

WHITE WING

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MESSENGER

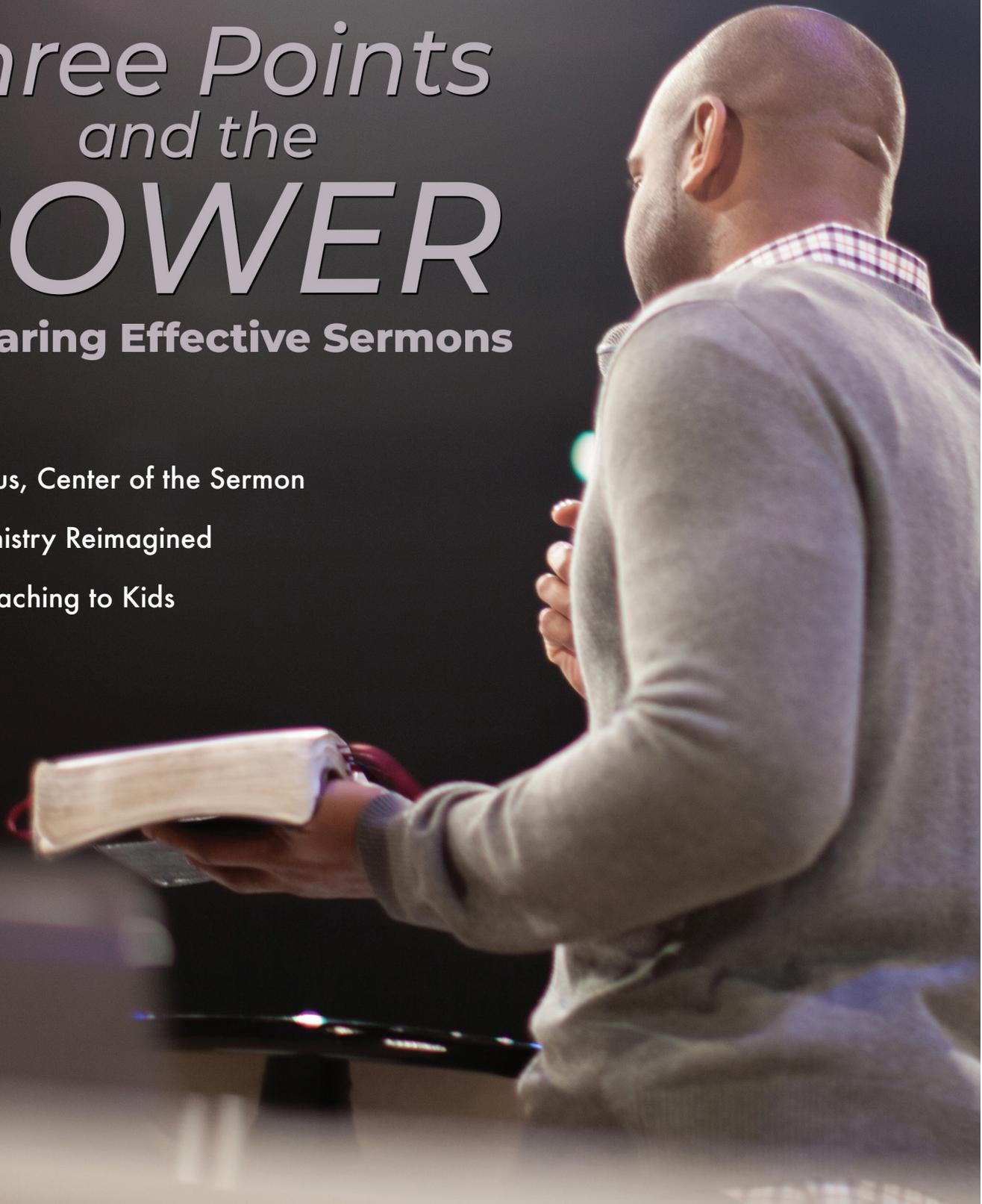
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CARING FOR KIDS IN CRISIS

Part One: Children and Anxiety

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Recently, the publication Reader's Digest printed a list of words added to our daily vocabulary since the world began battling the COVID-19 virus. The list included the words pandemic, public health, PPE, social distancing, quarantine, isolation, contactless, and flatten the curve, among other terms. Along with this revised vocabulary came a new reality filled with uncertainty, instability, and disruption. And with this "new normal," statistics tell us there has come an increase in emotional disorders. A March 2021 study by the Centers for Disease Control found that more than 40 percent of adults in the United States experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety since August 2020.

As our world continues to battle a pervasive virus while seeking to return to some semblance of normal, we must be aware that many people, including children, will suffer from lasting emotional challenges resulting from this period. For the church, this presents a tremendous opportunity to partner with families and serve children. For children, significant change often brings fear and anxiety. In a period of disruptions in education, isolation from friends and family, and health crises in their communities and homes, the children we serve have likely experienced some level of anxiety within the past year.

Anxiety, when not addressed, can affect children mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Its impact can be short-term or can last a lifetime. Anxiety disorders include separation anxiety, phobias, social anxiety, and panic disorders. Children suffering from anxiety may feel helpless or sad, appear fearful or worried, and be irritable or angry. The good news is that we can help children cope with anxiety and stress, no matter the situation.

Detect Signs Early

One of the most valuable tools in combating anxiety in children is to watch for early signs of its

presence. These signs may look different for each child but can include fatigue, trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and excessive worry. Some outward signs may be fingernail biting or being unusually fidgety. Also, consider the age of the child. Younger children have not yet developed the vocabulary necessary to share their anxiety, so they will often exhibit their anxiety through frequent tantrums, aggression, or meltdowns. Irritability or isolation are often exhibited by older children dealing with anxiety.

Routine

Another good way to help children struggling with anxiety is to establish routines and structure. If children know what to expect or anticipate what is coming, they will feel more at ease and secure. At home or in your ministry, establish a schedule. If possible, post the schedule in a visible area. While you might not consistently maintain the exact schedule or order, it will still help provide a structure that the child can follow.

Listen

It is essential to connect with our kids frequently to see how they are doing. Listen to their feelings without interruption or correction. Share times when you have felt anxious and ways that you coped with it. Include spiritual (prayer, devotion, meditation) and practical (seeking silence, journaling, drawing pictures) methods for dealing with anxiety. Ask kids how you can support or help them, and then follow through where possible.

Coping Skills

When kids become overwhelmed by their anxious feelings, it can sometimes be challenging to calm down. Teach kids some coping mechanisms. At home, they might take deep breaths, count down from 100, seek a quiet place to concentrate, or hold something familiar such as a soft animal, blanket, or fidget



spinner. At church, establish a signal for the child to tell you they are becoming anxious, offer alternative activities to participating with the larger group (such as coloring or working on puzzles), or assign the child an older "buddy" to work exclusively with him/her throughout the class or ministry time.

Encourage

Encourage children to reframe their negative feelings into positive ones. When they are displaying anxious behavior, ask them, "What are you thinking?" As they share their concerns, remind them to think of ways they can cope with their feelings. As a spiritual leader in their life, remind them of biblical promises such as Deuteronomy 31:8; Psalm 94:18, 19; Proverbs 12:25; Matthew 6:25-34; and 1 Peter 5:7.

Seek Help

If a child displays a persistent or debilitating level of anxiety, it may be necessary to seek the help of a mental health professional. Signs that this intervention may be helpful include a child being unable to accomplish routine tasks, not wanting to participate in activities typically enjoyed by the child, and loss of sleep or appetite.

The Impact of Crisis

By Dr. Morais L. Cassell, PhD, NCC, MA, MS
Behavioral Health Specialist/Therapist

During a crisis, it is important to check in with children/youth. Why?

- Crisis (COVID-19 pandemic, grief/loss, academic/school displacement, economic downturn, racial realities, absence of in-person worship) can be traumatic for children/youth and leave invisible imprints on their brain, mind, body, and emotions.

- "Traumatic/overwhelming experiences affect the development of brain, mind, and body awareness, all of which are closely intertwined" - Bessel A. Van der Kolk, MD.
- "Trauma not only damages children's bodies and emotions, but it wounds their souls, soul murder" - Leonard Shengold, MD.
- "Trauma left unaddressed can lead to internalizing (insecurity, subsyndromal symptoms, depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, God/faith detachment) and externalizing (aggression, delinquency, destruction of property, hypersexuality) behavior problems, or trigger traumatic symptoms" - Dr. Morais Lee Cassell, Behavioral Health Specialist/Therapist.
- Be aware of the changes, such as mood/behavior, eating habits, sleep issues, hair loss, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal, anger/frustration, lack of motivation, etc.

"Caring for Kids in Crisis" is a four-part series from International Children's Ministries. Read part two, Children and Depression, in the next issue of the *White Wing Messenger*. For training on helping children cope with crisis, visit cgpkids.teachable.com for our online course "Ministry to Children in Crisis."