

SESSION 1:
LIFE IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

LOOK UP: LARGE GROUP TEACHING GUIDE

BIG IDEA

In this session, students will understand that anxiety exists and begin to recognize some of its symptoms. Culture, technology, academic achievement, competition, self-comparison—all of these add to the pressure that builds around us and inside of us. When life starts to feel unsteady, we can look up, look inside, and look around to see God at work in the midst of our anxiety.

FOR THIS SESSION, YOU'LL NEED:

- A sheet of blank paper and pen for each student
- Session 1 slides and a way to project them
- Access to a clock or timer
- **Session 1 video: *Life in an anxious world*** and a means to play it, if you are using the videos included with this curriculum during your ***Look up*** teaching time
- If you're doing small groups during this gathering, be sure to check the "You'll need" list at the top of the ***Look inside*** small group discussion guide

WHERE IS GOD WHEN I FEEL ANXIOUS?



SLIDE: WHERE IS GOD WHEN I FEEL ANXIOUS?

*If you are using the videos included with this curriculum in your **Look up** teaching time, show **Session 1 video: Life in an anxious world** here to open your teaching session.*

Begin by explaining that for the next four weeks (or the next four times that you gather) we'll be looking at life in our anxious world. As you saw in the video, anxiety is something that exists in the world around us. It's something we ALL experience. And because our anxious feelings can, at times, have the potential to grow and cause a lot of disruption in our lives, anxiety is something that we all need to talk about. Throughout this series we'll be opening up the Bible to watch God at work in anxious stories, learning a spiritual practice that can help us when we're stressed, and building relationships with people we can turn to when we need to talk.

Say: **Let's start by taking a look at a story in the Bible that you might have heard before. But today we're going to look at it from a different perspective.**

Invite a student to read Mark 6:45–51 out loud.



SLIDE: MARK 6:45-51

Right then, Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake, toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying good-bye to them, Jesus went up onto a mountain to pray. Evening came and the boat was in the middle of the lake, but he was alone on the land. He saw his disciples struggling. They were trying to row forward, but the wind was blowing against them. Very early in the morning, he came to them, walking on the lake. He intended to pass by them. When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost and they screamed. Seeing him was terrifying to all of them. Just then he spoke to them, “Be encouraged! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.” He got into the boat, and the wind settled down. His disciples were so baffled they were beside themselves.

Ask: **What do you notice that's unusual about Jesus' words or actions?**



SLIDE: WHAT'S UNUSUAL ABOUT JESUS' WORDS OR ACTIONS?

Give students a moment to call out their observations. When they're finished, point out that in this story, Jesus' walk is steady. But when he encounters his disciples, he doesn't walk past and keep going. He stops and gets in the wobbly boat.

JESUS STEPS INTO THE UNSTEADY BOAT.



SLIDE: JESUS STEPS INTO THE UNSTEADY BOAT.

Say: **There are many stories in the Bible where someone shows signs that they're feeling anxious. What examples can you think of?**

Allow students a moment or two to respond. If needed, share a few answers of your own to get them started (*for example: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Naomi, David, Esther, etc.*)

Say: **Even for the people in today's story, it wasn't the first time these same disciples found themselves in a heated situation. Let's look at a story from a couple of chapters earlier in Mark.**



SLIDE: MARK 4:35-41

Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along.

Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?"

He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, "Silence! Be still!" The wind settled down and there was a great calm. Jesus asked them, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?"

Overcome with awe, they said to each other, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!"

MARK 4:35-41

Read the passage out loud. Then compare the story you've just looked at in Mark 6 with Mark 4:35–41. Once again, Jesus is *in* the unsteady boat with his disciples. In both stories, we see Jesus speaking or acting from a place of calm stillness but entering in to the anxious situation of his friends.

Say: **Jesus doesn't leave them alone in their anxiety. He joins them. He's *with* them. What do you notice about their response?**

Students may point out that the disciples didn't really seem to get it. They were in awe, and misunderstood who Jesus was and what he was doing. But in both cases, the water and wind were calmed. Their storms ceased, and now Jesus was with them in their questions and confusion.

WHAT'S MAKING YOUR BOAT FEEL UNSTEADY?



SLIDE: WHAT'S MAKING YOUR BOAT FEEL UNSTEADY LATELY?

Hand out sheets of paper and a pen to each student.

Ask: **What's making your boat feel unsteady lately? Maybe it's school, sports or activities you're involved in, friendships, a relationship, or something at home. On your paper, take two minutes to write as many things you can think of that are causing you to feel stressed out. We won't ask you to share your list with the group if you don't want to, so be honest with yourself. Ready? Set? Go.**

Ever been given a series of quick-fire questions and challenged to answer with the first word that comes to mind? When we're given a very brief window of time to think about a question, sometimes our answers are the most honest. Give students just two minutes to journal, and don't ask them to share their responses with the group at this time. They'll have a chance to open up about what they wish to later in the session.

Say: **We all feel anxious sometimes. That knot in your stomach or nagging fear when you face a challenge is your body's natural response to stress or pressure. Anxiety is a feeling that everyone, at every age, experiences.**

Anxiety can feel like a real problem—and sometimes it is. But here's the important thing to remember: Anxiety exists to tell us something important. Anxiety might be telling us something is wrong or that we're in danger. It might be telling us something about our bodies, our relationships, or about basic needs like food and sleep. The key is that we *learn to listen*.

Point out that in the Mark passages you looked at earlier, Jesus was present in moments when people were feeling most anxious, and showed them a healthier way to respond. As we look at characters throughout the Bible, we can see that while God doesn't usually place the anxiety on people's shoulders, God is present and stays with them in their most anxious moments. Often anxiety seems to be a tool that points people towards growth.

WHAT IS ANXIETY TELLING YOU?

Say: **Look through the list you made earlier. I'm going to put two minutes on the clock once again. This time, look over the stress points you wrote down and ask yourself two questions: *Where is God at work in the midst of your anxiety?* and *What might God—or anxiety—be trying to tell you?***



SLIDE: WHERE IS GOD AT WORK IN THE MIDST OF MY ANXIETY? WHAT MIGHT GOD—OR ANXIETY—BE TRYING TO TELL ME ABOUT ... (2 SLIDES)

... MY SCHEDULE AND THE PRESSURE I'M UNDER?

... TIMES WHEN I'M BEYOND MY COMFORT ZONE?

... WHETHER I'M EATING AND SLEEPING ENOUGH?

... WHETHER I'M PUTTING MYSELF IN DANGEROUS SITUATIONS?

As you did with the previous question, give just two minutes to answer. Resist the urge to ask students to share their answers out loud. They'll have a chance to open up later in their small group, or with a trusted adult later in the week.

Say: **When anxiety takes control, it can make us feel unsteady. We try different things to make that unsteady feeling go away. These are called “coping strategies.” Some coping strategies might numb our feelings—like alcohol, drugs, and self-harm—but cause even more problems.**



SLIDE: COPING STRATEGIES = EVERYTHING WE DO TO TRY TO GET RID OF, REDUCE, OR TOLERATE STRESS.

Can you give an example of a situation you were in where you turned to unhealthy coping strategies to escape an anxious situation? Whether your strategy was one of the three listed above or something else that formed a pattern that was difficult to break, sharing a bit of your own experience can help emphasize the message that we all struggle at times, and we can all overcome our struggles.

Say: **Over time, if we ignore anxiety it can cause other struggles like depression. But the good news is that we can work with anxiety in healthier ways than just ignoring it or numbing it. We don't have to follow it down a dangerous path. There are healthy coping strategies that help us step out of our anxiousness and learn to see it differently.**



SLIDE: ANXIETY DOESN'T HAVE TO TAKE US DOWN A DANGEROUS PATH.

Tell your students about a healthy habit you've formed to help you maintain balance and respond objectively when anxiety shows up in your life. Some examples might include a prayer practice, time in silence, exercising, talking with a friend or mentor, going to therapy—or a combination of those things.

Say: **When we listen to what our anxiety is trying to tell us, we can ...**

- Learn about who we are, what situations make us feel unsteady, and what healthy coping strategies work for us.
- Use our power to make changes when situations in our life cause us to feel tense.
- Recognize where God is present and at work in our rocking boat.
- Practice listening to God so that we can experience peace and share that peace with others.

Kind of like we might cultivate a garden to grow what we want, we can cultivate practices to grow peace in our lives by helping us walk through this anxious world and recognize God at our side—in our unsteady boat.

Say: Think back to the two stories we've read from the Bible in this session. You can even consider other stories about Jesus you've read or heard. Notice Jesus rarely traveled alone. In forming his group, the twelve disciples and the women who traveled with them, he created a close circle who supported one another even long after he was gone.

Over the next few weeks we're going to talk about anxiety and depression, because they are important things for every person to get comfortable talking about. When we start to feel anxious or sad, there are three important things we can do. We can:



SLIDE: LOOK UP. LOOK INSIDE. LOOK AROUND.

LOOK UP. We pause in the midst of our anxious thoughts to look up and seek God's wisdom through the Bible, and talk with others who are walking in faith.

LOOK INSIDE. We think and reflect on where God is at work inside us.

LOOK AROUND. We take a good look at our own anxious world so that we can make peace and share it.

As we *look up* together, I'm going to teach you some steps to build yourself a circle of care like Jesus did—a close circle of friends you can trust and talk to when you're feeling unsteady.

LEADER TIP

The Daily Replay is based on the Ignatian Prayer of Examen, and adapted for teenagers. Find out more about this prayer practice at www.ignatianspirituality.com.

I'm also going to give you some time and some tools to look inward. In small groups we'll explore a prayer called the "Daily Replay"—a simple prayer practice with a few steps you follow every day, or even in those moments where it feels like anxiety is taking over, to help you spot God at work. I'm also going to challenge you to look around you when you go home and when you go to school. Each week you'll get a take-home sheet with some questions and a challenge to try.

If needed, emphasize to students the truth that we get out of life what we put into it. Teenagers aren't always interested in taking home a worksheet or thinking about what they learned in youth group during the weekdays. But if they want to see change in their life, they have to be willing to put in the work. And when it comes to their mental health, the work is certainly worth it.

LEADER TIP



It's a good idea to assume that not every young person has key people in their life they can call upon. Find suggestions on how you can connect every student with a trusted adult in ***How to lead this curriculum***, found in the ***Leaders Start Here*** folder included with this curriculum.

Close in prayer, referring to the image of Jesus in the boat with us, steadyng our boat, calming the wind and waves, sticking with us through our anxiety.

*Divide into small groups at this point, or use the **Session 1 Look inside** material whenever your ministry meets in small groups this week.*