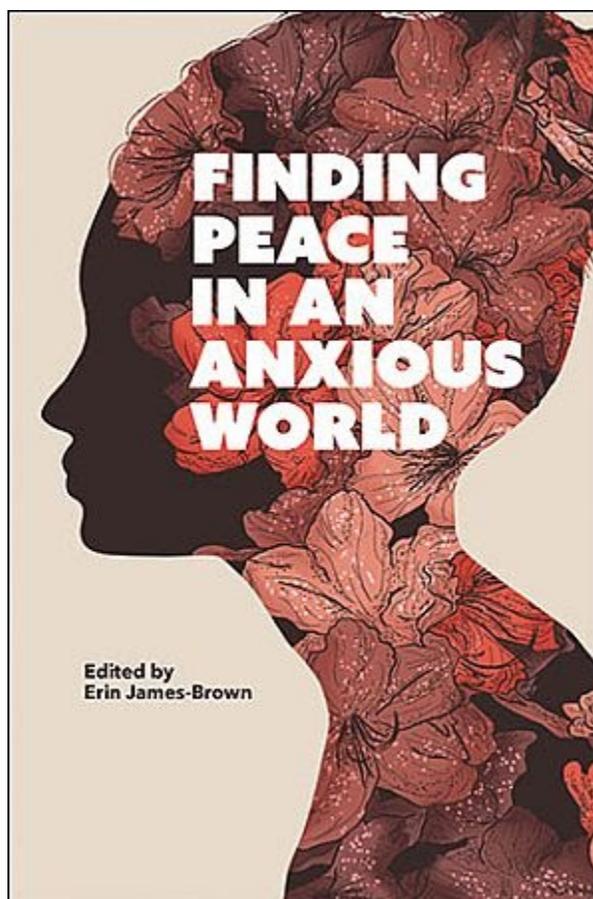


FINDING PEACE IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

adapted from Chapter 1: "Serenity" by Hannah Kardon, Edited by Erin James-Brown
<https://www.amazon.com/Finding-Peace-Anxious-Edited-James-Brown-ebook/dp/B088JK9JSY>



We are going to take 2 minutes to think back on this past week. Take time to sit and reflect, and let us find something to be thankful for. Did you notice anything in nature? Did you notice anything extraordinary? Did you notice the ordinary? We can be thankful for even the smallest things.

What are you thankful for upon remembering God's work in your life this week?

- Type your answer in the chat, but do not hit send yet. We will wait to press enter at the same time and read our responses together.

Introduction

A calm sea and a sandy beach. Laughing friends sharing a memory. The center of a labyrinth, reached after a steady, prayerful walk. "Serenity" conjures up different images for each of us. But for all, the granting of serenity is the granting of some measure of peace. The words "serenity" originally comes from the Latin *serenus*, meaning "clear or without clouds." No wonder we so often associate serenity with nature and stillness.

Serenity is a state that knows no disturbance, brooks no intrusion, and offers a deep oneness with both oneself and the creation of the universe.

What is an image you visualize or a moment from your own life that comes to mind when you think of the word "serenity"?

What is your definition of the word serenity? Is it different from the one shared above?

As God's peace, "which surpasses all understanding," serenity is something most of us have experienced for at least a moment or two somewhere along the line, but have rarely managed to hold on to. There has been some moment or phase of our life in which we knew peace, contentment, and the alignment of our inner spirit and outer circumstance that is serenity, but it has never lasted as long as we would like.

When was the last time you experienced peace or serenity?

A Foundation of Peace in the Midst of Anxiety

Anxiety is not pleasant, although it can be useful. The hyperarousal to environment and possible outcomes that anxiety creates in us can be very helpful when we are in short-term situations of real danger and need our wits and our worst cases around us to keep us from harm. In moderation, worry helps ensure we plan for the future and don't trip through life unconscious of the consequences. But too often today, our bodies and minds are responding to everyday life as if we are being chased by a bear, to the benefit of no one and at a great additional suffering to ourselves.

Think back to an anxious moment you had this week.

- What caused your anxiety?
- What were the physical manifestations of your anxiety (what did you notice happening in your body)?

To achieve this heightening of defenses, anxiety shuts down important parts of our awareness. When we are anxious, we become less aware of others and less able to see situations from their perspectives, causing more isolation from the very people in our community who might help us address our distress. Anxiety that is repeatedly experienced, or experienced at length, can be painful. As a result, we turn to a variety of methods to ease it, some of which are less healthy than others. Used as desperate distractions, any one of these habits serve as a numbing agent. It distracts us from the discomfort of our anxiety for a while, but is unhelpful in finding peace. Serenity will still elude us, and in some ways when we numb our need for it, it only moves further away.

What are some examples of things you do to help yourself when you are feeling anxious?

- Do you try to distract or "numb" yourself? Are these things healthy or unhealthy? Do they help you find lasting peace?

Proverbs offers wisdom as a friend and its words can tether us in the midst of daily life and guide our steps and ease our hearts. Read Proverbs 3:21-26, which shares advice from a parent speaking to a child.

(NRSV) The True Security

- ²¹ My child, do not let these escape from your sight:
 keep sound wisdom and prudence,
²² and they will be life for your soul
 and adornment for your neck.
²³ Then you will walk on your way securely
 and your foot will not stumble.
²⁴ If you sit down, you will not be afraid;
 when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
²⁵ Do not be afraid of sudden panic,
 or of the storm that strikes the wicked;
²⁶ for the Lord will be your confidence
 and will keep your foot from being caught.

This perfectly describes the anxiety-free state of true serenity. When we go to bed, our sleep is "sweet." We are free from fear. We have no need to anticipate disaster. Many of us desire wisdom, but struggle to see it manifested in our hearts and actions. Wisdom and understanding are not qualities you are born with; they grow in us. And the growth of wisdom begins with the knowledge that God loves us and desires for us to never be snared. This knowledge of God's love can be found in prayer, quiet times, and intimacy with scripture. It also is often found in our companions and a community that reflects to us the nature of God's unconditional love. This is part of why the context of this passage -- a parent speaking to a child -- is so important to understanding the wisdom that it offers.

To find wisdom and serenity, we need not just have a relationship with God, but also a relationship with others in which we can learn, practice, test ideas, and experience offering and receiving care. Helpfully, this community of care will also help us get at the root of one of the reasons anxiety may plague us in the twenty-first century. Jean Twenge, a psychological researcher, has noted that a primary factor in the increase of anxiety and depression may be the sharp decrease in the forms of human connection we experience in daily life.

What stood out to you in the verse or reading above?

Another factor named as a cause of the escalation of anxiety in modern life is the increase in choice of all kinds. When we convince ourselves that the trick to a good life is making all the right choices, we spend far too much time either weighing possible consequences of choices yet to be made, ignoring good things in front of us while we worry about whether we could be finding a better option, or shaming or victim-blaming ourselves or others when things go wrong because we assume failures are entirely borne of choice and not chance.

Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths".

True judgment isn't becoming so excellent at making decisions that we can always trust in our competency. It is instead trusting in God so much that our perspective widens, our discretion is honed, and we are accompanied by so much love and trust that wise living comes as a sort of lovely byproduct. The judgment and discretion we are called to cultivate include the qualities of trust, seeing the broadness of the world and the presence of God in all things. Rather than contributing to our anxiety, trusting in God can help relieve us of it by helping us to see the bigger picture of God's whole creation and connect us to our place in the cosmos and how we are knitted into God's good work -- even when some small part of our experience may not go how we want it to. We need to develop intimacy with and trust in God, find community with others, and increase our capacity for judgment by allowing ourselves to see God's bigger picture.

Increasing Serenity

- *Therapy* can help you identify patterns that lead to anxiety and develop coping mechanisms to handle your anxiety in new ways
- *Breathing Exercises* simultaneously focus body, mind and spirit. Like counting to ten when you're angry, focusing on breath when you're anxious can interrupt a cycle of unhelpful thoughts and allow your mind to turn towards other things.
- *Prayer* works in much the same way to interrupt anxious states. It has the added benefit of leading to the intimacy with God that can then cultivate wisdom, the quality that ultimately can help us deepen our capacity for serenity throughout our lives.

In his meditation on prayer, Henri Nouwen notes that in the modern church we have often reduced prayer to acts of "interesting words or pious emotions," intellectualizing a practice that in fact invites us to be transformed in the fullness of our being. When we invite a prayerful connection to God of this kind -- full, heart-led, bodily- experienced, exposing the truth of ourselves to the truth of God's being -- into our lives, anxiety gives way to the serenity that is present in the nature of God. In Nouwen's words, "prayer of the heart" offers a conviction of God's rest and love as a counterpoint to the cult of productivity and busyness that often overwhelms us. He writes, "... to the degree that this truth [of the merciful God] anchors itself in our heart, we will be less distracted... we will be restful even in the midst of a restless existence." From prayer comes intimacy, from intimacy with God wisdom and trust, and from abiding in that wisdom we live into serenity.

This, in the end, is what wisdom is. Wisdom is creating a lifelong process that leads to greater peace of mind and peace of heart. Increasing wisdom increases our capacity for serenity. This will involve many techniques, many relationships, many practices and habits, all working in concert together to bring you closer to God and closer to the wisdom that trust in God can offer. In each chapter of this book we will offer one specifically helpful spiritual practice that we would encourage you to try to see if any measure of serenity follows.

What stood out to you from the reading above?

Spiritual Practice Idea: The Examen

In each chapter of this book we will offer one specifically helpful spiritual practice that we would encourage you to try to see if any measure of serenity follows.

The Examen helps us to become ever more present to the now-moment in which we live and what it might have to offer us. To do the Examen, sit down at the end of each day and think through what has happened, looking for places where you particularly felt the presence or absence of God. The hope in engaging in this kind of daily thoughtful and prayerful review is that you might become more sensitive to where the Holy Spirit is moving in your life and to your own spiritual ups and downs. Naming the places in which you are close to God (or close to the person you want to be) is a way to notice patterns and see if those moments can become more frequent and more joyful. Naming places of absence is a way to invite God into them and see what other patterns (like anxiety) might be leading you away from God's peace.

Many find it helpful to establish a rhythm each day of inviting God's presence, expressing thanks to God, reviewing the day, and then finishing with some sort of response to close that day and prepare your heart for the next one. The whole process can take anything from ten minutes to one hour.

1. *Invite God in* (with a short prayer, mantra, or repetition of a phrase, ex. "be still and know that I am God")
2. *Gratitude*: Ask yourself what in this day and in this moment are you thankful for?
3. *Review*. Pairs of questions are most helpful for identifying patterns that can lead to fruitful examination and reflection (ex. "Where did I find God today? / When were times I knew peace?" and "Where did I feel God's absence? / When were times I was out of peace?")
4. *In God's Hands*: Close by offering yourself the opportunity to start over again the next day, not dwelling on what you have already considered and learned from during this day. Avoid being stuck in past guilt or future anticipation. Pray for it all to be put in God's hands and for you to be released from it. Pair this with any physical or verbal act that helps you let things go. And pray that wisdom and serenity may begin to follow.

Questions

- What are you thankful for upon remembering God's work in your life?
- Upon reflection, where did you find God? Where did you feel God's absence?
- When were times you knew peace? When were times you were out of peace?
- Thinking about your next week/day, where do you hope to experience God's peace?
- How are you being led to share God's peace with others? The world?