Stress in the Storm: Jesus, The Calming One

Introduce:

SLIDE - Today is designed to start or continue a conversation for you and your trusted friends.

SLIDE – The Storm – type in one-word descriptors re COVID-19

Yes, and many more I’m sure

Focus today is on anxiety although you may need to access other resources

A disclaimer: in one hour it is impossible to cover such a complex topic as anxiety and depression. I will focus today on dealing with these issues in the church setting.

There is no judgement in this room today. We simply come as friends seeking to better understand our challenges, and to help each other out.

I come to you as a fellow sufferer. Members of my family and I deal with anxiety and other mental health issues and have taken medication at times to help relieve the symptoms.

SLIDE - For those sceptics in the crowd, please be aware of the reality of these symptoms. Just because you can’t relate, does not mean they don’t exist. There is always a need for understanding and grace.

SLIDE - In many ways, anxiety was created by God to be an important part of the human condition and at times can be quite helpful. READ the verse

SLIDE - Without anxiety we would be eaten by bears, run over by cars, or suffer other dangers in the world. Anxiety is a survival feature of our life. It helps you get going on that exam coming up or finish the project with its deadlines. When the car is low on gas, that anxiety we feel, helps us to stop and get gas. Anxiety can be a warning siren for many harmful times in our lives.

Depression, too has useful features. Without depression, we would not know how to grieve our losses, how to feel sorrow, or how to create down times in our lives for rest and recuperation. Without depression, we would not have much of the finest art, music, and writing we all enjoy.

Depression is an opportunity to dive into the human character of textured feelings, and colors many of our most enjoyable experiences. Depression takes us to the very questions of life. Without some depression, we would be robotic creatures, unable to feel and understand ourselves, or have the ability to empathize with others.

Often, mental health challenges, are character builders, intricately connected to our faith, and our growth as disciples of Jesus. Paul said*, When I am weak, then I am strong!* He meant that!Weakness has a way of bringing us closer to God and attracts others to God.

SLIDE - But at times, our mental health challenges become too much and our lives suffer.

1. Suicide and self-harm–the rates are alarming.
2. A lost faith in God, others, and the church.
3. Discouragement & isolation

Stay close to those who love you and are trusted. Church is an amazing resource during these times – many people do not have this kind of structure -

SLIDE **- Think of your brain.** It is very complex and has many functions. We have an “anxious brain” which is designed to keep us safe from biological fears – fight or flight. We also have a logical brain (pre-frontal cortex) which allows us to stop and decide to make rational choices after weighing options.

**Job of anxiety is protection.** The anxious brain) scans the environment for danger and when it sees danger it gets our body ready for action (biological dangers – bears, bad people – fight of flight). Plasticity in our brain – the ability of the brain to re-create itself.

*Our goal in anxiety is to access our logical brain when the anxiety part of our brain is in charge.* Anxiety tells us the **worst-case** scenariosto help us avoid.

**The Irony of Anxiety**: anxiety is thinking it is protecting us from our worst psychological fears, but it is really making our fears become a reality.

EXAMPLE: We may perceive threat in a social situation. Our anxiety tells us to withdraw so we do and that a social interaction may reveal that we are not good enough to be with these people. As we withdraw socially, others perceive that we just don't like them and they may withdraw and we find ourselves isolated. Our worst fear of others not like us is realized.

EXAMPLE: Or we're afraid to raise our hand in class to ask a question in order not to look stupid. We sit through the class, not understanding and our lack of knowledge increases which adds to our insecurity at not understanding the material. The test comes along and we fail it. Our worst fear is confirmed...we're just not that “smart.”

It is *ironic* that what we think we are doing to protect ourselves, we do the opposite, making our fears a reality.

SLIDE **- The Paradox of Anxiety**: The more we do what we want anxiety to do, the stronger it becomes and the more anxiety we have. Are you listening to your “anxious brain” or your “smart brain”?

EXAMPLE: This is about avoidance. *By avoiding our anxiety we strengthen our anxiety*. A paradox is a situation when you do the opposite of what seems to be right. Our body is saying to us, run, escape. The paradox is that the more you run and escape, the worse things go. We can strengthen (or disciple ourselves) to the very thing that is causing us pain.

We want to face our fears, challenge their pretenses, overcome them. ***Our job is to master anxiety, not avoid it.*** By facing our fears, we reduce the anxiety and anxious things actually become easier as time goes by.

SLIDE - We can’t control every aspect of our challenges but there are ways to lessen the negative effects of them.

*I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can****adjust****my sails to always reach my destination.*

SLIDE - The GOAL is to have the logical brain win out, so in order: **calming and coping.**

First, we need to get the body calm in order to switch from the anxiety part of the brain to the logical, rational part.

Some people do only this and never seem to get to the source of their anxiety and deal with it. But calming is a vital need to know how to access our smart brain and then make rational choices.

**Jesus wrote on the ground.**

**Body –**

* breathing-in through the nose and out the mouth (like blowing on soup),
* Stretching-tightening up muscles for a minute and then relaxing

**Mind –**

* Mindfulness – learning to control your mind and be in the present; count to ten
* Grounding – reading, count lines in your palm, time and day of the week,
* Exercise of Five: 5 facts, 4 things you see, 3 things you touch, 2 things you hear, 1 thing that makes you happy
* Humor – helps us with perspective

**Senses** – music, lotions, scent

**Release** – putting your feelings into something constructive

* journaling – what I don’t journal, I take out on my family,
* venting –
* creative work – write or produce music

When you practice, you are ready for the crisis = So, calming before coping

SLIDE **Coping Strategies: Question and Challenge your anxiety**

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* **Argue** – acknowledge/talk back; between your anxious brain and your smart brain:

Anxious brain: *Tim don’t get on that airplane, it might crash*

Smart Brain: *What are the odds?*

Anxious brain: *Yea, but maybe you’ll beat the odds*

Smart brain: *let’s list some reasons that reveal risk/reward*

* **Consequences** – risk/reward; What rewards outweigh the risks? Why am I flying? Is there purpose that overrides my anxiety?

If I raise my hand in class, will that be more beneficial than not knowing the material?

Google stats or review past events. Are you thinking in the extremes?

* **Negotiate Exposure** – little bit and then increase. Exposure therapy by trained therapist. Snake? Fake snake, then little snake, then bigger…

**Courage** – appeal to your morals, goals, and motivations. Use goals and motivations to determine current behavior

SLIDE - One of my favorite authors, Ed Welch said: *The best stories are not those of victory over struggles but of a stubborn faith in the midst of them.*

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Finally - The **role of a meaningful community** in our lives in our mental health challenges.

We have become a part of a remarkable community – the church. A community like none other in the world. It is unique and yet multi-faceted. While full of imperfect people, the church is also the body of our perfect and loving Lord, Jesus. There is no community like the Lord’s church.

You are accepted, loved, cared for and have a purpose. Practice your safe and confidential trusted friends to lean on in difficult times.

More on this idea when I visit San Diego

SLIDE

**Other helpful coping strategies include**:

* Have a healthy sense of exercising, sleep, and nutrition – consider eliminating caffeine, energy drinks, or unneeded stress; Use meditation, breath counting, and other centering techniques
* Use a Thought Record – Google “thought record.”
* Look at your environment: be aware of the 24/7 news cycle. Learn to limit what you see. Control what you can control.
* Writing in a journal helps. Someone told me that journaling takes the anxiety out of my head – and “What I ***don’t*** journal I take out on my family.”
* Keep others involved in your life.
* Nurture a Dream. Have a dream for God – something to pull us through and gives us a reason to change.

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Think resources. Resources help us make ongoing progress – ***progress and not perfection***

In conclusion, if you are dealing with a mental health issue do the following:

1. Recognize and own the problem
2. Create a social network around you for support
3. Educate and advocate for yourself
4. Develop and execute a self-help plan with short- and long-term goals