



## **Battling Beside Them: Ministering to Students Fighting Anxiety or Depression**

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The room was so full they were having to turn students away.

Last winter, I attended the yearly Cru winter conference in Fort Worth, TX with around 800 students. One afternoon there were multiple break out seminars students could attend.

I just happened to walk by a large conference room with a sign outside which read, “Dealing with Anxiety and Depression.” Inside the room students filled all of the chairs and floor space. Students outside wanted in, but were being redirected to other workshops.

I knew this was a growing issue in the college culture, but this was the first time I had seen it on such a large scale. When I was in college, I don’t think the room would have been half full.

When spring semester started a few weeks later, I attended a luncheon with our Dean of Students. When I told her how shocked I was to see a room overflowing with students wanting to hear more on dealing with anxiety and depression, she responded by saying that over the past two falls, they have had hundreds more emails and students calling the “hotline” dealing with these symptoms. They have had to hire additional counselors to meet the **overwhelming need**.

I also mentioned my growing concern to a Director of Student Conduct at a major university, and he believes students’ skyrocketing mental health concerns will soon be the number one crisis we have to deal with at our universities—a greater issue even than frat parties and drugs on campus! I by no means have an exhaustive answer to this complex issue, but as we face this together on our campuses I would like to pass on a few ideas I have shared with students who are battling feelings of anxiety or depression:

## God knows you intimately and has a plan for your life

A common lie students will believe is that what they are doing in life has no purpose and does not matter. They have to understand that who they are and what they are doing right now actually matters to God.

King David had every reason to be stressed out and anxious at multiple times in his life when people were trying to kill him, yet he says:

*“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

*Psalm 139:13-16*

The psalmist understood that God knew him intimately and had a plan for his life. He also understood that God was the one looking after him, and he did not have to go through life alone.

Psalm 119 is another picture of David crying out to God in his suffering. He freely approaches the Lord with his burdens, knowing his God is gracious and kind.

The 4+ hours a day students are spending looking at social media only compounds the lie that they don't matter and everyone else is doing better or looking better than they are.

Challenge them to spend less time on social media looking at what *the world is doing* and focus more on God's promises of *what He will do* in His Word. Jesus also addresses this idea in Matthew 6:25-33. He basically challenges His listeners to not be anxious about *anything* because we belong to God, and ultimately He has our back.

God is the great provider and will take care of even our most basic needs. I have been in ministry for 30 years, and I have had to trust in Him completely to supply my needs. I love to share with students how God has been faithful to provide during those 30 years!

The joy of the abundant and fulfilling life is actually in dying

German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, served his church faithfully during World War 2. One of the most famous quotes from his book, "[The Cost of Discipleship](#)" is:

*"When God calls a man, He bids him come and die."*

This idea is essential throughout the New Testament and is the foundation for following Christ. Three of the four Gospels record Jesus saying:

*"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Matthew 16:24-25. Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24.*

Living out the Christian faith is actually dying to self and living for Christ. The apostle Paul even called himself a bond servant and slave to Christ. I challenge students to visualize placing everything they worry about and stress over in their hand and then imagine opening their hand and presenting

all of it to God. As they do this I encourage them to let Him take away the things they don't need and place the things they do need into their hand.

## Dying to self literally causes us to forget ourselves

I once counseled a student who was consumed with always wondering what others thought of him. I had to be honest and tell him most people struggle with the same thing...in other words those he was worried about impressing were actually not even thinking about him but were likely thinking only of themselves!

As a student, I found when I started getting more involved in my fraternity and helping minister to my brothers, I struggled less with personal issues. I wasn't avoiding my issues, but the more I gave my time to helping minister to others, the more fulfillment I received.

In other words, the more we sit around and do nothing (or stare at our phones), the more we compare ourselves to others which often leads to anxiety.

The art of the abundant life is finding our significance, not in what we can gain for ourselves, but through the [investments we can make giving our lives away to others](#).

Tim Keller says it's not that we should think *less of ourselves* but should think about *ourselves less*. He has written a short book on this very topic entitled, "[The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness](#)." This could be a great resource for you to give to a student.

## Constantly be renewing your mind

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever*

*is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:6-8*

A few months ago, my pastor was speaking on this passage and said something I had never thought of before:

*“God is not trying to protect evil from coming to you so much as He is trying to protect your heart from going to evil things or thoughts.”*

That makes so much sense! I naturally would run towards evil actions or thoughts if it were not for God’s protection in my life. This is one of the key reasons I spend regular time in the Word and **memorizing passages** like the one above.

## Find true community

*“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.” Proverbs 18:1*

While I was in college and ministering in my fraternity, I realized very quickly I needed Christian community. I made it a must to attend at least one campus ministry meeting a week as well as attending a local church. I got in a small group with several guys from different frats who were ministering in their chapters, and this was a highlight of my week.

Just like wolves will try to get the weaker animals away from the pack so they can attack them, the enemy wants to do the same to us.

Also, the more time I spend in community with others, the more I realize I am not alone in my struggles. Most of my friends struggle with the same types of issues I do, and it has been so encouraging to see firsthand how they deal with their issues and overcome their personal hurdles.

## Counseling and medication may need to be an option

*“Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.” Deuteronomy 31:6*

Although our students have the promises of God to stand on, there may be times when a student’s mind will not be able to move off of the fear or pain

they are experiencing to focus on those truths. It is important to realize that sometimes counseling and/or medication may be the help our students need. Learn to recognize which students may need more help than you or your ministry can give them. Network through your pastor or local mental health professionals to find doctors and counselors to refer students to. Familiarize yourself with the resources available on campus and in your area to support students' mental and emotional health, and be ready to walk beside students in taking steps toward getting healthy.

Students who are struggling with anxiety or depression to the degree that they need professional help may need to step back from ministry commitments for a season. Extend grace and compassion, not confusing current inability with a lack of faithfulness.

Finally, I would encourage you to pray regularly and by name for the students you are ministering to.

Our students are in a battle bigger than they are. It's also bigger than we are. Ephesians 6 makes it clear that prayer is our most powerful offensive weapon when fighting against the schemes of the enemy.