ended having a series, a string, of just little episodes, which were started by what they call ice-pick pains in the side of your head. So I would get a really dark, awful pain in the side of my head. It would only last for kind of five or ten seconds, but then I would feel really dizzy and faint, and unsettled and nauseous, and sometimes like I was going to pass out. And so each that happened, I took myself off to casualty, and they ran a number of tests on my heart and other things. And they said: look, there's nothing medically wrong with you, not quite sure what's happened, go home and hopefully things will be okay.

Probably about the fourth time that that happened—this might have been over a space of about six months or so—that episode actually ended up in a full-blown panic attack. So, I ended up, what I've realised now, hyperventilating. And if you've never had that experience, basically as you hyperventilate, you start to get painful bands across your chest and down your arms, and you get tingling in your hands. And basically, I thought I was having a heart attack. So I was in a friend's lounge room; they rang the ambulance. The ambulance arrived, they kind of calmed me down and

told me: this is what's taken place for you. I genuinely thought that I was going to die, at that moment in time.

And then—that was a Friday—on that Sunday night after church, I had another episode where I felt like fainting. I went back off to casualty, and in casualty, there are kind of loud noises occasionally. And what would start to happen, there'd be a loud noise, and my body would just kind of violently react. So I'd have these kind of muscle spasms, and my limbs would fly in the air in response to loud noises. And at that point in time I thought I was going slightly mad. I ended up being admitted to hospital, and I spent about five days in hospital, while they ran just about every test that's known to humanity on me. At the end of that week, they kind of sat me down and said: look, we can't find anything particularly physiological that's going on for you. Not quite sure what's happening, it could be anxiety, it might be something else, whatever.

4:44

Anyway, in God's kindness, I ended up speaking to a psychiatrist. A really old-school psychiatrist, actually, who basically sat me down and said: well, there is no circuit in the human body that explains what's happened to you. This is basically—the bodily things there, they call it a conversion disorder. It's actually your body responding to the anxiety and the anxiety manifesting itself in different ways, physically, for you. And your body trying to find a way of making sense of kind of the anxiety that you've experienced. So, look, I spent about six months seeing someone and understanding a little bit about panic attacks, and my own rituals around controlling my breathing and my thinking and things in ways that helped me to manage that a bit better. But the underlying bits of my personality that were kind of prone to anxiety just didn't want to disappear.

And I ended up, in my early thirties, at a very, very stressful job. So, two years out of Bible college, I ended up as the senior pastor in a very large ministry at the University of New South Wales. And slowly, over time, I basically—the anxiety and stress of that job wore me down, and I got more and more symptoms of burnout. I also ended up with very low mood, and I got to the point of being really quite depressed. So at its worst, I felt really trapped in the job. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing and I couldn't do it. I would get enough energy to do the next thing, and then I'd kind of collapse. Sometimes I'd just kind of roll up in a ball on the floor, kind of rocking backwards and forwards, just feeling like I can't move. I don't know where I'm going, and I don't know how to go on. And again, in God's kindness, he just provided some people in my life, and he provided a set of videos. One summer holidays, me and my wife sat down and watched a man called Arch Hart explain a little bit about anxiety and stress. And as he talked about that and burnout and other things, we both looked at each other and said: that's what's happening to you.

6:45

So I walked away from ministry for a year or so. I went and started doing some counselling, both for my marriage and for me personally, and kind of have learnt a whole bunch of things, that have helped me to kind of manage it, and get a bit better at kind of functioning. There you go, there's a very long story, isn't it, Akos, but yeah.

AKOS BALOGH: Yeah, no, thanks for sharing. I mean, for those that have experienced anxiety, I guess there's a spectrum in terms of how much you feel, how anxious you feel. And I think it's fair to say you've experienced quite the severe end of that spectrum.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, although it's interesting. I mean, for different people, it's different things. You know, for some people it's particular triggers; for other people it's more generalised,

and so there'll be just lots and lots of things that spike those feelings and experiences. And it—there's a really broad spectrum along which people experience anxiety I think, so yeah.

AKOS BALOGH: Indeed. So you've been on a long journey with anxiety, and understanding yourself, and your anxiety. What are some of the things you've learned that you wished that you had known when you were first struggling with anxiety?

PAUL GRIMMOND: I mean I guess one of the things I'd wished I'd known was that—that your body's capable of doing such things. And that, like, when this happens, it's not something that you're particularly in control of. So I think one of the things that I've found really helpful is—I think biblically, I actually believe that I'm a whole person; I'm a brain and a body and that's all connected together. And so I think one of the things that I've learnt too, is my brain is controlled by my body just as my body is controlled by my brain. And so when the anxiety takes hold and kind of runs out of control, there's a whole lot of chemical processes and other things that are going on inside my body that actually affect my ability to think and process in that space. You know, so one of the symptoms for me when things are bad, I'll wake up at three or four o'clock in the morning, maybe with a conflict situation or something that happened the day before. And it will just spin over and over and over and over again in my mind. And I've realised I've been thinking the same thoughts for half an hour, and I'll try and stop myself. And then all of a sudden, I've realised I've had those same thoughts again for another half an hour, and I'm back again, trying to stop myself.

9:05

And I think realising what I've come to understand now, because my brain and body are wired together, I can't just think my way out of it. I think I thought if I could reason properly, or if I could think really clearly, if I understood the real truths of the Bible and got them all right, everything would kind of sort itself out. One of the things I've learned about anxiety is it's not very reasonable or rational, particularly in the moment when it's very acute. So, I do believe that you believe and how you think and stuff matters over a long period of time. But I also know that when the anxiety's acute and things are out of control, my thinking's actually not very good, and that's probably not the time to try and think about it too much. That's been a really significant thing for me.

And so I think, for me, I think part of the process of going through all of this too, is realising that I've had my identity tied up in a lot of different places: in my ability to do ministry, and other things. And I've learnt some deep things about myself and my avoiding of conflict, for example, which isn't always healthy in my relationships. And so I think another thing that I have learnt, is that while the experience of anxiety was really awful, receiving good help and thinking helpfully, biblically, about it and having friends who prayed with me and encouraged me and helped me over time, that in God's kindness, is actually possible to make progress.

So, I'm a bit better at managing it now when I get anxious. And I'm not completely ... like, I'm not completely cured. I still go through patches of anxiety. But I just have better skills, and I'm more aware; and I probably sometimes now do the opposite thing of what I used to do. So when I get anxious now, I stop and go for a walk and try not to think about anything. Whereas before, I used to sit there and try and solve the problem, just as one simple example.

AKOS BALOGH: Yeah, sure, and you get tied up in your thoughts and that would just lead to a downward spiral.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Sure, yep.

AKOS BALOGH: Alright, moving then to your relationship with God. How did your anxiety affect your relationship with God? In particular, did you have any theological misunderstandings—

particularly if you're going through the acute phase—did you have any theological misunderstandings as you grappled with your anxiety?

11:25

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think, in some ways, God spared me from too much theologising about it, which I realise is a bit different for me from some other people who go through that experience. So there were moments, I think, where I—like, there were particular things, like, sometimes I would pray and wonder if God was really there and if he was really listening. So there were kind of those deep kind of things at one level. At another level, I didn't feel really deep guilt about my anxiety, in a way that I know that quite a lot of people do. I think the sense of being trapped here and not quite being about to work out a way out, and would God ever release me from this, was a real question. And that made me quite desperate, cos I'd think about the future, and I'd think about what would it be like to be like this ongoingly. And that's quite a—that's a really scary thing, because it's so awful when you're experiencing it.

But again, like, you know, because of my experience in talking about it, I've had the privilege of speaking to and ministering to lots of people who struggle with anxiety over time. And there are so many different things for people. But I think, you know, I talked to one person the other day, even, for them, questions of kind of guilt and whether God could really love them and whether they're sinning in their anxiety, I think is a really big thing for some people. For other people it leads them in a different path. It's kind of: gee, if God lets this happen, is he really there? Like, do I really believe in him and you might kind of run down the rabbit hole of reading lots of atheistic literature, and all those questions about how do you know whether God's really there or not. Our thoughts, as they run away with us, can run to different places, I think, so yeah.

13:17

AKOS BALOGH: So, flowing on from that, what does the Bible actually say about anxiety? So in Philippians, the apostle Paul says: "Don't be anxious about anything". I mean, isn't that all there is to say? Like, what does the Bible actually say?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, look, can I just say that the worst thing in the world you can say to someone in acute anxiety is "don't be anxious". Like, "don't be anxious" just makes you feel more anxious about being anxious! And your body's already—you're way too far gone for you to be able to kind of work your way out of it at that point in time. So, like a couple of things that I've found really helpful as I've kind of put it together: one is to realise that the Bible uses the word 'anxious' quite a lot, and sometimes it's really positive about anxiety and just not negative. So in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the body, different parts of the body being burned for each other. The word in the original Greek, it's exactly the same word as it uses when Paul says "don't be anxious" in Philippians 4:6. So whereas in Philippians 4, "don't be anxious" seems like a bad thing, in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says it's good when one part of the body is anxious for another part of the body. When you love people, and you're concerned for what happens to them, that's a right kind of outworking of anxiety. Or Philippians 2, he speaks about Timothy being someone who is anxious for other people's affairs. Or in 2 Corinthians 11 he talks about his own anxiety for the churches, right?

So actually the Bible doesn't just go: anxiety bad. It goes: anxiety's a thing that all people can experience; there are right anxieties, there are wrong anxieties. There are helpful fears, there are wrong fears. And so I want to say, about Philippians 4 in particular, you know, even as you read it, what kind of tone do you read that verse with? [aggressive tone] "Do not be anxious!" You're about to sin, you're about to—or is it actually, God's encouragement [gentler tone]: "don't be anxious,

but by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God". I think Paul is basically saying: we're all going to feel anxious, here is one of God's antidotes in that place. Pray, bring your things to God, and know that he's big enough and strong enough to deal with them and hold on to them.

But I think we need to be really careful to think and understand about what God's tone with us is. He's not rousing on us, he's not kind of condemning us and telling us, because you're anxious, you're a terrible human being. He's encouraging us; don't be anxious, come to me. Keep living out your relationship with me. So that's the first thing I want to say. Anxiety's not always bad, it's not always good, it's a whole range of things.

15:49

And actually, when you think biblically about that, that's right, you know? For a fallen world, which is broken, anxiety is sometimes a good gift from God to us. So when I see the snake rippling in the grass on my bushwalk, across the path, and it makes me stop and my heart racing and I kind of avoid the snake, there's probably something actually very good about my anxiety response in that moment. And the same thing's true sometimes in relationship with people who have been very unhealthy in relationship, or other things like that. There are lots of times when anxiety is a healthy warning from God, that we're actually in a space that we need to be thoughtful about and engage well with that space. So that kind of thing.

On a kind of more positive side, I want to say one of things I think has been really helpful—and actually, I have a dear friend who's struggled with anxiety, who prays with me, and I think this has been really great—we need to remember, in relationship with God, we're in a state of grace. And not a state of kind of consternation. Or God's not up in heaven rousing on us, he basically accepts us as his children and invites us into of his family. So I really think that adoption is a helpful thing for us to think about and ponder. You know, when a family goes out and adopts a child, they don't kind of adopt them in and go: you're in until you do something naughty, and then you're out the front door until you fix it up, and then I'll have you in again or whatever. But you get adopted into the family with all of your quirks and your joys and your struggles and your sinfulness and whatever. And you'll probably fight with your new siblings and you'll probably have days when you're angry with your adopted parents and all that kind of stuff will happen. But you do all of that in a state—at least in an ideal situation—where you're adopted into a family who loves you, and with parents you love you and accept that all that stuff is part of life.

And so I think in our own relationship with God, we need to keep remembering that our relationship with God is not dependant on our performance. So it's not dependent upon how well you can obey, or whether you got everything right today or whatever. In Jesus, God opens his arms and he says: welcome, you're my child. You're here with me; I love you. And I will walk with you through the difficult stuff and the joys and the privileges, and I want to see you grow and change and all that kind of stuff. But you do that in a state of grace. You know, a place where God loves you and cares for you and will keep working with you.

18:13

AKOS BALOGH: Look, that's very helpful. I think having that understanding of God's immense grace to us, I think puts it all in context, doesn't it? A little bit more of a practical question then: some Christians shy away from seeking secular psychological help in dealing with anxiety. Can you speak to this from a theological perspective?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, I think I want to say, this is a really tricky space to walk into. Because as Christians, if we're worried about the worldview of the person who's speaking to us, or we're worried that what they're saying to us, in some way goes against what we believe as a Christian, that can make it very difficult for us to hear what they're saying and maybe to engage with some things that might be helpful for us in terms of processing things. So I want to say, in any field, like with psychology, you're both engaging with truth about things that people have observed, just basic facts about how we operate and how things work. And then there'll also be sometimes a set of values associated with that. Keep working at kind of—the fact that sometimes the values are unhelpful doesn't mean the observations about how things work and whatever are unhelpful. And actually I think, sometimes, in certain situations, I'd heard of Christian counsellors who'd bring in a bunch of Christian values that are necessarily particularly helpful in terms of engaging with anxiety. And so I actually think that really helpful treatment is engaging with psychology. I think there's just stuff to learn about how the world works, and psychology has lots of great observations about how that works and why it works.

And then we need to work out how to integrate that with what we believe as Christians. And having pastors and other people help us talk through that stuff is really helpful and important. Don't end up going against your conscience, but there's lots of really valuable and helpful stuff there from the world of psychology that is just about part of being created and human and part of God's created world.

AKOS BALOGH: And I'm sure we'll—I'll ask Carolyn about that as well. In a moment we'll hear a bit more. But thank you for speaking to that theologically. So, as we wrap up your segment Paul, in three sentences or less: how should Christians deal with anxiety?

PAUL GRIMMOND: This is a hopeless question. [laughter]

AKOS BALOGH: I had to throw it in, I had to throw it in.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Look, I think I want to say: accept that you've been made who you are by God, with all the good things and the frustrations that that brings. Know that this anxiety, by God's grace, God will use it to grow you and shape you. It's not ultimately in control of your life. But know that, particularly in its acute form, it's distressing, it's real, it's bodily, it's part of your world. And seek help, find the people, go and talk to your GP. Use some medication to help you start to control some of the extreme symptoms. Trust that God will work in and through all of those good ways, in order to help you to engage with it.

21:16

And trust and know that he is your God, and keeps loving you, even when you feel like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling.

AKOS BALOGH: Thank you. Wise words, even if it was more than three sentences! Thank you so much, Grimmo. Alright, we now turn to Carolyn. Thank you so much, Carolyn. Now looking at this issue more from the medical perspective, could you, for our listeners, define anxiety from a medical perspective?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Okay, well the first thing to realise is just as Paul said, anxiety actually goes from normal to extreme. And for all of us, in our fallen world, I actually think that feeling anxious is one of God's most wonderful gifts. Not just for the snake that goes across the grass—although I'm very glad of that one—but even when we cross the road. For our bodies to actually have a physiological experience that says: something could hurt you if you actually don't do this.

So just our normal increase in heart rate, our normal increase in respiratory rate prepares us for the world. So normal anxiety, if you're going into a theatre for an exploratory operation, normal anxiety about having a baby for the first time, normal anxiety about all of those things is part of an absolutely fabulous physiological setting that God has given to us. So, all of us know what that is.

However, we then have that gradation: from that, which can actually increase and then settle back down again, to people who experience anxiety and fear and a sense of danger in times when there is no apparent danger or fear. And that's what we talk about often when we talk about anxiety in medicine. We're actually talking about people who are developing either mild or moderate forms of anxiety disorder. And the way we describe that is: people have a particular fear of something. We might have a fear of spiders, that's called a phobia and an anxiety, so a phobic anxiety. Or we might have a fear of speaking in public, or of eating in public, and that might be described as a social anxiety. And then we'll have those incredible experiences, the ones that Paul described. Whole body experiences, but from a time when the context does not require it. But it's terrifying. And so when people have a severe anxiety disorder, it is terrifying for them. Paul made that comment about all of the systems being involved, and you either feel like you're going mad, or you feel like you're dying or you feel like you're just totally messed up, and totally irrational. And part of you knows, that there's something really wrong here, and you just don't know what to do about it.

24:04

Now, I've had one panic attack in my life, and I can't imagine what it's like to feel Paul must have felt. Ah, terrible panic, and I've had one panic attack when I was actually perimenopausal, and I was sitting at a piano about to play the introduction to a piece of music in front of the whole church and I couldn't work out what key the piece of music was written in. And I sweated, and I shook, and my hands, you know. And I just couldn't think, and I had to tell somebody else that they had to start this piece. And it was purely because all my hormonal stuff was going weird, and then I needed to get some understanding of what panic was for me.

So when we talk about anxiety disorders, we're talking about people having fear of something specific, or fear of feeling fear. And that's like—or fear of not being able to get safe, which is agoraphobia; or fear of doubt, which is what is expressed in obsessive-compulsive disorder. Or fear of reliving an awful experience, which is like a traumatic stress disorder. All of those things are what we describe as anxiety. When our body decides that this internal distress is absolutely accurate, but our brain and our body just seem to lose contact with this normal context that we're in.

AKOS BALOGH: Yep, so in terms of an anxiety disorder, it's really a case of your body—there's an alarm going off in your body, as it were, but there's not actual reason for it to go.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: That's right, you know. And it can be that it actually seems like the situation. For example, the people who don't like going in lifts, you know, they've got a thinking about lifts. And of course, they go close to a lift, and that situation fills them with a great deal of anticipation. And of course, they say: well I should avoid that, because that's going to be a dangerous experience for me. However, if we were realistic about it, how many people actually ever get stuck in a lift and never get out? We know that lifts can get stuck, but the lift—but the real likelihood is very real small, yeah? So that's the sense. So it's fear that's out of context, and fear that's extreme, and fear that is whole body fear. It is mind, body; it feels like spirit, it feels socially and relationally, involving the whole of our body. And it's really uncomfortable and so distressing.

AKOS BALOGH: Sure. So how treatable is anxiety? Particularly the anxiety disorders, if we think about those.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Well, anxiety disorders are very, very treatable. And part of the reason for that is, as Paul talked about, people have been observing this now for quite some time. Cos we've known about the studies in anxiety for a long time. And people who've been doing work in it have actually looked at a whole lot of modalities that are valuable. And certainly not just medication.

26:54

Being able to work out what the triggers are for people, being able to work out what in the context set their body going to start with. Is there a genetic capacity to this? When we can actually get a good story, and find out what the pattern of anxiety is, then we can start to look at the goals that we can use. It's extremely treatable. And one of the things is that increasing understanding—when somebody says: why does my heart do that? And we can talk and describe why our heart does that, all of a sudden they go: oh, you mean it's my adrenaline? Yes, it is. It's so, you know—let's work out why your adrenaline does that and see if there's any ways that we can help you to both understand it and be able to manage it, using physical ways to manage it.

AKOS BALOGH: Yeah, indeed. So if I was to ask this question, what are a couple of things Christians should know from the medical perspective about anxiety? I mean, you've already mentioned a few things there, but are there, you know, two or three things that you think Christians should know from a medical perspective about anxiety?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Well look, I think one of the first things is that anxiety sets up a cycle of avoidance. The feelings are awful. So just to take the lift, for example. If we don't—if we have a sort of a strange thought that that lift is going to be dangerous, and we decide that the best thing to do is go up the stairs, then we have avoided a physiological feeling. And we say: ooh, I've got mastery over that, I can do that. However, if you have to go up 26 floors to something, and you've got to walk up 26 flights of stairs or 52 flights of stairs to get to the top, then we know that there's something out of whack in terms of our rationality, in terms of the lift is dangerous. But that avoidance is actually going to set us up for the anxiety feeling worse. Because the more we avoid, and the more we don't actually face the fact that our body can manage it, the more it's going to get worse.

28:59

AKOS BALOGH: So if I can just jump there. Sorry, avoidance is not the way to treat anxiety?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Absolutely.

AKOS BALOGH: Yep, I think that's very important.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: If we decide to avoid something, what happens is, the anxiety will gradually grow. We get this short-term relief, but we actually haven't grasped what's going on in the anxiety and realised if we face it, the anxiety gradually extinguishes. Yeah? Just an example about that: I have a delightful patient who has actually had obsessive-compulsive disorder since she was about seven, her first episode. And in her first episode, she worried that the tree outside her bedroom window was going to fall over in the middle of the night. And so because that feeling was desperate, she would lie in bed, she would pray and pray and pray, for about an hour before she went to bed, that the tree would not fall over. And would go to bed exhausted. In the morning, the first thing she would do would be to check that the tree was still there. Even as a woman of forty, she would still pray and pray and pray every night, until she was almost exhausted so that she could go to sleep, so that she would stop worrying about the thing that she thought was going to happen,

that was going to be disastrous for her. So had she's intrusive thoughts about it, and her compulsion was, to reduce her anxiety, she would pray and pray and pray.

And she kept saying to me: but I feel like I'm not really getting closer to God. Why am I not getting closer to God? You know, I pray and pray and pray, and surely he's not going to take these things away from me. Once I could help her to understand that this was actually the same thing that her dad had just told her that he had, and this was actually a genetic condition, that they were wired for this. And as well as that, she watched dad do rituals all her life, and that this was her ritual. After she understood rituals, we were able to say: what are we going to do? And we started to change the ritual that she did do, the excessive praying and the thinking that was going on, into something very different. And she started to relax; she started to get her body into a different place. We started to challenge the thinking and the reality of that thinking, and all the irrationality of that thinking. And now she can go: tree. Okay, I don't have to worry about that and I can go to bed.

31:15

So, those are the sort of things. Anxiety creates isolation, creates avoidance. If we avoid, we're more likely for it to get worse. And if children are taught to avoid and accommodate all those things, and if families accommodate all those things very early, it actually sets them up for a worse anxiety disorder as they get older. And I think that's really important for us as Christians. Because we as believers can sometimes accommodate anxiety far too often, in our children or in our communities, and people will say: oh no, I can't do that. Well, actually, maybe you can. Let's work together and see whether you know, this might be useful for you, and not accommodate it all the time.

AKOS BALOGH: Excellent. So, moving on from that then, can you speak to the issue of Christians using medication to treat anxiety? I know—I understand that some Christians might be a bit hesitant in using medication. Can you speak to that issue for us, Carolyn?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Look, I think ... this is a really big one, isn't it? You know, when people feel like there's something wrong spiritually perhaps, and they will strive and strive to fix something spiritually or—and wonder why they're not getting better that way, for them to think that actually taking some medication may be of help to them is a very difficult thing. And they really want to honour God in their lives. The reality is that there is much to anxiety that does need medication to—it doesn't need medication to actually sort it out. Medication is used in two different circumstances. The first one is when the anxiety has reached a severe level, where function has actually been distorted. And where people cannot maintain a reasonable level of life, that most people would consider to be normal, functioning, going to work, managing their family, et cetera; when their sleep is excessively disturbed.

And for those people, they will often say, after two or three weeks: oh my goodness, I haven't felt this way for so long. And then they go: okay, what I was feeling was not the norm, this is the norm. So that's the first group of people.

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The second group of people is, for those who may not be quite as severely unwell, but who may be needing a bit of a step up. A little bit like when you first learn to turn the doorknob on a door and have to you get a little stool up when you're a child, to actually reach the doorknob. It's a little bit like that. Sometimes you need to get settled enough in your physical body, and in your thinking, it's got to be a little slower, so you can actually do the psychological work, or the relaxation work that might be necessary to really grasp hold of your anxiety. Or even to be able to maintain dialogue

with somebody, like Paul talked about, seeing a therapist, or seeing a psychiatrist. Some people just cannot maintain in their head what they need to, to dialogue around what might be driving this anxiety. So medication can be used for both of those things.

The thing about medication these days, is that it's not a sledgehammer anymore. When I first started medicine and was a young doctor, we were giving people sometimes some medications that would give them a lot of side effects. And that was really uncomfortable, medication got a bad rap, and people remember feeling drugged out, or watching their family members be a bit drugged out. These days, most medication that would be used for anxiety is so tailored and so low in side effects if you choose it well and wisely and go slow, that people are not going to even notice that it does anything to them much except improve their symptoms. And they don't change their personality. It's actually the anxiety that's changing their personality, it's not actually the medication that's changing their personality.

AKOS BALOGH: So, for Christians, there is a legitimate use of medication to treat anxiety. That's good to hear.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Yeah. I would say that it's a little bit like using insulin to treat diabetes or using a pain medication when I broke my leg. It's the same. It's a physical manifestation of something, a system that's gone wrong in the body, and we don't pooh-pooh pain relief after a broken leg. Why would we with something else that's gone wrong in our body?

AKOS BALOGH: That's right. There needs to be a bit of a paradigm shift there, doesn't there.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Yeah, there does.

AKOS BALOGH: We're just about to—sorry, Carolyn, if I can just jump in—we're just about to get to the people's questions. I'm just conscious of the time. But if I could ask you the same question I asked Paul: in three sentences or less, how should Christians deal with anxiety, particularly for the medical perspective?

36:03

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Okay, the first thing for me would be: don't jump to meaning. Don't jump to a meaning, either in the church or in your growth group. Don't jump to a negative meaning, that this is a condemning thing for you. That's the first thing. The second thing is: don't isolate yourself. You need your brothers and sisters, in that you will need to them walk with you, to read with you, to remind you. There's a third sentence, I'm really sorry. The third one is: seek a wise and wide assessment very early, rather than waiting and waiting and seeing if you can do all the other things. Those would be my three.

AKOS BALOGH: Excellent. Thank you very much for your wisdom. Alright, ladies and gentlemen, we're now about to jump into the questions that you have. And again, you can just vote or like the question that you have, or you can type your own answer—type your own question in. But we'll go from the top, the questions that have been the most popular. And so we'll jump straight in. Okay, so Shannon King, says a question at the top that's very well-liked. It says, "how do I best support a loved one struggling with anxiety?" Paul, we'll kick off with you; I'll just unmute you. Just one moment. Okay, no, Paul, you're there. "How you best support a loved one struggling with anxiety?"

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, it's a really great question, isn't it? There are a few things that I would want to say. The first one's going to sound slightly weird, but it's really important for people to

work out how to be thoughtful about themselves and care for themselves and engage with people with anxiety. So, caring for people in situations like this can be draining and exhausting for you. And so it's okay to realise that you yourself have limitations and can't fix it. So I think the biggest thing I want to say is: you can't fix it, but you be one resource that God uses in their lives to help them to take a step further forward.

So in terms of what does that actually look like, I think at one level, for me, it would be encouraging them that there's a real issue going on here and it's okay to go and seek some help. So, maybe even for people in acute phase or whatever, help them. Go along and visit the GP with them and have a bit of a conversation there. Help them to find a counsellor, maybe, that they feel like they can trust, they can engage with stuff and whatever. But a lot of it in the end, in my experience, is about being a friend. One of the things that Carolyn mentioned is that anxiety's often isolating, and people with anxiety often isolate themselves. But they do need—they need friends and social contact. They need to do some of the normal stuff of life. So just having the person with anxiety in your house; being willing to be with them even if they don't want to talk much, or they just need quiet but they need somebody around.

39:03

I do think that often, particularly in the acute phase, it's very hard to pray. And so I was very thankful when other people would pray or help me to pray or pray on my behalf. Or voice things to God that I felt that I couldn't. I think that was a real gift and encouragement from them. And to be someone who, in the end—you will get this wrong, so don't be afraid about getting this wrong—but good friends don't spend their whole time talking about one issue. So whatever you do, don't, every time you meet the person, spend all your time talking about their anxiety. That's actually really unhelpful. Be a friend. Talk about what you did on the weekend, watch a movie together, go for a walk, do that stuff together. And occasionally say: how are you going? What can I pray for you? Where are you up to? Are there things that I can do? I mean, they'd be kind of key things for me, yeah.

AKOS BALOGH: Thank you. Okay, the next question—and I might throw this one to you both—let me just get Carolyn back on. The next question is, “how do I work through feelings of guilt around my anxiety?” Actually, I might throw that one to you first, Paul, cos I understand that might have been something you've been able to relate to a little bit more. “How do I work through feelings of guilt around my anxiety?”

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah. I mean I think one of things, like the theological stuff that I spoke about at the beginning, it's appropriate to kind of grasp that that's true. And so to understand that much of what's going on for you in terms of anxiety is not a sin thing, it's that we live in a world that's been affected by sin and is broken, and sometimes our body reacts and gets out of control in response to things that we're not completely in control of. So I'd want to say one of the mistakes that we often make is not understanding the difference between just being finite and human, and being a sinful person, you know. So I'll give you a concrete example. Some of gets up in front of church, and they say: look, such-and-such has had a baby, we'd really like people to provide meals for them. The person who's kind of normally functioning is going: well, there's lots of people here, my life's really crazy at the moment; I'm not sure if I can provide a meal this week. I feel a bit sad about it, but that's okay.

41:22

The anxious person goes: gee, if I don't provide them with a meal, I'm not really being Christian. And if I'm not really being Christian, then what does Jesus think of me. And so every time someone

asks you for help, I feel like I have to do that thing in order to prove to myself and other people that I'm a Christian. And to realise that even when you can't cope with it, or there's been fifteen requests for things in front of church tonight and you feel like you had to do all fifteen of them, there's a point there where you've kind of let go of the fact that you're finite and human and you can do so much. And it's actually anxiety that's kind of speaking in that space. And so to realise there's lots of spaces where some of the guilt that you're feeling, it's not true. It's not a real response to you genuinely being sinful, it's just that you're broken and whatever.

Now, the flip side of that—and this is a bit crazy—is that all people who are anxious are still sinful. We still do the wrong thing, there are mistakes that you make, there are things that need to be changed. And so you need to remember what we all need to remember: how do you deal with your sin? You keep coming back to Jesus and coming back to the cross. And so when you feel like you've sinned and broken and all that kind of stuff, get your friends to help you work out which bits are sin and which bits are just part of the thing. And when there really is sin or mistakes that you've made or whatever, bring them to Jesus and pray, knowing the only way that you can be forgiven is through his death again. Just like it is for all of us. So bring your mistakes to Jesus, pray for his forgiveness, and know that his forgiveness is not dependant on your ability to fix your anxiety. His forgiveness is totally, totally, totally dependent on the work that he did for you on the cross, and the fact that God has loved you so much. You remember that Romans 5, “while you were still enemies, Christ died for us.” And so, you know, we were all enemies, and God didn't wait for us to fix ourselves up. He made us right through Jesus. When you're feeling the weight of your guilt, know that God loves you and he forgives you. And his forgiveness is not dependant on your ability to fix your anxiety.

43:38

AKOS BALOGH: Very wise words, very helpful words, thank you. The next question comes from Christian, and Christian says, “to what extent do you think our church members/leader should be trained in the area of mental health issues, especially helping to increase empathy for the sufferers? If so, what kind of training would you suggest?” Carolyn, I'll throw this one to you. Maybe the first part, “to what extent do you think church members/leaders should be trained in the area of mental health issues?”

CAROLYN RUSSELL: You're talking to somebody who thinks that everyone should actually have some understanding of mental health first aid, Akos. And thank you so much for the question, Christian. I think we go through all of our lives learning things that we didn't learn before. And to be open to the idea that people in our midst will suffer with mental health issues, in our churches, in our communities, in our families. Probably one in four in our lifetime, from here on, will have some form of anxiety disorder at some time in their life. It's as high as that in some areas. And as we increasingly become isolated it's getting worse. And as we go so fast in our life, it's getting worse. And so I actually think that we all need to have our eyes open and our ears listening to the Spirit of God, and ready for that tap on the shoulder that says: this person is suffering in front of you, and willing to ask, “you don't look okay. What's happening for you? How are things going?” And then listen to the story very empathically. I think most of us can learn to listen well. And the best thing to do is to open our ears and close our mouth and open our minds to the fact this person is suffering, and to just say, I wanna be with you. And like Paul said, to have people around you who can pray for you when you can't pray. And who can actually open the word and say: there's that word that says, “we are not condemned.” And if you're feeling condemned, I'm going to stand with you until you don't. It's probably your anxiety that's doing that.

So I would say mental health training is available, mental health first aid is useful. However, even more than that, to maybe even do a just, you know, just a simple mental health course in your

church. And somebody get a local psychologist or a local doctor along to teach you about anxiety or depression or whatever it is, because they're the two commonest you're going to come up against. And then to learn some ways just to sit with people.

46:05

AKOS BALOGH: Sure. Could I just ask, just following on from that—and I might ask each of you—what's the wrong thing you could say to someone who opens up and says that they're feeling anxious? Maybe ...

CAROLYN RUSSELL: "Get over it."

AKOS BALOGH: "Get over it." Paul, yourself?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, I mean that's a ... I mean, "don't be anxious." Or "what are you doing Christianly?" Or ...

AKOS BALOGH: "Get yourself together."

PAUL GRIMMOND: "Get yourself together", I think. Like it's the assumption that you'll just be able to sort yourself out and fix yourself up. People get, will get—don't get cross with people, I think.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Definitely. You don't get cross. One of the things that anxiety invokes in us is that sense of impatience. Because, you know, people like things fixed, that's part of our sinfulness. We're not patient like God. And I would say, pray for patience, and willingness to sit with somebody and hear their story. Because we get too impatient for people to be well. And that's not necessarily the path that's going to happen.

AKOS BALOGH: Sure. Claire asks this one, and this one goes to you, Paul. It says, "Paul, can you share a bit about how to re-enter ministry after you were burnt out? I have had time out and am now in the midst of coming back in, but have massive anxiety about getting sick again."

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah. Oh Claire, in some ways there's an awful lot to say here, and we don't have heaps of time. I think the first thing I would want to say is just having time out isn't often enough of a solution to be able to enter back in. So, for many people, the anxiety is partly situationally dependant. So you remove yourself from all the stress of ministry and you start to feel a bit better, but you haven't necessarily ... it's helpful to work out to what extent have you just started to understand a bit about why that happens for you. And have you started to understand yourself a bit more clearly, so you can manage yourself helpfully as you walk back into that situation. So, time out, I'm feeling better, I can just go back in. When I got anxious the first time—sorry, in ministry, the wardens of the church that I ran told me: you need to go away and have three months' break. I went away and had three months' break, I felt a lot better. I entered back in, and within a couple of months of being back in, I was kind of back in the same place. What was actually much more helpful was after I'd had a whole bunch of counselling, I'd learnt some stuff about myself. I'd understood some of what drove my anxiety more clearly, and I'd started to develop some skills and techniques around engaging and working in that space; I found myself much more able to re-enter.

48:50

So I want to say, just time out is not enough. Get some healing and help in order to re-enter. But, as Carolyn said, you don't solve anxiety by just running away from everything that makes you anxious. And so know that God loves, know that he is able to carry you and help you be able to enter back into a situation that's been anxiety inducing in the past. But you might need to do that a little bit, rather than a lot. So one of the things you want to do with anxiety is you want to fix it, and prove to yourself you've fixed it, so you want to face a lot of anxiety and then know that it's all been fixed. Whereas actually, kind of small baby steps, going back in a space where you feel a bit uncomfortable, and then giving yourself permission to take the rest that you need and whatever else. Take that slowly and patiently and carefully. And I think that means speaking to the rest of the staff or team or church wardens or whatever else it is, elders in your context. And talk a little bit about what it might mean to enter in slowly. You may need to take a few more breaks; you may need to make some different decisions about what you can and can't do for a while, as you slowly help yourself to walk back into that situation.

Rather than: I want to be fixed. I've had time off, I'm feeling better, I just gonna go back in, kind of, as hard as I can. I think that's often not a helpful way. I'd be interested—I don't know whether Carolyn's got anything to add.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: The one thing I would say is that anxiety leads us to two things often, in our thinking. And one is that the world is going to be a bad place, or I'm not going to be up for it. You know, it's the what if this happens? Or what if I can't do this? Or what if something else? And if there is still a lot of anxiety left about approaching a place, it's time to work together with you and the person who's caring for you, your doctors, the eldership about those real thoughts. I am worried. What if I don't do well? That's exactly what anxiety is.

And so being able to process that, think it through, and go: well, what if. If I can't do it, then I've got a plan. If I walk into the church this day and I have some panic, then alright, I've got a plan. I'll go outside, I'll do some reading, I'll move back in again. I'll take somebody with me. I'll learn how to face this thing that I'm scared of, or that my brain tells me I should be scared of. And so, see it as part of your recovery from your anxiety, and companion with somebody as you walk into it.

51:16

AKOS BALOGH: Okay. Lilian asks a question, and I think we might have addressed it, but this got a lot of likes, so I'll ask it anyway. It says, "does anxiety stem from a lack of faith in our all-knowing and all in control God?" And then she clarifies there, she says, "i.e. are we not handing our burdens to God and allowing Jesus to carry our yoke when we feel anxious?" Carolyn?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Right. I would say that for some people, that is where their anxiety has stemmed from. Yes, there are people who get anxious symptoms, anxious bodies, anxious minds because they want to control absolutely everything. Which is what we do in our sin, isn't it. And probably anxiety is made excessive by that. However, feeling anxious in your body is a normal feeling. And we are meant to have no feelings of anxiety. So, I would say the base level of feeling anxious about living in this world is probably normal. A child has to learn that if you touch the stove, it's hot. Therefore a little bit of anticipatory anxiety will be right for a child to have. That pathway with our adrenal glands and our brain and our thinking patterns has to be developing.

So to put it that every anxiety feeling that we have is going to be based in a spiritual deficit with God, I don't think we can say that, and I'd go to Paul for that. But I do see a lot of Christian clients, and patients who feel that way. And I think it comes from our dualistic ... our dualism in our thinking. It says, everything once we're Christian is spiritual only, and everything will be fine and

our bodies don't matter or don't have a say anymore. And that's not the way that our bodies work in God's universe.

AKOS BALOGH: Paul, did you want to add anything to that?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, no, not particularly. I do think that a really deep understanding of being embodied is very important. Though I think—like Scriptures tell us that Jesus died and rose again bodily, and we are bodily heading into the new heavens and the new earth. But while we live in this world, we are living in the fallenness of this world, and we don't get to the end straight away. And so, as we experience the brokenness of the world in various kinds of ways, we're going to expect it to affect all of us in terms of our thinking and our bodies and all sorts of things. And so understanding that God cares about our bodies and is bringing them home, but our bodies and our minds are still part of a fallen world. And therefore it's not just: if I could faith harder, I would get fixed. I just don't think that's the way God works in the world. God does occasionally, miraculously heal people from things. I think I've seen people who've been miraculously healed from cancer and other things. He can do it if he wants to, and we pray to him knowing that he's able to fix all things. But a lot of our life is lived out in this world with the brokenness of it, waiting for that heavenly reality. And so, telling people, "if you just had more faith, you'd fix it", misunderstands where we are and what we're waiting for and what God's going to do, I think.

54:31

AKOS BALOGH: Cathy Grimmond asks, "Carolyn, you've spoken about..."

PAUL GRIMMOND: Fine person to be asking a question, by the way.

AKOS BALOGH: What's that, sorry?

PAUL GRIMMOND: That's a fine person to be asking a question.

AKOS BALOGH: That's right. For those that don't know, Cathy Grimmond is Paul Grimmond's wife. "Carolyn, you've spoken about anxiety as a fear of something in particular. What about someone with a generalised anxiety disorder?"

CAROLYN RUSSELL: They basically fear the outcome of everything, yes? A generalised anxiety disorder fears that they are not in a situation that they can manage pretty much everything in the world. It's like: will the bus come on time? Will I get to my job on time? Will this car crash, you know, and fear is essentially the substrate of everything. And the thinking is about: I don't think I'm capable of managing whatever life brings at me. So it's a fear of me not being capable of managing life. That's what Lisa Lampe, who is a psychiatrist in Sydney, calls generalised anxiety disorder. Fear that I can't manage the things that the world's going to bring at me. And that I'm not going to ... not going to have a good outcome. Yeah, that's a generalised anxiety.

AKOS BALOGH: Carolyn, we might stay with you for this one. "Is mindfulness a helpful technique in dealing with anxiety?"

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Absolutely. I love mindfulness, when I understand that God gave us brains that can notice ourselves. And to be aware of ourselves, aware of our bodies, aware of our breathing, aware of our listening, aware of our skin temperature, aware of the colours in the room, and bring us closer back into ourselves. It gives us some space in that panicked, horrible feeling of terror, where we can actually experience the awareness of God again. So for me mindfulness, in the appropriate tradition, is the profound way of improving the embodied, which is out of kilter. So, I

would suggest that anybody who's interested in mindfulness starts to read around some of the work of some of the Christian mindfulness practitioners in the UK. And look at people who are ... like what's his name, the fellow who wrote ... Tim Stead, who's an Anglican clergyman from Oxford who runs mindfulness classes. There's a woman who does mindfulness as part of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). And mindfulness is basically a state of meditating and noticing. It's a state of awareness. In the scientific tradition, mindfulness is being studied profoundly at the moment. I would say that I believe that Eastern meditation hijacked one of God's beautiful, beautiful gifts to us, and only took it into Eastern meditation. And that's not all that mindfulness is.

57:25

So if we go back to the Scriptures, we read about "being aware", "watch", "notice", you know. "Don't sleep, stay aware." Those are all functions of mindfulness and in scientific practice mindfulness is excellent.

AKOS BALOGH: Like Jesus says, "look at the lilies of the field." Or "don't be anxious about tomorrow."

CAROLYN RUSSELL: That's right, yeah. Notice these beautiful things.

AKOS BALOGH: Just following on from that, there is a comment here about other forms of therapy, like cognitive behavioural therapy. Do you want to just comment on those quickly?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: CBT is probably the gold standard for most people, what they would start with in terms of looking at anxiety. Because it links the experience we've had to the feelings we've got, to the thoughts that we've had to the behaviours that resulted. It helps people to start to understand the cycles of avoidance or the cycles of the feeling and what they generate. There's a lot of other things though. Some people don't do well with cognitive therapy, because it can feel manualised, and like it's education. And so there are lots of other types of therapy. There are behavioural therapies, there is rational and emotive behavioural therapy. And then there is ACT, which is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is a new generation of therapy which has followed on from CBT. And ACT uses a lot of mindfulness and awareness of self in the moment, to bring people back from the catastrophes that anxiety brings them. So yes, CBT's very helpful, although CBT doesn't always help people to reflect on who they are and who they might be in Christ. And so some people will find CBT a little dry, from that.

And so narrative therapists will use much more awareness of yourself, and psychodynamic therapists will look at what's going on in your family that might be driving your persistent anxiety. So it's horses for courses; CBT's not the only thing.

AKOS BALOGH: Okay, a question here from INJ Wong [??]. "Paul, you mentioned here that underlying personality traits cause you to be more anxiety-prone. In the TGC article that you wrote, you also mentioned there are sin patterns that have also contributed, such as fear of what others think, fear of conflict and these are deeply rooted fears within me. How can one battle despair when these sins are so hard to address, and when these continue to trigger anxiety?"

59:51

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, look, it's an excellent question. I think, like ... I'll try and speak a bit concretely from my own experience at this point in time I think. So, the question about kind of fear of conflict, for example. One of the things that that meant when I was in a senior leadership position in a ministry context, was there were moments when actually my job required me to disagree with

people or engage with people or whatever. And because that creates such a strong bodily response for me, and I felt so awful about it, I would avoid having those conversations. Avoiding those conversations would often then create an atmosphere and a context where things became more anxious, because things weren't dealt with or spoken about, and so the fear got worse rather than better. And so the problem—and I think Carolyn's alluded to this a number of times—you can't deal with anxiety just by running away from it. You have to work out how to move gently towards it, I think.

But for most people, the reason the anxiety continues to build and grow is because the thing that's required to help you face the anxiety is anxiety-producing in itself, right? But you're never gonna actually start to deal with the anxiety without facing that. And so for me, I think it was thinking through things like: did I believe, as a Christian, that conflict was always wrong? Well, no, and I think, you know, the Bible tells me that there's falsehood in the world, we're going to disagree with each other. Conflict is right and normal and actually healthy part of being human. If nobody can ever disagree with me, I can never change and grow. And if I can't disagree with other people, they can't. So, disagreement, or the prospect of disagreement, made me feel really anxious. But I was persuaded that it was a good thing.

What does that mean? Well it then means I had this feeling that this was going to be really awful, but I needed to work out that it was worth doing anyway. And so to have a go at saying something that was difficult, or disagreeing with someone, or saying something in a space. That was hard. It didn't always work. You'd fall over, you'd feel guilty, you'd feel disappointed about what happened. All of that kind of stuff. But trusting that God, by his Spirit, will use his truth to slowly reshape you and help you over time.

62:22

And so slowly, encountering those things, I've gotten a bit better at engaging in conflict. Or saying to someone: I don't like that, or that disappoints me or whatever. Trust, that although it's painful and difficult to do, little steps in engaging with some of those things that are part of you, will actually reap fruit by the grace and kindness of God, over time. Don't let the fear keep you avoiding the things that really are deep things that need to change. And know that God's word and Spirit will change you as you start to wrestle with those things.

AKOS BALOGH: An important one here, an important question here for all the parents on the webinar. Carolyn, I'll throw this one to you. "How can a parent help primary school-aged children recognise feelings of anxiety and learn to deal with them?"

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Okay, a wonderful, wonderful question. There's a quite famous centre called the Yale Study Centre that has a fabulous program on this, which is called Space. And it's for parents who want to understand how to engage their child and create a patient and loving and focussed space in which they can face their feelings. So I would encourage any parent not to be thinking so much of working on the child, but to first of all create their own space, with people, just to be able to think: what am I going to be doing that supports this anxious child? Not accommodates their anxiety, but actually creates a patient, calm, focussed space in which my child, who is anxious, can learn and can grow. So for me, the first thing is to help the parents to really understand that. Because we are impatient. I mean, and an anxious child who comes into your bed every night and who can't sleep, that's really distressing. An anxious child who has separation anxiety, and doesn't want to go to school, is incredibly distressing. And if it continues, and we accommodate too much, the whole family gets inveigled into this anxiety cycle.

64:31

So the first thing I would say is: get help yourself if you're not feeling calm and if you can't create a space in which feelings can be discussed. So that's the first thing. And maybe you might like to go and see a child psychologist and get some help.

AKOS BALOGH: Sorry, I think we just lost Carolyn's voice there. Ah, here we go. Sorry, Carolyn, we just lost you there, about a—can you just go back to the bit about getting a child psychologist for your child?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Yep. If this is the case, then I would engage with a child psychologist really yourselves, first, to start off with. And to let them know the story of what that's like, and what the accommodation's been like and how your family has been. And then work with the child psychologist, often with play, to help them to notice. There are a couple of fantastic books on this, there's one which was written quite some time ago and been revised a few times. It's called *Helping Your Anxious Child*, by Ron Rapee and Sue Spence. Excellent little book for helping—it's about sort of being a detective and discovering things that are happening in my body and my mind when I've got certain things. And introducing play into your family. So I would suggest working with somebody who understands anxiety, for you to get some space, and then lead your child into thinking about feelings and reflecting on feelings. Yeah, and work with somebody else who can help you do to that.

AKOS BALOGH: So, and just to add my own question there as well, how treatable is anxiety in children?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Absolutely, wonderfully treatable. Yep, they're so resourceful and they play well and they reflect well, as long as they've got a trusted group of adults with them. And so catching the anxious child early and engaging them in therapy that's age-appropriate, and is cohesive and grouped, you know. So that it's not that they're scapegoated, but rather that the anxiety is worked on within the family, so that we don't accommodate it too much. It's very treatable.

66: 40

AKOS BALOGH: Okay, excellent. There's a comment here, "what was that book?" I just want to say this is being recorded, so all the—everybody who's listening to this webinar will have this emailed out to them late next week. We'll also send out some quote-unquote show notes, and we'll make sure that that book title is in it as well. So you will get all these details. But for now, Claire asks, "what if church is a trigger for your anxiety? And yet we're encouraged to press in to experience God's love for us through Christian community." Paul?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah, I mean that's—it's a really ... that's a big question, isn't it? The reality is, again, I think Carolyn's just reflecting on: think about what it is that's triggering it, and why, is a really helpful question to ask. So to get some people around you to help you work out what it is. It might be church, or it might be there's so many people here and a space with lots and lots of people and that makes me feel really anxious. Or is it that I'm afraid I'm going to hear something about God that's going to make me feel guilty and that's what's making me anxious. To get a bit more specific about, apart from just 'church', would be a helpful step. And then again, I think, finding healthy ways of entering into that space in little ways.

So it might be that you work out that it is a difficult space, so you ask a friend to come and just sit with you, at the back, beside the door. So that you could walk out of church if you needed to, because it had started to create that anxiety. But you would still like to be there and have a go at

being with—it might be that maybe something like a small Bible study group, or a group with friends is a helpful smaller space as a way of starting to get you to enter into that space. So work out, I guess, as clearly as you can, what are the particular triggers? Learn how to think about those in a kind of perhaps more healthy or biblical way, I guess. So, to kind of go: yeah, actually, it's really ... it's that space and there's so many people and I do feel anxious about that. And that's okay. How could I find some encouragement? And it might be something as simple as saying to a friend, will you come with me? We'll sit at the back, whilst the—we'll walk out during the singing of the final hymn the first week. And we'll just pray together about it afterwards and I'll ... like I want to start finding ways of being encouraged in some small ways in that space, even as I acknowledge it's a difficult space and find ways of entering into it.

69:14

It's experimental. We'll try something and it'll work, it won't work quite so well; we'll try a bit less, try a bit more. Being patient and taking small steps, I think all of those things.

AKOS BALOGH: Carolyn, did you have anything to add?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: I think I would absolutely underscore all of that. And I would say people, if you're looking around for churches—whoops, sorry, it's all reverberating for me. Am I right, Akos?

AKOS BALOGH: We can hear you fine, yep.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Okay. I would say that there are probably between five and ten percent of most people in congregations for whom there are trigger issues around church. It may be childhood things, it may be recent things, it may be a whole heap of stuff. It may just be agoraphobia, because they're a bit scared about having a panic attack. And so be very open to this and help people. And if they say, please do it with me, just do it with them. As Paul said, just little baby steps. And meeting together in a home, as two or three people, for some time until your anxiety level finishes, is a really good thing. We call it graded exposure. So we work out a standard hierarchy of what's going to be a small but of anxiety, what's going to add a bit more anxiety, a bit more complexity. And we work our way through it. And we sit at one until we get better, and then at the next until we get better, then the next until we get better. And our body just doesn't react quite so violently as we do that.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Can I say something at that point, Akos, which I think is really important? In much of my pastoral experience, anxiety tends to polarise people to perfectionism. And it's either right or it's wrong. So if you're a perfectionist, anything short of perfect is wrong. So there's a massive space that's wrong, and there's a tiny little bit at the edge that's right. Learning that that progress is small and gentle, and if I was at three last week and I've made it to four this week, that's a thing that I can give thanks to God for and thank him that I've kind of made it. Or even three and a half this week or whatever else it is, I don't need to get to perfection for things to be fixed. And learning to give thanks for small steps in the right direction I think is a really healthy habit, yeah.

71:29

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Absolutely.

AKOS BALOGH: Okay, we're getting towards the end of our time. I'll just look out—look for a few questions that haven't quite been answered. Here's an interesting one from Stephen Ritchie. He says—it concerns anxiety in leadership where we are evaluated by performance. He says, “authentic

Christian leaders will want to place the spotlight on Jesus by unveiling their weakness so as to magnify his strength (as in Jesus' strength). Yet spouses, congregation and church team members especially struggle to respect and value this, seeking out professional, successful quote-unquote strong and stable people to rely on, who aren't anxious or depressed." Presumably leaders, he's talking about. "How do we counteract this, showing that we aren't super-people, but rely on Jesus? My experience is that in our world, and in our imperfect church, it actually undermines confidence in our leadership position, and rather encourages people to consider as unfit for the role. Anxiety is infectious in this way, and we are tempted to hide our real self. Doesn't this undermine effective discipleship?" So I think the question centres around how much can we actually unveil our weakness in front of people as leaders, as Christian leaders? Doesn't that undermine our leadership in some way?

PAUL GRIMMOND: Yeah. I mean I would encourage you to go and read and reread 2 Corinthians. That's one of the books that I have found most helpful and fruitful in this regard personally. The whole discussion from Paul about the fact that he knows that he has this treasure in a jar of clay. And then it's actually his claim is in part it shows how great and good God is. And also he's contrasting himself with the super apostles towards the end of the letter, where it says they want to be perfect in all these things, but I just want to say I'm not perfect, but Jesus is perfect. I think that what you've identified is really important and helpful. I think godly Christian leaders will acknowledge that there are all sorts of areas of weakness in their life. Now I do want to say, please don't use that as an excuse to be sinful, or to pretend that you don't need to work on anything. That would be really unhelpful and unhealthy. But at the same time, acknowledging that there are places where I struggle or things that are difficult, I think that's a healthy and right thing to do.

73:55

What your particular church culture is and how people respond to that will be very different in different places, depending upon how deeply that particular understanding of the gospel has penetrated. And so there are some places where it might be very difficult to do that. And you may need to do that in small amounts, in small places, with some people and not others. And it's also, I mean, this is such a tricky place, isn't it? There are moments when the person who is really acutely in this place of anxiety or depression probably does need to step out of leadership for a little while, in order to find a space of healing and hope for themselves as well. And so there's a bunch of complex factors that are involved in that space.

So I want to say, over time as a leader I think my job is to train people that weakness is part of the Christian life and they shouldn't expect perfection from their leaders. I want to train them that though leaders do need to deal with their mistakes and their failings. And I want to say sometimes leaders do get into a spot where they need space in order to help themselves to grow. So there's a bunch of different things there, and you might get some people around you to help you sort of discern what your particular space is and how those things interact.

AKOS BALOGH: Sorry, there was a very interesting question here which I'm just looking for. Okay, "does Christian forgiveness require reunion with the person who hurt you? They've caused me great anxiety, and it's taken a long journey to forgiveness, but my anxiety around this person leads me to want to distance to protect myself. I am being accused of not being forgiving because I have not reunited with this friend. Thoughts on this?" Again, Paul, I might throw it to you first.

PAUL GRIMMOND: This is a huge—if you're in second year of a college that I teach at, I would spend about four hours of lectures on this topic, so just helping you to understand the context of this answer. The reality is one of the things we need to understand is that God's relationship with us

gives us a model of forgiveness, but it also is different between God and us as it is between us and other people. God is perfect and we're not. When God forgives us, there's a kind of moment, an instantaneous moment in which he forgives us and restores the relationship. And God's not afraid of what's going to take place, and he's not worried about what the outworkings of all this are going to be. And we are restored completely and the sin is done away with and all that kind of stuff.

76:26

But in human to human interactions, we need to realise that both asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness is a risky business. Because if I ask for forgiveness, I'm basically putting in your hands whether the relationship is going to be restored or not. And you could say no, even if I'm genuinely repentant and trying to sort it out. And vice versa, if I offer you forgiveness, I can be terrified that by offering you forgiveness I'm just giving you permission to do the same thing to me again next time, and you'll expect forgiveness again and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And so one of the things that we have to understand is that between human beings, while the gospel is our model of what forgiveness looks like, forgiveness is actually a process that has emotional waves associated with it that need to be worked out patiently between both parties as forgiveness is offered and received and played out in particular relationships.

So to give you a quick example, I remember a moment when my kids were little. In the swimming pool, one of them kind of you know, dived in when they were young, kind of "catch me, Dad" moment. I'm not close enough, they start sort of floundering around in the water, takes me a little while to get there, I kind of pluck them out of the water. I say sorry, they say it's ok, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera ... I'm kind of talking two, three-year-old, right? Next time, do I expect when they stand on the edge of the pool, them not to be anxious? Or not to be worried? Or to ... well I don't, actually. Being human, I think going back to that space is a scary space for them. And so the person who is asking to be forgiven needs to realise that there will be fears and stuff associated for the other people, and vice versa, over time. And so saying I've forgiven you doesn't mean that I'll never experience difficult feelings or discomfort or whatever, that I need to work through, and all of that kind of stuff.

So working out, the gospel is our model, we want to be people who are people of forgiveness, but we're also humans who react to fear and danger and stuff in complex ways. And so forgiveness will be a process that has waves that get worked out over time. And the more both parties can understand the reality of that, the more understanding and thoughtful they can be about the other person, and not expect what's inhuman of them as we work out how to actually practice forgiveness in relationship to each other. Sorry, that's a long answer, but ...

78:55

AKOS BALOGH: Thank you, that's a very important issue that we all deal with as humans, and especially as Christians. Look, there's a final question ...

PAUL GRIMMOND: I just want to say one more thing in that space. In spaces of extreme abuse or whatever, what is classic is that the abuser will say to you, because you're a Christian, you must forgive me. At that point in time, they have completely misunderstood and undermined the gospel. Without repentance, reconciliation cannot take place. And so the person who goes: you're Christian, you must forgive me, you must be reconciled, but in whom there is no repentance or change or acknowledgment of wrong or any of those things, they are actually manipulating you at that point in time. And you are not bound to be reconciled to somebody who won't actually deal with their own sin and the wrongs that they've done in that situation. Yep, sorry.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Akos, could I just add one more little thing too, that to remember that anxiety is absolutely normal. And some of this anxiety that you may have may be about some specifics as Paul has just said, which need to be noticed. There may be some significant trauma there for you that is absolutely realistic around the relationship with this person. So, respect that God has given us something to notice. It may be a little bit out of kilter but it might be very realistic, as Paul just said, it may be dangerous. So finding some trusted people and really assess whether this is reasonable anxiety or not.

PAUL GRIMMOND: Thanks Carolyn.

AKOS BALOGH: Very wise words there and very important, especially when we're talking about abusive people. Here's a question that might—picks up on an apparent difference that Jonathan has seen between your answers. He says, "Paul mentioned that often anxiety manifests itself in unwanted and intrusive thoughts and it is sometimes helpful to try and take our mind off it; yet Carolyn mentioned that avoidance is not the best method to manage it. How do you reconcile these comments, especially when it manifests in doubt?"

81:00

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Okay, excellent.

AKOS BALOGH: Carolyn, I'll throw it to you.

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Alright. When Paul was talking about taking his mind of it, what he was referring to is when we have anxiety, we often ruminate. And we go in and go in and go in and go in and go in and a thought goes round and round and round and round and round. And we're trying to fix it, but we're trying to fix it by going down a route that can never fix it. And so to actually stop that thinking is actually not avoidance. To go and look at the flowers, or lie in the grass and look at the clouds and see what shapes you can find is engaging some other part of our body and letting our whole body slow down so that the thoughts, instead of going round and round and round, can start to go back on a line again, and can actually start going further forward. And then we can start getting more rational. So, when it comes to obsessional type thoughts that go round and round and round, it is right that we actually have to stop them. Because they're on a loop, yeah? And so stopping and—it seems like avoiding, but you're actually not avoiding, you're actually treating what is right, which is we're doubting that we can get a right answer. You know, if it's an obsessional thought, it's about: oh, it has to be perfect, or I have to strive to fix it, or whatever. And we're not actually avoiding it, we're stopping it, when we do thought-stopping and do something else.

He's picked up a really good point there, and the important thing is that you're not avoiding—it's not avoiding the thought, but you're avoiding the process of getting better. So let's get better, by stopping.

AKOS BALOGH: That's a very helpful and important clarification. This might be our final question, but one of the attendees has asked—they're curious if anyone has struggled with similar anxieties to them. And it involves "often circling around existential and meaning of life, 'why are we here?' questions. And even just the thought of just existing as a human can create serious panic. This is despite a deep, strong, lifelong trust in God and very solid Christian faith. Is this unusual for Christians?" Paul?

83:10

PAUL GRIMMOND: In my experience pastorally, it's not unusual for people who are struggling with anxiety. And I think that part of the—part of what happens in the anxiety is our brain sometimes leaps to places which are the things that we're most afraid of or most uncertain about or most unsettled about. And so I've seen a large number of Christians for whom their anxiety manifests itself in existential crisis. Is God really there? Does the world mean anything? Is there a purpose? Is there a future, all that kind of stuff. And even for Christians who've been Christians all their life, and who on another level believe very deeply that God is there and know that the gospel tells them that God loves them. One of the really important things to do at that point in time is to have people around you who will help you to remember, and you work at remembering those thoughts are actually—it's a natural—when I say natural, it's just part of life.

They're going to go there sometimes, and when I jump there, it's not a secret sign that there's something deeply sinfully wrong about me, or there's something kind of broken and unwound about the universe and I hadn't seen it before but all of a sudden somehow I've seen it. Often anxiety causes us to leap to whatever the polar opposite was of the thing that we believed beforehand. When I find myself leaping from one thing to exactly the opposite in a moment, that's very often an outworking of my anxiety, rather than an outworking of what the truth is or what the world's like.

AKOS BALOGH: Carolyn, did you want to add something before we close up?

CAROLYN RUSSELL: Look, I would actually say that one of my favourite patients ever is a pastor who struggled with this and came to see me having lost fifteen kilograms because he was fasting, listening to music all night, couldn't get this out of his mind. And he actually had a form of OCD, a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, which was in his family. And his existential anguish was huge. Now not everybody who gets existential anguish has got OCD, but it's common enough in our Christian life where we are uncertain that it makes sense. A fear of doubt, fear of the confusion of uncertainty is the basic—and I think as humans, we have a deep fear of uncertainty, because we are creatures and we're human and we're sinful. However, to spend a lot of time trying to solve it and get it fixed is actually not helpful, and this is the best time for us to connect with other people. The young man that I'm talking about is now in his forties, he's managing extremely well, he's still a pastor. And he actually says, I take some of God's bottle of grace for me every day. And it keeps my OCD at bay, and I actually can praise God.

86:21

And so if it's not resolvable, and after a while of meeting with other people and being able to be assured and to read of God's love for us, if nothing happens there, get some other wise counsel as well. And see whether there might be something else going on.

AKOS BALOGH: That's a great note to end on. We bring—we now come to the close of the webinar, so thanks everyone for being a part of this special event. And thanks especially to Paul and Carolyn, why don't we give them a virtual clap, as much as we can, wherever you are. We really appreciate your time and your wisdom, Paul and Carolyn, in joining us tonight. Thanks also to our technical experts in bringing this webinar together: Servants Studio. They're a new company that started that's there to serve the church. So if you're interested in doing these sorts of events, give me a line and I can put you on to them. So very importantly, if this webinar has triggered emotions, perhaps powerful emotions and you need to talk to someone, please go and see your GP. And in the meantime, tonight if you need to talk to someone, we can recommend talking to Lifeline. Their number is one three double one fourteen, that's one three double one fourteen. Now this webinar will be emailed out, we have recorded it and you will receive this late next week. So you'll be able to review it and see it with other people as well. But until our next webinar, thank you for joining us, and we hope you have a fruitful night.

87:53

[End of transcript.]