



Changing Our Story: From Germs and Giants to God

Marti Wibbels, MS, LMHC

Anxiety, part of the human condition, is related to fear, an emotional reaction to perceived danger (whether real or imagined). On the other hand, a panic attack is a sudden, unpredictable barrage of intense fear and anxiety, hitting “out of the blue.” An initial panic attack can feel so terrifying that life begins to revolve around the dread of suffering through another one—which actually increases the likelihood of experiencing additional, yet avoidable, panic attacks. “Fear overload” (perhaps from a global pandemic or social unrest) is all it takes for an initial panic attack to occur, though you probably weren’t thinking about anything fearful when symptoms began. You can reduce the intensity and length of a panic attack if you’ll simply recognize what’s happening, breathe deeply, “ground” in the present, and talk to yourself calmly: “This is a panic attack. I don’t like it; it feels awful, but it’s not going to kill me, and it’s not going to last.” When anxiety symptoms are intentionally managed as soon as they begin, a panic attack will last minutes instead of hours—and you’ll reduce further attacks’ frequency, intensity, and duration.

Symptoms of a panic attack vary—from sweating, trembling, believing you can’t breathe (feeling like you’re being smothered), a sense of choking, a pounding heart or chest pain (like a heart attack), nausea, dizziness, numbness, anxiety about going crazy or even fear of dying. **Please have a physician check medical concerns.** If you have four or more of these symptoms and have panic attacks so often you can’t function in everyday life, and/or have phobias that interfere with life, please consult a doctor or mental health professional. You’re worth getting the help you need.

In children and adolescents, anxiety can include excessive crying or irritation, returning to behaviors they’ve outgrown (like bed wetting), excessive sadness, relentless worry, unhealthy eating or sleeping habits, “acting out” behaviors like tantrums, avoiding school, difficulties with concentration, inexplicable headaches, other physical pain, nightmares, etc. Pay attention to root causes of fear and provide appropriate help. You can reassure your child that he or she is safe, you can remind your family of God’s love, and help your children “ground” in the present.

...we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Hebrews 6:18b-19a, NIV). In contrast to being *encouraged*, emphasizing fears can activate phobias, the most extreme form of fear. 19 million adults, or 8.7% of the U.S. population, experience phobias [from the Greek *phobos*, for *fear, flight or dread*]. Parents can help children manage anxiety by modeling and teaching emotional self-regulation. Listen to your children’s concerns and help them practice soothing positive self-talk (“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”) rather than avoiding triggers or focusing on fears. Help them develop healthy behaviors. Pray together. [*If your child is afraid of *someone*, pay close attention: childhood sexual abuse is rampant, and parents and guardians need to persistently protect their children.]

What stories are we telling ourselves and our families? As soon as we identify “giants” in our stories, we can shift our focus to God and His ability to defeat giants and germs. We all know the story of David: While bringing supplies to his brothers, David saw Israel’s army trembling in fear. He didn’t let their fears infect him but boldly told King Saul, “*Let no man’s courage fail because of him (Goliath). Your servant will go out and fight with this Philistine.*” Then Saul said to David, “*You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight him. For you are [only] a young man and he has been a warrior since his youth.*” But David said to Saul, “*Your servant was tending his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and attacked it and rescued the lamb from its mouth; and when it rose up against me, I seized it by its whiskers and struck and killed*

it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted and defied the armies of the living God.” (1 Samuel 17:32-36, AMP).

What stories are you telling your children? What are you telling yourself? If we let anxiety dictate what we think and feel, it will grow—becoming a debilitating emotional *giant*. Israel experienced 40 days of fear, until one person [David] trusted God to deliver them. While an army trembled in fear, David remembered God’s protection and provision for him and sheep in his care. Like David, we can put “giants” in perspective by noticing God’s presence and power. [Here’s a few ideas to get you started: God daily provides air to breathe, food to eat, and promises a future and hope [see Jeremiah 29:11]. We wash our hands to get rid of invisible germs, and we can trust God to defeat other invisible enemies like doubt and fear. *And He Himself existed and is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. [His is the controlling, cohesive force of the universe.]* (Colossians 1:17, AMP).

Doubt and fear reigned earlier in Israel’s history, too, when 40 days of checking out the promised land were followed by 40 years of crippling fear-driven delays. After twelve spies visited the land, only Joshua and Caleb believed God’s promises to conquer it. When Joshua and Caleb urged Israel not to be afraid of the people in the land they’d scouted, the people of Israel threatened to kill them with stones (read more in Numbers 14).

The Message rephrases Jesus’ promise in John 16:33: *I’ve told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I’ve conquered the world.* In Christ’s strength, we can live as “more than conquerors,” managing our emotions instead of being controlled by them.

Using the tools God provides, we can change our stories and live in hope and peace:

- ☐ Pray, believing God wants to do more than you can ask or imagine (see Ephesians 3:20).
- ☐ Be proactive: Exercise. Eat healthy foods. Expect God to work in your life!
- ☐ Listen to soothing music, thanking God for His perfect provision for all your needs.
- ☐ With children, choose age-appropriate lessons to help them experience God’s faithfulness. With young children, try the “**BE Game**,” applying Bible verses teaching what we *can* do when we’re afraid. **BE strong and courageous. BE anxious for nothing. BE of good courage. BE still and know I am God...** ETC.
- ☐ When you or your children experience emotional upheaval, live in this moment, “grounding” yourself via:
Physical grounding: practice abdominal breathing, remembering to breathe deeply whenever anxiety hits. Notice where you are; press your hands together (gently touch your child); wiggle your feet, be present.
Mental grounding: think about relaxing places you’ve gone and visualize them when you feel afraid. Jesus teaches us how to enjoy His Father’s creation: *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? See how the lilies of the field grow* (see Matthew 6:25-34).
Emotional (and mental) grounding: spend time daily in God’s Word, training your mind and heart to trust God, choosing to fall in love with the One who loves you perfectly! Consider Proverbs 14:30.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), anxiety disorders affect 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older, 18.1% of the population. Anxiety disorders can develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics [Yale researchers identified a genetic component to anxiety known as the “rumination gene”], brain chemistry, personality, and traumatic life events. Regardless of its source, we can learn to manage anxiety instead of being dominated by it. Just as we accept professional help for complex medical concerns, we can accept help for emotional concerns—enjoying being fully alive, while recognizing and managing anxiety that’s part of our fallen human condition. Instead of talking about “what ifs” and “what’s scary today,” we can discover examples of God’s unfailing strength and hope throughout God’s love letter to us, the Bible.

If you’re experiencing unmanageable anxiety, please seek professional help. The South Florida Association of Christian Counselors (sfacconline.org) offers a list of Christian counselors in our area.