



How to Manage Parental Anxiety When Caring for Your Child's Mental Health

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If you're a parent caring for a child with mental health struggles, you already know what parental anxiety feels like in your body.

Your chest tightens when your phone rings. You toss and turn with long, restless nights spent worrying about whether your son or daughter is safe. You are all too familiar with the shaky, nervous energy that settles in after a crisis and won't loosen its grip.

On top of the struggles, you can feel isolated. When people talk about mental health for parents, they rarely mean parents like you who are caring for a child with a serious diagnosis or substance use disorder, who wonder whether the next phone call will bring another crisis.

As a licensed clinical social worker who has walked alongside hundreds of parents and caregivers through their child's mental health challenges, I want you to understand that what you're feeling is normal. Loving your child deeply and feeling overwhelmed at the same time is not a contradiction. It's what parents do. We love so fiercely that we absorb the weight of our child's pain, and that weight has consequences.

While it can feel debilitating at times, there is hope. Over and over, in my work with families, I've seen that parental anxiety doesn't have to run the show. There are ways to understand what's happening inside you, challenge the thoughts that make things harder, and find real relief. It's not by pretending that it isn't hard, but by learning to see things more clearly.

Whether your child is 17 or 37, whether they're living with depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, or other mental health challenges, the parental stress you carry is real. Managing your own anxiety isn't selfish. It's one of the most loving things you can do for your family.

The Hidden Beliefs That Fuel Your Anxiety

Anxiety often runs deeper than the current crisis. Yes, the situation with your child is genuinely painful. But underneath the surface, many parents carry beliefs about themselves that make the anxiety more difficult than it needs to be.

These are core beliefs, and most of us picked them up early in life. A coach who said something careless. A parent who was critical in a moment that stuck. These are messages from childhood that anchored themselves deep inside and never quite let go.

In my work, the three most common categories I see are:

1. **Beliefs about helplessness.** Thoughts like "I can't cope," "I'm a failure," or "I'm not good enough." When you carry these, struggles with your child's mental illness confirm what you already feared about yourself. You might freeze, avoid, or feel your anxiety spike because the situation feels like proof that you really can't handle this.
2. **Beliefs about being unlovable.** Thoughts like "I'll always be rejected," "people don't really want me around," or "I'm not worthy of love." When your child says hurtful things during a manic episode or pushes you away, these beliefs make the pain cut deeper. You might overcompensate, trying desperately to earn love you already deserve, or you might withdraw to protect yourself from more rejection.
3. **Beliefs about worthlessness.** Thoughts like "I'm a bad person" or "I deserve what's happening to me." These beliefs pile shame on top of an already painful situation and leave you feeling like you have no right to ask for help.

Most of us have carried unhelpful beliefs, and they're not true. They're old tapes, playing in the background without our permission. Sometimes these beliefs grew out of very real experiences, such as trauma, repeated crises with your child, past church hurt, or even systemic pressures like financial strain and lack of access to care. Naming that reality matters, and it is one more reason to treat yourself with gentleness as you notice what you are carrying.

How to Start Noticing What's Really Going On

The single best tool to combat these false narratives is awareness. In clinical terms, it's called metacognition, which is just a fancy way of saying "thinking about your thinking."

When something happens with your child, whether it's a relapse, a crisis, or just a hard conversation, your brain doesn't just react to the event. It filters everything through those core beliefs first. If you're not aware of that process, you end up feeling like the anxiety is about the situation when it's actually being amplified by something much older.

Anxiety itself can have many causes, including biology, trauma, chronic stress, and more, but becoming aware of how your beliefs and thoughts feed that anxiety is one powerful lever God can use as part of your healing.

Try this simple exercise:

The next time you feel that wave of anxiety rising, stop and ask yourself three questions:

1. **What am I believing about myself right now?** Maybe it's "I can't do anything right" or "If I'm not in control, something terrible will happen."
2. **Because I believe that, how am I feeling?** Anxious, helpless, ashamed, panicked?
3. **Because I feel that way, how am I acting?** Am I withdrawing? Avoiding? Am I trying to control the outcome? Am I snapping at people I love?

When you can see that chain from belief to feeling to behavior, you've already started to break its grip. Instead of reacting, you're watching yourself from the outside, curious instead of consumed. That small shift helps you to feel you have choices and are more capable of coping in a healthy way.

Many of the tools in this article come from what clinicians call cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and metacognitive approaches. These are evidence-based treatments that help people notice their thoughts, challenge unhelpful patterns, and respond in healthier ways. For many parents, God uses these practical skills, along with prayer and community, as part of the healing process.

Replacing Old Tapes with What's True

Awareness is the starting point, but don't stop there. Once you've identified a belief that's driving your anxiety, the next step is to ask if that belief is actually true.

The question is whether there's solid evidence for the belief, or whether you've been carrying someone else's careless words for decades.

Take catastrophizing as an example. You get a call in the middle of the night, and your first thought is, "This is the worst possible news." The feelings of anxiety follow. Your body responds as if the worst has already happened. Your heart races, your mind spirals, and by the time you answer the phone, you're already in full crisis mode.

But what if you paused and asked, on a scale of zero to ten, how likely is it that the worst-case scenario is actually happening? If the answer is a one or a two, then the anxiety you're feeling is out of proportion to the situation. It's being driven by a pattern of thinking, not by reality. Your belief about the situation is not fully accurate.

Faith can become a real anchor for parents, children, and adolescents. Scripture speaks directly to the beliefs that fuel anxiety. If you believe you're helpless, the Bible says you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. If you believe you're unlovable, recall that Christ's love is unconditional and unearned. If you believe you're worthless, remember that you are a child of God with dignity and value that no one can take away, regardless of performance.

This is so much deeper than a throwaway spiritual platitude. When parents begin to replace those old, false beliefs with biblical truth about who they actually are, their anxiety decreases. And, they're more able to support their child.

Practical Ways to Manage Anxiety Day by Day

Knowing the theory is helpful, but when your chest is tight after a difficult conversation with your adult child, you need tools you can reach for in the moment.

Here are a few simple ways to practice these truths when anxiety shows up in everyday life:

- **Talk to yourself like you'd talk to a friend.** Ask yourself: what would I say to someone I love unconditionally who came to me with this exact situation? If a close friend told you they felt like a failure as a parent, you wouldn't pile on. You'd say something comforting like, "You're doing the best you can. Take it one step at a time. I'm here with you." Give yourself that same compassion. The harsh way you talk to yourself is adding unnecessary suffering on top of real pain.
- **Put truth where you can see it.** Write down a verse or a statement that counters your false core belief and put it where you'll see it every day. Post it on your bathroom mirror, in your car, as your phone's screensaver, or on the refrigerator. [Psalm 139](#) reminds us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. [Romans 8](#) tells us that nothing can separate us from God's love. When the old tapes start to play, having visible reminders can interrupt the loop.
- **Separate pain from unnecessary suffering.** The situation with your child may be genuinely painful. That pain is real, and it deserves to be acknowledged. But when you start spiraling into "*I should have done more*" or "*It shouldn't be this way*" or "*I'm a terrible parent*" you may be adding layers of suffering that don't have to be there. Learning to recognize the difference between the pain of the situation and the suffering you're encountering through your thoughts can bring your anxiety from a ten down to a two.
- **Build in practices that calm your body.** A few ideas include deep breathing, prayer, worship music, a walk outside, and exercise. Your body stores anxiety, and it needs physical ways to release it. Find what works for you, whether that's sitting quietly with Scripture, putting on a worship song that speaks truth, or going for a ten-minute walk when the tension builds. These aren't luxuries. They are part of how you stay available for the people you love.

- **Let safe people speak truth to you.** Community matters, but not just any community. You need people you trust, people whose words you can actually receive. Words that are edifying. Be intentional about who you let in. Choose people who bring compassion without judgment.

It's Okay to Need More Support

While these tools can make a real difference, I also want to be honest that sometimes parental anxiety reaches a level where self-awareness and spiritual practices aren't enough on their own. If you're unable to sleep for days at a time, if your anxiety is keeping you from functioning, or if you're coping in ways that worry you, talking to a mental health professional is a sign of strength, not weakness.

A good therapist can help you do the deeper work of identifying those core beliefs, understanding where they came from, challenging them, and reframing your thinking with biblical anchors of truth. I've watched this process change families because discovery leads to recovery. You discover what's been driving your anxiety so that you can make different choices going forward.

If your faith community is part of your support system, a healthcare professional who understands your values can help you integrate clinical tools with your spiritual life. You don't have to choose between therapy and faith. They can and often do work well together.

You're Not Broken. You're Growing.

There is no shame when managing parental anxiety, especially when you're carrying the burden of a child with mental health challenges. We all carry beliefs and patterns that shape how we respond to difficult situations.

The process of growing and becoming more aware and choosing differently doesn't happen overnight. The Bible calls it sanctification. Scripture is honest that life in a fallen world often includes ongoing suffering, even when circumstances do not quickly change. Yet in the middle of that reality, God walks with us and patiently shapes us to look more like Christ. Replacing old tapes that have been playing for years takes time, willingness, and practice. Some days it will feel mechanical to remind yourself of what's true. That's okay. Keep going.

Your child's mental health condition is part of your family's story, but it doesn't define you or your worth as a parent. You are loved. You have value. You are not alone.

If you're a parent or caregiver carrying this weight, we invite you to the [community of parents at Hope for Brighter Tomorrows](#). It's a space where other parents who truly understand what you're

going through can walk alongside you. There is no judgment or pressure. Just people who get it, because they've been there too.

Whenever you're ready, there's a place for you here.

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you are concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

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