



FAITH IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

A 4-WEEK HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

Faith in an Anxious World; A 4-Week High School Curriculum

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WHY THIS STUDY?

Today's young people are anxious and depressed.

We don't need to look far to see that our teenagers are hurting.

Anxiety and depression in particular are on the rise, dominating the ways young people talk about their generation. Seventy percent of teenagers in one recent study consider anxiety and depression a “major problem” among their generation.¹ What's more, popular media often elevate anxiety and depression in destructive ways. One report found that in the month following the launch of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (which culminates in a graphic suicide reenactment), teen suicide increased by an alarming rate of nearly 30 percent, a *19-year high*.²

While adults in teenagers' lives are becoming more aware of these problems, we often aren't sure how to respond. Youth ministry leaders, parents, and mentors need practical, accessible, and trusted resources that bring greater freedom and health to the teenagers entrusted to our care.

A research-based resource for everyday leaders and parents

While parents need to have more open conversations about mental health concerns, we sense that youth ministry leaders are probably the most open and most ready to talk about mental health with students. In recent focus groups our team conducted with youth leaders like you, they told us they want curriculum to use with students to talk about issues more directly. We created *Faith in an Anxious World* to help you make mental health a part of the discipleship conversation, and to help parents of your students do the same.

We care a lot about this topic both professionally and personally. Kara, Brad, and Rachel have all spent years doing youth ministry, and Kara and Brad are raising teenagers in their homes. We asked Aaron to join us as a trained clinical psychologist who regularly works with and researches young people. Aaron was part of our *Growing Young* research team, as well as a contributor to a study teaching high-risk teenagers to practice mindfulness techniques, so he was a natural fit for this project.

Our goal in choosing Gospel passages throughout this curriculum is for students to build out their understanding of Christ and his words, so that he becomes for them not simply a teacher and miracle worker, but a living, breathing example of the wholeness we can experience in our everyday life with God, the Spirit we can embody, and the relational community in which we can find belonging.

What's more, we've partnered with mental health practitioners throughout the curriculum development process, and we interviewed several experts as part of a podcast series especially for parents that corresponds to the student curriculum. Please share the ***Faith in an Anxious World Parenting Podcast*** with your parents and other leaders throughout the weeks to come. Find it at fulleryouthinstitute.org/anxiousworld or wherever you listen to podcasts.

As a result, we hope you will feel empowered with language and tools to respond to young people in your care, and that teen anxiety and depression can become part of conversations about discipleship and holistic faithful living in your ministry.

ENDNOTES

¹ Karen Zraick, "Teenagers Say Depression and Anxiety Are Major Issues Among Their Peers," *The New York Times Online*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/health/teenage-depression-statistics.html>, and the referenced Pew Research Center study, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, "Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers," Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

² Note that these findings were released two years after the premiere of the series' first season. In response, the producers released an amended version of the scene in question. Matthew S. Schwartz, "Teen Suicide Spiked After Debut Of Netflix's '13 Reasons Why,' Study Says," *NPR Online*, Apr. 30, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/30/718529255/teen-suicide-spiked-after-debut-of-netflixs-13-reasons-why-report-says>.

BEFORE YOU START

This series has the potential to get heavy. You're probably already preparing for that since you decided to address anxiety head-on. While we have worked hard to set you up well for discussions that stay positive and productive, it's likely there are students in your ministry who will feel the weight of this content more than others. They might be struggling with anxiety or depression right now, or these experiences might be part of their story.

What's more, you or other adult leaders might live with anxiety or depression. While there will be some appropriate times to share about some of these experiences, we encourage you to be sure you have the support you need already in place before launching into these waters with students. That might mean time with a therapist, spiritual director, or good friend. It may mean practicing the kinds of breathing and prayer exercises we recommend in this curriculum. Whatever it looks like for you and your team to be healthy so you can lead healthily, invest up front and throughout the series.

While you and your leaders already know the young people and families in your ministry well, it's a good idea to be ready in case students choose to open up over the coming weeks about issues and concerns you weren't aware of. Here are a few other ways you'll want to prepare in advance:

- Build a shortlist of local therapists who specialize in working with teenagers. It's ideal to have a few different options on hand, including options available for families who may struggle to afford mental health care. Parents typically don't know where to turn when they need more help, so be ready with recommendations.
- Get familiar with your church or ministry's safety and reporting policies (including what is stipulated in your insurance policy), as well as state mandated reporting laws (which change from state to state). It's imperative for your team to know who is a mandated reporter and in what circumstances.
- Create a plan for how you or other adults on your team will respond to specific scenarios that might come up during this series, including students who need professional referrals, disclose past or current abuse, share about self-harm, or share about suicidal ideation or attempts.
- Add the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK, [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org))**, or another preferred helpline, to your phone and ask other leaders to do the same.

LEADER TIP

Our expert advisors recommend the Steve Fund Crisis Text Line (text STEVE to **741741**, or see www.stevelfund.org/crisistextline) as an outstanding service dedicated to the mental health and emotional well-being of students of color. Consider the specific needs of young people in your church or community and choose the service that is best for your ministry context.

HOW TO LEAD THIS CURRICULUM

Each session is designed to take about one hour. We know ministries use time differently and work within different schedules, so please adjust everything as needed for your unique context. You'll notice each session includes a small group guide. You may want to use this content in breakout groups during your primary meeting time or during outside small group gatherings if you already have those in place. Be sure to have an adult leading each breakout or small group, and we recommend that you send them each week's **small group discussion guide** in advance of the meeting time.

STUDY FORMAT

We have designed this series to follow the same pattern within each group session:

LOOK UP:

Large group teaching which roots the conversation in faith and looks to Scripture. This segment includes a brief video discussion starter. Our video producer, Nica Halula, and a talented crew captured interviews with young people about their experiences of anxiety in order to create candid, thoughtful short videos you can show to your students.

Options for using these videos:

- Show the video when prompted near the opening of each session as an engaging way to introduce ideas and concepts to students. Because they'll be hearing perspectives from other young people, they might feel less alone in their experiences.
- Show the video at the beginning of small group time to recap your large group teaching theme and spark discussion. Seeing someone else model sharing about hard subjects is often the best way to get students talking.
- Use it in both contexts, especially if your small groups meet on a separate day from the large group.

LOOK INSIDE:

Small group discussion to reflect, process, and ask questions about how the teaching and Scripture speak to each student's unique situation. This section of the curriculum also introduces a spiritual practice we're calling the "Daily Replay."

The Daily Replay is based on the Ignatian Prayer of Examen and adapted for teenagers. We've included this practice because mental health experts recommend regular reflection (often linked with practices of mindfulness) as a productive way for most people to manage normal levels of anxiety. The Christian psychologists we consulted often pointed to the Examen as a helpful tool from our faith tradition that roots mindfulness in prayer. If you're unfamiliar with the Examen, you can find out more about this prayer practice at ignatianspirituality.com. And if you find apps helpful in reminding and guiding you through your own practice of prayer, search your app store for Ignatian Spirituality's "[Reimagining the Examen](#)," or "[Examen](#)" from FULLER studio.

LOOK AROUND:

Students incorporate the teaching and practices you've explored into daily life. Via weekly take-home sheets, the student is prompted to observe and reflect, to talk with someone they trust, and to try the Daily Replay on their own.

Here are a few important notes as you prepare to lead the large and small group sessions:

- We wrote each **Look Up** large group teaching session like a script. **The words in bold are for you to say out loud.** Feel free to adapt them to sound like your own words. In some cases, you might find the wording about tricky subjects (like suicide prevention) helpful to use verbatim.
- Each large group session and small group guide include **Leader Tip** sidebars with extra ideas or things to look out for.
- Throughout this curriculum you'll be given opportunity to share some of your own experiences with anxiety, and talk about how you learned to ask for help. As we mentioned earlier in this section, it's important for you to be in a healthy place before you share with students. If you're not sure whether your story is appropriate, try sharing it with another leader or your supervisor first to get their perspective. *Never share in a way that makes students feel responsible to care for you or watch out for your well-being. This is an inappropriate burden to place on teenagers.*
- If you don't have a helpful story to share, consider inviting a volunteer leader, a trusted member of the congregation, or a local therapist to do so. Make sure to prepare them beforehand with these same guidelines, and meet ahead of time to hear their story directly.
- Depending on the size of your group, feel free to make the large group times more or less discussion-oriented. We've written each guide with a discussion format in mind, but if that's simply not possible given your context, it should be easy to adapt.

LEADER TIP

Your curriculum includes an additional video, titled **The Daily Replay**. Use it in your small groups or with parents to inspire and encourage them to try this helpful prayer practice.

TIPS FOR MEANINGFUL SMALL GROUPS

If you don't already have small groups in place in your ministry, consider creating consistent breakout groups for this series. To be most effective, organize groups of students who have already built up some relationship and trust with one another. If your students haven't spent much time in small groups before, consider dividing them by grade, gender, or other peer groupings, and partner them with an adult leader they know and trust. You may even consider spending a week or two just solidifying small group relationships before you begin this curriculum. The more comfortable students feel in their group, the more helpful the small group time will be.

If at all possible, try to keep small groups to a maximum of 6–8 teenagers. Your students are more likely to share openly and build a circle of trust if they're consistently meeting with the same small group leader each week.

When it's time for discussion, **establish some clear boundaries** for all small groups, such as:

- Be respectful when others are sharing. Only one person will speak at a time. Everyone will have an opportunity to share, but anyone can pass on a question.
- Ever been asked to keep a secret for a friend, and then realized you shouldn't have promised to keep the secret because you're worried about your friend? This group is a place to be courageous in sharing, but we are also going to protect everyone in the group from having to hold those kinds of secret burdens. If anyone is worried for themselves or someone else, it's important to talk to a leader or trusted adult about it. In this group we will not place the burden of secrecy on someone else when it involves someone's safety.
- At the same time, we *do* want this group to be a place where each person feels they can open up and be honest. Although it may be tempting to talk with friends at school or in youth group about stories and feelings shared here, let's agree that whatever is said in our small group stays in the group.
- Everyone needs to know that if the leader feels that anyone is at risk of being harmed, harming themselves, or harming someone else, then that leader *cannot* keep that information within the small group. (You may wish to offer a quick summary of the safety policy set by your insurance provider, church or ministry, or state mandatory reporting laws. Teenagers should know the systems set up to protect them and expect adults to abide by those systems.)

The subject matter of each week's **Look up** large group teaching session may bring up some worries or concerns from students who are experiencing unhealthy levels of anxiety. Give them time to talk if they wish, but be aware of the level of comfort and ability to show confidentiality displayed by other members of the small group. When possible, draw the conversation back to the spiritual practice that, over time, is going to help students learn to navigate daily stress for themselves. If it seems that a student needs to do more talking than time allows, set a date and time to follow up with the student during the week and invite your ministry supervisor and, ideally, their parent to join the conversation.

Help your students build themselves a “circle” of trusted adults they can call on when they need to talk about how they feel.

Each week you'll invite your students to have an honest conversation with a trusted adult in their life. This could be the same adult weekly, or if the student is comfortable, they can grow a wider net by connecting with a different trusted adult from week to week. *The wider a student's circle, the more people they will have to turn to in moments of crisis.*

Although the curriculum gives students suggestions about who to meet with (a trusted adult, a family member they'd like to learn from, a parent, etc.), we can't assume that every young person already knows adults they can call on. Consider compiling a list of trusted adults within your congregation (youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, pastoral caregivers, grandparents, or others) to offer students needing help connecting with an adult who can listen and spend time with them. Make sure that the people on your list are background-checked and vetted according to your church or organizational policies, and communicate your expectations on setting healthy boundaries (including whether adults need to be the same gender as students, appropriate times and places to meet, and when adults should voice concerns to you or another leader) both to adults and students.

FINALLY, PRAY.

You know this, but we're reminding you all the same. Pray for this series.

- Pray for each session and the specific conversations it will create.
- Pray for leaders who will be circling with students in small groups.
- Pray for parents to have courageous conversations with their kids about tough topics.
- Pray for the adults who will say “yes” to listening to teenagers and sharing some of their own journey in return.
- And most of all, pray for your students. Pray that the Spirit would open them to the ways you will be talking together about anxiety and how to face it healthily and hopefully. Pray that the words of Jesus in Scripture would both comfort and challenge them. Pray that God would work transformation in whatever ways are needed.

Our team is praying for you as we write this, and will keep you in prayer as you lead. We are so grateful to be part of your ministry.

Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, Rachel Dodd, Aaron Rosales, and the FYI Team

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