



# Q & A



## What's Wrong with a Little Worry?

*About her new book Amy Simpson says, "I hope Anxious will encourage readers to recognize worry in their own lives, in disguises they haven't recognized before, and to experience a change in perspective that allows them to live more courageously. I believe worry distracts many of us from living boldly and wisely. This isn't about mustering up courage because we believe in ourselves or we're willing to take a risk. It's about being strong and courageous because of who God is, and because God is with us. I would love to see more Christians living with that kind of courage." See below more of Amy's thoughts on anxiety, worry, and how it relates to our faith in God.*

Amy Simpson is a passionate leader and communicator who loves to encourage Christ's church and its people to discern and fulfill their calling in this life. Amy is a former publishing executive who currently serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership and senior editor of *Leadership Journal*. Her background includes a unique career path through both the editorial and business sides of publishing, including for-profit and nonprofit organizational leadership.

She has spent nearly two decades as an award-winning writer, authoring numerous resources for Christian ministry, including *Diving Deep: Experiencing Jesus Through Spiritual Disciplines*, *In the Word: Bible Study Basics for Youth Ministry*, *Into the Word: How to Get the Most from Your Bible*, and her newest book,

**What drove you to write a book about worry? Doesn't writing about all the stressors we have in this world just make us have more anxiety?**

**Amy Simpson:** I wanted to write a book about worry because I wanted to express something I was learning and being challenged by, which I thought might help and challenge others too. I honestly didn't think I was a "worrier" because we tend to define that word as someone who worries excessively, and most of us don't think our worry is excessive; we think it's justified and necessary, at least most of the time. But God began to open my eyes to the habit of worry – and just how much it controlled me – through a series of challenging circumstances. The culmination of this lesson came when my husband and I were dealing with some serious financial stress and at the same time felt strongly, over a period of time, that I should resign my position as a publishing executive and devote a substantial portion of my time to writing. We knew this was not an economically viable idea. During times of global economic crisis, people who are supporting families shouldn't quit good jobs to become self-employed Christian writers; this is basic common sense. On top of that common sense, we were saddled with the mortgage on a second house a thousand miles away, which we had not been able to sell because the housing market had fallen apart right as we made a cross-country move. Our future was uncertain and our financial situation was precarious. Clearly, it made no sense for us to make a risky change in my employment status. But no matter how many times we told ourselves that, this sense of calling did not go away.

As I was wrestling through the "what ifs" and the fears that were keeping me from obeying God, I kept asking God for reassurance, something that would give me a sense that everything would be okay. And I spent a lot of time asking him to take away this stressful situation, to bring stability to our circumstances. But instead of changing our circumstances, and instead of giving me the concrete answers I was looking for – what I was really longing for was a peek at the future – he just taught me more about himself. Everywhere I looked, in my own personal study, in my reading, in sermons, in conversations with others, I was constantly confronted with what God says about himself and with how much he desires for us to trust him. I just could not escape it, and I began to see my worries and anxieties against a backdrop of this marvelous God whose strength, wisdom, and plans dwarf our own. I saw how my "what ifs" reveal my appalling lack of trust not only that God will take care of me,

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*Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission.* She has published articles with *Christianity Today*, *Leadership Journal*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *Christian Singles*, *Group* magazine, *Relevant*, *Her.meneutics*, and others.

Amy holds an English degree from Trinity International University and an MBA from the University of Colorado. She is deeply in love with her incredible husband, Trevor, and extremely proud of her two fantastic kids. She lives with these wonderful people in Illinois, where she is committed to using the gifts God has given her in work that changes the world.

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but that God's plans are better than mine, even if my worst fears are realized. He asks us to trust him that what we can see is not all there is, and that what he offers is far greater than what we think we want and need.

Eventually, in the midst of this situation, my husband and I both realized that God was calling us to take a big step of faith and to trust in him to care for us, even if it meant losing much of what we thought we couldn't stand to lose. So I resigned from my job and committed to do what I believed God was asking me to do. About a week later, our second house went under contract. We lost everything we had put into it, but we were able to walk away and be free of that burden. And while this career move has turned out to mean a lot of sacrifice, God has provided everything we need and more. The last couple of years have given us repeated opportunities to choose faith over worry and to see God take care of us.

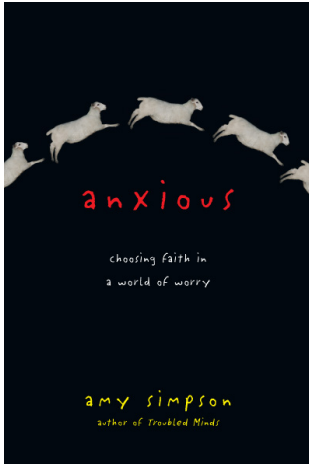
Interestingly, I think writing the book helped me become a less anxious person. Even though I was writing about the many reasons we worry, there's something about writing that gives an opportunity for distance and objectivity that's hard to achieve in other activities. So I was able to sit and really think about some of the things that worry me and realize that when they're put in perspective, they're not as big as they seem. And I realized that I often worry about other things only because someone is actively encouraging me to feel worried about them, not because they're important to me or because worrying will help at all. If my worry causes me to go out and spend money I wouldn't otherwise spend, or to turn my focus to something I wouldn't otherwise be distracted by, someone else is profiting from my worry. I was also helped by the process of thinking through some of the mental and spiritual exercises I wrote about in the book. The writing process gave me some new tools to use in choosing faith rather than worry.

## **Did your research and writing for *Troubled Minds* in any way influence how *Anxious* came about?**

**Amy:** Yes, although *Troubled Minds* didn't give me the idea for *Anxious*. The ideas developed simultaneously, and I was scribbling down notes for *Anxious* the whole time I was writing *Troubled Minds*. On the surface, I think *Troubled Minds* helped me learn some things that I used in writing *Anxious*; for example, what anxiety disorders are and thinking about the distinctions between anxiety, fear, and worry, which I described in *Anxious*. I think *Troubled Minds* also helped me write with more sensitivity toward people who do have anxiety disorders—I don't want *Anxious* to feel like a judgment of that. But on a deeper level, the experience of writing *Troubled Minds* was one big act of faith and courage, so I was working out some of the themes of *Anxious* in my own life and spirit as I wrote *Troubled Minds*. I wrote *Troubled Minds* right after I left my executive position, and I was going through the related major life transition and dealing with all the uncertainties that came with it. Writing that book also required me to lean into my trust in God while sharing some of my family's story and revisiting some painful memories.



# Q & A



*Anxious: Choosing Faith in a World of Worry*  
Available October 2014  
\$15, 192 pages, paperback  
978-0-8308-4314-5

**In the introduction you write, “This book is not for ‘worriers.’ It’s not written to shame people who have anxiety disorders and who often hide in fear that others will judge them for their lack of control over anxious thoughts and feelings and the physical symptoms that threaten to overwhelm them.” Why is that distinction important?**

**Amy:** It’s important because I don’t want people with anxiety disorders, and people who struggle to get their anxiety under control, to feel judged or condemned by what I’ve written. I’ve spent a lot of time, words and emotional energy trying to fight the stigma attached to mental illness, particularly in the church. People with mental illness and psychiatric disorders often feel condemned and ashamed, and the last thing I want to do is pile on. Anxiety disorders are often misunderstood as just “excessive worry,” as if people are choosing to indulge the habit of worry more than they should and the solution is to just stop it. For people with anxiety disorders, worry may not be any more habitual than it is for their next-door neighbors; their bodies and minds may be simply unable to turn off that anxious response that God built into us as a gift to keep us safe. There’s no reason to feel ashamed of a runaway biological process like that. The solution is in retraining the brain to respond in a healthier way to stimuli, often through therapy, and for many people in taking medication at least for the short term. I don’t want anyone to think that *Anxious* is a substitute for receiving that necessary treatment.

I’ve written *Anxious* for people who have a choice, as most of us do, and who choose to respond to fear with worry – as most of us do. The more we indulge in worry, the more we may increase our chances of developing an anxiety disorder, but such a disorder is not the marker for when worry becomes a problem in a person’s life. Worry is a problem whenever it is present in our lives; it’s not something that’s okay for me and not okay for my friend whose body can’t turn off the anxiety response without medication and therapy.

**How do you battle worry on a daily basis?**

**Amy:** I do need to battle worry on a daily basis. The experiences of seeing how prevalent worry is in my life, then writing about it, have made me very conscious of this ongoing battle. Sometimes I try to address worry by doing something: relaxing, taking a break, praying, exercising, talking to a friend. But as I wrote about in *Anxious*, and as Jesus taught when he was on earth, our behavior reflects what we have in our hearts and minds. The key to real behavior change is change in the way we think. So when I find myself worrying, I try to shift my focus and reorient myself around what I believe is true about God. I check my attitude toward the future: Am I trying to see something I don’t have the ability to see? I check my attitude toward possessions and people: Am I trying to hang onto something that really isn’t mine? I try to pull back to a bigger-picture perspective: How important is this really? Am I focused on what matters to God in this situation? These changes in thinking can cause changes in my behavior and can help me to stop worrying.



**You touch on the idea that if we aren't worrying, than we aren't being good citizens. Can you explain that a bit further?**

**Amy:** Yes, I believe our culture expects worry as a sign that we are responsible and engaged in our world. As much as we value the opportunity to relax, cut loose, take some time off, our society is very suspicious of people who are at peace in everyday life. I think there are a couple of reasons for that. One, misery loves company, so worried people want everyone else to worry alongside them. Also, being at peace is different from disengaging with the world, but we often see the two as the same thing. Disengaging is something we're allowed to do for a few days or maybe a week at a time, when only we're on vacation. Responsible people don't remain disengaged. So when peace is misinterpreted as disengagement, it's seen as a sign that people have abdicated their responsibility to the rest of the world. As long as people are worried, it's taken as an indication that they're properly engaged and pulling their own weight.

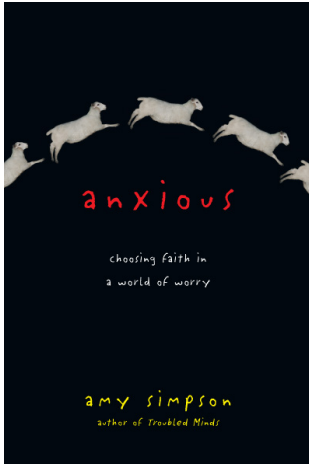
**Would you recommend just stepping back from media, both television and online, to avoid worrying about the news, causes and other things outside of your control?**

**Amy:** In general, I don't think it's necessary or wise for us to ignore what's happening in the world around us. And choosing faith in a world of worry does not require that we hide away from the world or stop caring about it. Those actions may soothe us, but they aren't the same as living by faith.

But sometimes it is a good idea to step back or even turn away for a time. It's okay to decide we have had enough. Knowing what is happening in the world doesn't mean we have to watch it nonstop. Being informed doesn't require knowing all the details about horrific events. There are limits to what we can process, limits to what is healthy for us. And it's important to remember that the information we receive about news and causes is usually filtered through the perspectives of people who have a financial stake in keeping us watching. Sometimes in our quest for more information, we aren't really learning anything new; we're just passive participants in a discussion loop that overrides our own voices and doesn't allow us to process events privately and prayerfully. This is a great recipe for feeding worry.



# BOOK EXCERPT



*Anxious: Choosing Faith in a World of Worry*  
Available October 2014  
\$15, 192 pages, paperback  
978-0-8308-4314-5

**“You probably spend a lot of time and energy worrying—but you haven’t admitted it yet.”**

## Should You Be Worried?

Well, if you’re like me, and in this regard I feel confident that you are, you have many reasons to worry. And you probably spend a lot of time and energy worrying—but you haven’t admitted it yet. This book is written for people like you: people who aren’t convinced worry is a problem in their lives. People who don’t even know they’re imprisoned and can’t envision freedom. So let me start by saying you are worried. And now I’ll tell you why.

As I write this, I’m keeping one eye on my backyard, where a small lake has formed after two days of relentless and sometimes violent storms. I’m praying for the rain to stop and the waters to recede. I’m thinking about my friends and neighbors who have basements full of water and boats floating down their suburban streets, and I’m worrying that my house will flood as well. Ironically, just a few months ago, I was worried about a drought that threatened not only the local area but most of the nation’s agriculture.

A quick glance at the news will remind me of a thousand other, bigger reasons to worry. Terrorism can and does strike anywhere, at any time. We face a growing global nuclear threat. Climate change, which might have something to do with the droughts and floods literally in my own backyard, is making our natural world less predictable—and we don’t know where it will lead us. Unemployment and economic recession threaten the well-being of so many families. Public rhetoric is brash and angry. Religions and worldviews clash bitterly. Diseases spread globally. Animals face extinction while non-native species thrive in places they never should have gone to live.

The news is bleeding with stories of mass murder, gun violence, genocide, war, rape, suicide and other forms of violence. The World Health Organization tells us that fifteen thousand people die each day from injuries of all kinds. That’s one person every five seconds. In many parts of the world, gender-based discrimination wages war against women and girls. And my own preteen and teenage daughters, like all American kids their age, stand at the edge of a world brimming with more choices than they can possibly make on their own, a world that places very few limits on what they can do but would happily consume them—a world that is staged to lure them into self-destruction, addiction, and lies that promise greater freedom among the yawning, gleaming, pretty teeth of cruel traps.

And if you can’t see enough reasons to worry, consider what you can’t see.

Consider the microscopic world of bacteria and antibiotics.

In this age of relatively easy access to health care (compared with generations before), our liberal use of antibiotics is working against us. When we treat disease with antibiotics, a few

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bacteria sometimes survive the treatment. For example, the antibiotic or the dosage may not be strong enough to wipe out the entire infection. Sometimes a single bacterium manages to repel the treatment. And often patients fail to finish all their prescribed medication once they feel better. In such cases, the bacteria learn how to fight and survive antibiotic attack, and they develop resistance to those antibiotics. They become harder (or even impossible) to contain and kill with the weapons we have. Those strong bacteria multiply and create difficult and expensive treatment challenges.

“If you aren’t worried, you are either 1) dead, 2) comatose or 3) seriously out of step with our culture.”

Development of antibiotics (following Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin in 1928) dramatically altered the course of human history. Millions of lives have been saved through the use of such drugs, and diseases that once terrorized our ancestors (such as scarlet fever and pneumonia) now constitute moderate inconveniences for most people with access to good medical care and early intervention, requiring only a quick visit to the doctor, ten days of treatment and a few days in bed. Antibiotics are awesome when they kill bacteria. But as with humans, that which doesn’t kill bacteria makes it stronger – and that’s when antibiotics hurt us. So every time someone uses antibiotics unnecessarily, or fails to finish the entire course of medication, that person is contributing to a larger health crisis that potentially could render our most potent weapon against disease ineffective.

The problem doesn’t stop there. In our efforts to be clean, we may be encouraging disease. Antibacterial hand soap and household cleaners, like low doses of antibiotics, actually encourage the growth of strains of bacteria that not only resist cleaning, but may cause antibiotic-resistant diseases. Along with the bad bacteria, antibacterial hand soap can remove good bacteria from our hands – bacteria that help us fight disease. Cleaners of all kinds teach bacteria how to fight back and stay alive on surfaces we then use for cooking and eating. And when these soaps and cleaners are washed into the water supply and that water is used for agriculture, they increase the risk that our food supply is contaminated with more bacteria that have learned how to survive our efforts to kill them. Ironically, scientists say there is no real benefit to using products like antibacterial hand soap in most homes. They don’t keep us healthier or cleaner than regular soap, which does a good job of removing bacteria so we actually don’t need to try to kill them. Yet many homes are routinely stocked with antibacterial products.

Basically, the harder we try to be clean and healthy, the more we risk a bacteria-based global health crisis, the very thing we’re trying to avoid.

So do we have reason to worry? You bet we do – about all this and more. And our culture tells us worrying is not only justified; it’s the right thing to do. If you aren’t worried, you are either 1) dead, 2) comatose or 3) seriously out of step with our culture.

But while our culture tells us one thing, God tells us another. He tells us not to worry. And yes, he is fully aware of all the reasons we think we should worry. He tells us to expend our



# BOOK EXCERPT

energy on exercising faith in him and his character. Embracing faith is the one human choice God values most—above showing kindness, trying to be good, and following all the rules. It is the one thing without which he tells us “it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6).

Unless you’re a tremendously unique person, you worry. And because of the environment we live in, you may not even recognize it. Worry is a rebellious choice we usually don’t take very seriously. But it is serious. Willful worry amounts to rejection of God’s character and damages our capacity for the life he calls us to. A close look at Scripture shows us worry has always been a frequent point of correction between God and his people because it undermines that very faith he requires and rewards. Worry is still chronically undermining the faith and courage of Christians in this age. It is rooted in a theological misunderstanding of who God is, the nature of life in this world, and our place in the universe. Overcoming worry starts not with a list of therapeutic steps, but with a reorientation around the truth about God, who is not threatened by what scares us.

– Adapted from chapter one, “Frantic”