

# 10 Things You Can Do Right Now to Reduce Anxiety in Your Congregation

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The effects of anxiety on human thinking and behavior are both observable and predictable. In his book *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* Peter Steinke describes the impact of anxiety in three significant ways: Anxiety has a **repressive** effect, an **infectious** effect, and a **reactive** effect.

Anxiety *represses* human functioning by decreasing our capacity to learn, replacing our curiosity with a demand for certainty, and stiffening our positions over and against one another.

Anxiety is also *contagious*. It connects people. Let one or two people unleash their anxiety and it won't be long before it has a ripple effect on the congregation.

Finally, anxiety has a *reactive* effect. People oversimplify, become indecisive and unable to react.

So, what do you do if you are the leader of a congregation that is acting out of its anxiety, rather than acting in service to its mission? Here are ten relatively simple steps that you can begin today to restore your congregation's capacity to learn, its curiosity about itself, and its ability to reflect.

**1. Listen.** Perhaps the most important thing that a leader can do is to actively listen to how people express their angst. Healthy people are often able to manage their own reactivity when someone creates a safe container to hold the anxiety for them as they observe it. **Active listening** (where you offer feedback for both the content and the emotion that you are hearing) provides a reflective container for the healthy person to restore equilibrium. *Do not just try to talk them out of anxiety or explain it away, diminish, belittle as if anxiety is unreasonable. This erodes trust Do not ignore their anxiety thinking it will just go away. Active listening: I hear you saying . . . Is this accurate? Ask questions.*

**2. Remind people of the congregation's mission/vision.** Anxiety can make people react in ways that pull people into a short term focus when making decisions. You can reintroduce a proactive mindset by inviting people to focus on the bigger picture. For example, if the congregation has a clearly articulated mission statement you can use it to remind people that the challenge at hand is only one part of a larger picture. You can remind them that they already know the shape of the larger picture. If your congregation doesn't have a clearly articulated mission/vision statement, you can invite people to make some new claims about mission and vision by inviting their reflection on the following questions: *Focus on who they are as people of God and what God is calling them to. mission statement in worship.*

- Who are we?
- To whom will we be neighbor?
- What is God calling us to do or become in this moment?

**3. Set a clear and attainable goal and then support and encourage leaders as they set about accomplishing that goal.** Anxious people need to be reminded of their capacity for problem solving. You can help them reclaim a sense of power by setting a small, doable goal that moves them in a positive direction. This can demonstrate their ability to respond to circumstances change the environment. The goal that you set doesn't need to solve an entire problem. It does not need to address the root cause of a problem. It just needs to represent a small step in the right direction. Taking joint action and creating momentum of some kind will help to dissipate the indecisiveness of anxiety. Example: Right now, let's see if we can figure out how to get the Saturday lunch program for the homeless staffed for the coming month. *Break down tasks into manageable chunks. Problem-solving.*

**4. Talk about what hasn't changed and what isn't going to change.** When the world seems to be falling apart it is easy to be convinced that congregational life as we have known it is disappearing. This is the time to remind people that there are some things that will never change and some decision points the congregation will never entertain. Reminding people of where some of the known boundaries are will help them to recover their equilibrium.

**5. Invite people to tell stories about a previous proud moment in the life of the congregation.** Invite them to tell stories about a time when they felt that the congregation embodied everything it was supposed to be. Ask them to reflect upon the essence of that story and the values and principles that the story demonstrates. Finally, ask the storyteller(s) to imagine how we might bring the best lessons of that story to bear upon the present circumstance. Storytelling is a remarkable way to remind people of who they are when they are acting out of their best selves. *Nurture their confidence by reminding them of past demonstrations of their capability - storytelling. Time-lines. Mission studies.*

**6. Weave the core values of the church into your everyday conversation.** Continual referral to the core values of the congregation helps people to remember what solid ground feels like. If you don't have a clearly articulated and agreed upon set of core values, you can discern the values fairly easily. Simply reflect upon the favorite congregational stories that the generations of the congregation tell one another. What lessons do these stories teach? Go back to those favorite stories and apply their teachable moments to the present crisis. One word of caution: make certain that the core values you lift up are real and enacted core values, not simply espoused values that people rarely live into. *Continual refocus on essentials. - worship, prayer, newsletter, reports, committee mtg.*

**7. Invite people to describe the current situation and to describe the ideal outcome to the situation.** Help people explore any framing of the problem that indicates a sense of "stuckness." Invite them to imagine a new way of talking about the challenges that lie ahead. Invite people to frame these challenge in language that invites growth and discovery. Take give this new language a "trial run" and see how people react. *Engage their imagination to lift them above anxiety. Dream.. even guided meditation.*

**8. Find a biblical metaphor or story that speaks to the essential struggle of the moment.** Teach that story in a variety of contexts to illustrate how the congregation might find deeper meaning and purpose in its circumstance. Is your congregation in the midst of wilderness wandering? Is it in a David and Goliath moment? Does this experience feel like Noah sending out yet another dove over the watery expanse, or is it more like Rahab sending a tentative rope over the wall of the city to release a harbored spy? Find a story that exemplifies the courage and honor that you want your congregation to exhibit in the moment and use it liberally. *the power of Biblical story.*

**9. Invite your leaders into prayer and/or other forms of spiritual discipline.** You may or may not personally believe that prayer has the power to change circumstances and outcomes. However, prayer undeniably works in the management of group anxiety. When you invite your leadership group to pray (before, during, or after decision making) the act of prayer itself creates sacred space for anxiety to dissipate. Praying space is breathing space, and breathing space reduces reactivity. *Advent or Lenten special services*

**10. Take active steps to manage your own anxiety and to remain non-anxious in your own leadership.** Remind yourself of who you are, what you stand for and what your limits are. If you find that you are simply too anxious as a leader to engage in any of the previous steps, then perhaps you'll want to get some outside help and support to shore up your own leadership presence. *model healthy behavior. Interim pastor oath: \*By taking responsibility for myself I can give back to the people what they can be responsible for - which can lead to their greater maturity, empowerment, leadership, gifts \*By modeling non-anxious behavior, this allows me and others to act reasonably, creatively, imaginatively \*By acting out of confidence in self, God, others, I am not then acting out of fear or need*