

Reclaiming Sanity in the Midst of a Pandemic – by Dr. Laurel Shaler
Published on the American Association of Christian Counselors website

Jesus talks a lot about not being afraid. In fact, He devotes Matthew 6:25–34 to instructing us not to worry. He tells us that we don't need to worry about our lives because God will take care of all the details. He also reminds us that, even when life gets really rough, worrying does not add a single moment to our lives.

So – why do we continue to worry? More importantly, how can we get rid of this nagging worry that keeps us up all hours of the night, tossing and turning? It seems impossible to give up worry during stressful times like these. The constant news is scary and the excessive concern over the coronavirus circumstances, and our lack of control, can take hold and trap us into ruminating, or staying stuck on repetitive thoughts. It may even be that you feel like you're going insane. The reality is that worry chokes us. Worry can make us feel like we can't even breathe. In fact, Mark 4:19 says that worry chokes out the Word of God—the Truth. Jesus also said this when He taught the parable of the sower.

From a boat on the lake, Jesus was teaching a crowd standing on the shore when He began talking to them about seeds. Using a metaphor they were familiar with, He explained that when the farmer throws out seeds, there are different responses to the seed. I imagine the crowd nodding. They knew the challenges of farming. To be clear, the seed Jesus spoke of is the Word of God. For some people, Jesus explained, Satan comes and takes away the life-giving seeds of God's Word. For others, "like seed sown on rocky places" (Mark 4:16), people can hear the Word, be filled with joy, but since no root takes place, they fall away. And for some people, the Word of God is "like seed sown among thorns" (Mark 4:18) and the worries of this life choke it and make it unfruitful.

It's no coincidence that worriers feel as if they can't breathe and that many people who head to the hospital thinking they're having a heart attack are actually having a panic attack. When we worry, the Word of God cannot take root in our souls, and a life in His peace despite tribulations seems but a far-off fantasy. This anxiety triggers many other problems, including those sleepless nights and feeling like you may be off your rocker.

But we don't have to stay stuck in our suffering, even in the midst of our trials. Below are three antidotes to nagging worry and sleepless nights:

Write down your worrisome thoughts. Journaling is extremely therapeutic, and often recommended by mental health professionals. It will help you process what you are experiencing by writing out the situation you're dealing with, what you're thinking, and how you're feeling. When you can't sleep, you can take those thoughts keeping you awake and put them out of your mind onto paper, rather than continuing to keep them stuck on repeat in your brain. You can also use your journal to keep track of prayer requests and the answers to your prayers. Journaling helps us see how Jesus is present in the midst of some of life's most confusing and trying moments, and how our emotions at the time, though legitimate, did not dictate the outcome. After writing down your worrisome thoughts, spend some time reading through how God has answered some of your past fears, and pray about your current conflict as you intentionally lay the worries on Jesus.

Use Guided Imagery. As you lie in bed, close your eyes and imagine you finally went to sleep, and upon waking, you are in Israel. You're standing on the sandy shore of the Sea of Galilee, the warmth of the sun on your face. As you stand where Jesus stood, pause for a moment. What do you hear? What do you smell? Look around: what do you see? What are you thinking? You start to Jesus as He's walking toward you, His arms open wide, beckoning, waiting to wrap you in a tight embrace. "Come to me, Daughter. I will give you rest." You run to Him, sobbing, and throw yourself in His arms. Your burden begins to lift. You stare into the face of Jesus and you know—without a doubt—His great love for you. Sometimes, when we're anxious, our imagination runs away with scary thoughts and images, so this type of exercise is a way of using your imagination to bring healing, hope, and peace to your mind. This is imagination therapy! Psalm 119:15 says, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways."

Meditating on the Lord and His word, as King David described in the Psalms, simply means that we quiet our minds and souls enough to clearly hear God speaking as He gives us the rest our souls crave.

Allow Jesus to be your peace. We are designed to have peace, to be at peace, and to spread peace because Jesus did not just talk about peace; rather, Christ's very essence and character is For some who are struggling with nagging worry, as much as they want it to be the case, reading Scripture and praying for peace don't necessarily lead to peace. At least not immediately. And certainly not just by reading through the verses once or saying a quick prayer for peace. It can take much more time and effort than that. Despite tough circumstances, including the one we are all currently facing, we can embrace and take in the truth found in God's Word with an intentional deepening trust that peace can come and only comes through Jesus. Knowing this deep within us can help us relax our minds and bodies enough to actually be at peace.

I love this quote from Corrie Ten Boom: "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength." While it is tough to stop worrying, it is possible to take control of our thoughts and fears. Journaling, using guided imagery, and allowing Jesus to be your peace are just three ways you can overcome your nagging worry, and get the restful sleep you've been longing for.

As a counselor, professor, social worker, speaker, and writer, Dr. Laurel Shaler's goal is to live out the words of Isaiah 61:1-3... To proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, to release prisoners from darkness, to comfort all who mourn, and to bestow joy!

In order to help others in this way, Laurel earned her Masters in Social Work from Florida State University (and is a Licensed Social Worker) and earned her PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision from Regent University (and is a Licensed Professional Counselor and National Certified Counselor). She also holds a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Liberty University. Laurel has provided psychotherapy services to hundreds in need, many of whom were veterans of the United States Armed Forces. She is now an Associate Professor at Liberty University. She is a member of numerous counseling and social work organizations, and actively presents and publishes.