



FEAR OF OTHER PEOPLE'S OPINIONS Do I just need to be braver? TRANSCRIPT

Caroline: FOPO, what is it, and why is it a problem?

Amy: So FOPO stands for Fear of Other People's Opinions. And it's getting at the idea that your self-worth is tied to what other people think of you. This can not only be limiting, but it can actually be quite debilitating, and it can stop you putting forward new ideas, speaking up in meetings, having difficult conversations, or trying something new, because you're constantly worried about, oh, what will people say if it doesn't go according to plan?

Caroline: Hello again, welcome to an episode of the Her Work podcast. I'm Caroline Spencer. Great to have you with us. Here at the Her Work podcast our tagline is reframed by Jesus. We want to have conversations about work and what it means as workers to work well in God's world. This podcast is brought to you by City Bible Forum, where I'm a trainer and mentor. And this particular episode is sponsored by the Australian Christian Legal Society. Sitting across from me, my conversation partner for today is Amy. Amy is a senior leader with 25 years' experience in law, finance, consulting, and government, welcome Amy.

Amy: Thank you, Caro. Thanks for having me.

Caroline: Now, Amy, for our conversation today, you brought FOPO to the table. FOPO or Fear of Other People's Opinions, I understand from you is a term coined by Dr. Michael Gervais, a high performance psychologist and author. Amy, how you understand FOPO?

Amy: Thanks, Caro. Thanks for having me on to talk about such an interesting topic. I first latched onto this when I read that article in Harvard Business review. I think it was called "How to stop worrying about what other people think of you". And it talked about fear other people's opinions or FOPO, very catchy phrase, and it's basically an unhealthy sort of fixation on what other people think of you. To the point where you're almost approaching every situation with a, what are people going to think of me, lens? For some people, this isn't only distracting because you're always glancing sideways, so to speak, but it can actually be really limiting or even debilitating because if your entire self-worth is linked to other people's opinions, then that's kind of going to keep you playing in the comfort zone, if you will, or not trying new things because you'll constantly be thinking, but if it goes wrong or if it doesn't go according to plan, what are people going to say?

Caroline: Now, Amy, you and I are very different people. So, what I thought I would do is list some typical FOPO behaviours and then we can workshop whether they're typical for us. First off the list. Staying silent even when you have a good idea.

Amy: I possibly have done that in the past. I feel like now I've got a bit more confidence to put forward an idea if I've got one. So that one's probably less me.



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Caroline: It's interesting. I'm thinking about particular work contexts where when I shared an idea and I encountered feedback, I found it really hard. And my boss at the time said to me, well, we're debating the idea, not the person. And I'd be like, what do you mean? These are my ideas. It is personal. And so I would take their feedback on my ideas as a statement of what they thought about me. And that's made me realise I actually really cared about the opinions of people in the room and I was using my good ideas to try and win them over and justify the fact that I should be in the room.

Amy: Yeah, right. Whereas I feel like for me, sometimes it's sort of brainstorming, if you, it's, you know, throwing things at the wall and seeing if they stick. And if people are like, oh, that's not really going to work. I'm like, okay, no worries. Let's throw another one. So, I feel that that's maybe a different temperament thing.

Caroline: What about this one? Agreeing with people to avoid conflict?

Amy: Oh, I know. Yes, I think we're all probably a bit guilty of this. And if you take it at the least generous interpretation of that. It's quite disingenuous, isn't it? Because you're actually agreeing when in your heart of hearts, you don't agree. You just don't have the energy for a difficult conversation. So I feel like probably we all do that, but to what point are you nodding along when actually speaking up would be the more kind of integrity rich thing to do or courageous thing to do.

Caroline: That's a very good point about the whole disingenuous thing. And it reminds me of a working relationship I had where my boss had a fight style when it came to conflict. Whereas I'm a flight style. So he would yell let me. I would shrink back. And that was to avoid any further conflict. He would interpret that as me not agreeing with him and so he would yell further. So, it was a merry little dance that actually wasn't that merry now that I think about it. And it's interesting that his opinion of me actually ended up crushing me and it took me years to work through that to work my way out from under it.

Amy: That sounds like a very challenging situation. That would have taken quite a lot of time to recover from because, I mean, in that, what you've just described, that actually has a strong lack of psychological safety, you know, and so anyone would find it hard to stand up and perform well and speak with conviction when that's a response you're getting.

Caroline: Now what about downplaying your strengths?

Amy: Oh gosh, should I be gendered about it and say that women tend to trend in this direction. It's that old Cheryl Sandberg lean in, do we take the seat at the table, and bring forth our gifts and what we have to offer? Or do we get a bit kind of nervous about how people are going to receive it? And so sit on the outer and



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maybe, you know, speak when spoken to. So, I think knowing our strengths and bringing them to the table is something that in our career and in leadership, we really need to develop over time.

Caroline: It's interesting. As I've been thinking about this, the context that comes up for me is when I'm in a room where I think people are better than me at something, that I end up pulling out the learner card. Oh this is all new to me. I don't really know what I'm doing. And I suspect I do know a little bit more than what I'm actually portraying. I think that learner card is safety for me. Because then, well, it's all about them judging my efforts. I think if and if I'm a learner, well...

Amy: You kind of lowered your own bar.

Caroline: Yes. Because I like things to be good.

What about seeking constant validation?

Amy: This is yeah, it's big, isn't it? But I think we're all kind of, we can be quite externally referenced. But I think this is one that it's, and we'll talk about, you know, what it means for us as Christians, but we really have to work on this, right? Because if our self-worth is tied to what other people think about us. It's going to go up and you're going to be on some stormy seas. It's going to go up and down. You'll look for it and not get it. You'll be constantly, you know, that puppy dog after the next pat on the head. And that's quite an exhausting way to live, and it's really unpredictable and inconsistent. So, we need to have that validation tied to something that's kind of, you know, tied to our identity that is constant and certain and sure.

Caroline: Thanks, Amy. The last one, managing how others perceive you rather than acting from your values.

Amy: Yeah, that's the putting on the act, isn't it? Or the masking or, okay, I know that in this situation, someone's going to want me to be X, Y, Z, instead of going, no, hold on. What do I believe? What are my convictions, who am I? And what am I going to stand for here?

Caroline: Yes, I think for me, I've noticed that in some work contexts, after a meeting, where does all my energy go? And at times it can all be around the people and how they reacted to me, I spend more time thinking about that than the actual work task. And I think that's because I'm doing more in that what did they think of me space and not so much in, you know, did I present my position thoughtfully and carefully and acting out of my values.



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Amy: Or we can have a meeting where, you know, we say 10 great things and one thing that we felt was a bit dumb. And when we replay that one thing we're not happy with, again and again and again, wasting brain space and energy on a conversation, that's never going to happen again. And actually, probably no one else in the room has given a 2nd thought to. And yet you're replaying it for the next 24, 48 hours.

Um, can I add another one actually? This is one where I've fallen foul in the past, is around, not having a hard conversation or giving someone really useful feedback, you know, in a work context. Brenne Brown talks about the 8 seconds of discomfort. So when you have to have a hard conversation with someone, there's that 8 seconds where you're like, oh, oh, this is awful, oh, this is going to be, oh, I don't think they're going to like what I'm going to say, oh, they're not going to think I'm a good manager, oh, they're not going to think that I'm the best, you know, the most positive good time colleague ever because I have to deliver something. It's going to be hard for them to hear. But she points out that actually giving someone that clarity around, you know, feedback on their performance or um, you know, what they can do next time or where we're all headed, um, is actually the best gift you can give them from a career perspective. And if you're prioritising your own discomfort or fear of what the person's going to think in that initial moment, then you're actually putting yourself before them. So, I think that kind of difficult conversation stuff, that's related to FOPO as well.

Caroline: Yes, thank you for adding that. I've actually found working through these examples really helpful and it helped me to realise that, oh, I've got a bit more FOPO going on and then perhaps I initially realised or gave myself credit for.

And it's interesting that we have this term FOPO, whereas the Bible calls it the fear of other people versus the fear of God. And it's a problem. So, in Proverbs 29, and I have the words here:

The fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.

So, Amy, would you mind giving an example of where fear of people ended up being a snare for you?

Amy: Um, I feel like maybe it's less of a snare and more it was just holding me back from being, um, you know, reaching my, you know, potential for my colleagues around me and I think it really was what I've alluded to before around not having hard conversations. Um, particularly one on one in terms of people's development needs or some tension that was evolving on a project or how a particular meeting went that I probably should have circled back around and said, actually, can we just replay how that went? Um, what I was noticing was this and, you know, can, can you, you know, feedback to me, um, from your perspective, they, they can be uncomfortable conversations.



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And I think by not having them, I probably was um, prioritising, Being, you know, ever positive, and a great colleague to have around, which is great in the short term because you feel good and you, you know, the person in the office that, that people enjoy working with, but actually, if you want to, um, be a better worker yourself and help the others around other people around you, um, improve and grow and learn, then you have to have difficult conversations.

Caroline: Thanks, Amy. The 2nd part of that proverb is whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe. So I was thinking, can you share an example of where not having a unhealthy fixation of what others think of you, trusting in God, actually kept you safe.

Amy: Or if I interpret safe to be like, had a good outcome in the end, you know, if kind of, you know, simplify the concept a bit. So, yeah, I was unemployed for a year in 2023 and it was one of those best years, worst years, all at the same time. Um, because there were opportunities to do things I had never had time to do before. Um, you know, some theological study or, you know, doing stuff with the kids school or spending time with friends, um, investing in quality relationships, all of that. So it was a good time, but it was also a hard time because when you show up to, the dinner party or the, the networking event or, or um, by the side of the, the sports field or whatever, and people are like, what do you do? You know, that infamous question. And you're like, oh, I'm actually unemployed. FOPO, I think, would have had me, um, you know, rushed to the first thing so that I could say I had a job. Um, whereas trusting in God through the hard time meant that eventually I was able to find something great working in, um, first the kind of faith-based schools, particularly getting education opportunities to kids who might not otherwise get it. And now working in healthcare, um, getting health and social care services to communities who don't might not get it. If I succumbed to FOPO, I don't reckon I would have ended up here because I wouldn't have been willing to wait long enough to get it.

Caroline: Thank you for sharing that example. If anyone in the Bible knows about FOPO, it's the apostle Peter. I was thinking about how on the night before Jesus is executed, Peter denies knowing Jesus 3 times to a servant girl and presumably other servants. So Luke 22. And then in chapter 2 of the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul actually opposes Peter to his face over how Peter had changed his behaviour because he was afraid of the circumcision group. And so it's kind of not surprising that fear comes up in Peter's first letter to the churches and that Peter has actually learned a lot about fear.

One of the key verses is in chapter 1 of 1 Peter says:

Since you call on a father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear, for you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life, handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ.



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I understand that reverent fear of God it can sound like a bit of an abstract concept.

Amy: And so religious. You know, to my non-religious friends, they'd be like, what do you, what is the word reverent even mean? That's not an everyday language.

Caroline: I was reflecting how Peter actually lands it for us. In the book of 1 Peter by talking about who we are and how we are to relate to others. So, he actually lands at quite concretely. What does living in reverent fear of God, mean? Well, read the book of 1 Peter. There are lots of clues there.

There's one point where Peter says:

do not fear their threats do not be frightened, but in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

I think that's fascinating because it's not just fear of someone's opinion. It's actually fear of harm from another person. And what you need to do is revere Christ as Lord. So, this idea of being clear on who you are, who Christ has enabled you to be as his person and in the relationships around you.

Amy: Do you know what I love about that, you know, while we're on the topic? I would even say it's fearing their criticism, right? And I think if you're doing something that is innovative or game changing or, um, interesting or different, you're going to get criticism. So, it's not just fearing their opinion, like, will they think I'm doing a good job? What Peter's talking about is much more along the lines of quite a negative reaction. And I think that's actually where FOPO then goes up a level because you're not just worrying about their opinion, you're worrying about their criticism.

Caroline: And I think the 1 Peter context takes it even further because it's the fear of suffering. So that would increase your FOPO even more. The other thing I think I like about those verses is that we revere God from a place of safety and security because we're actually bought with the precious blood of Jesus. So, I think that's a good thing to remind us that we revere God from a place of safety and security.

And then the other thing which we kind of touched on already is that Peter's not saying the solution is not to fear anything at all. The solution is actually to fear God. It's a right fear because God will judge us.

Amy: It's a really interesting point. It's not if we kind of remove FOPO, it's not replaced with a nonchalant or nonch, as my teenage kids say, you're not being nonch, you don't, you don't not care. You do care, but you care about something that actually defines your identity. And it's a good thing and you are eternally loved and bought at a price. And that is far more healthy and stable than other people's opinions.



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Caroline: So, Amy, when it comes to FOPO, do we just need to be braver?

Amy: I reckon based on everything we've said, yes. Don't we? It's sort of being braver to step into situations. Be courageous. From the book of Brenne Brown, you've quoted 1 Peter, I'll quote Brenne Brown. It's choosing courage over comfort, choosing what is right over what is fast, easy or fun. And so that takes courage. And it takes bravery to just cast the criticisms and the opinions aside, choose what's right, choose what's in line with our identity in Christ, in our convictions on what we're put on this earth to do. And I think that does take a lot of bravery and growth, but we can only do it because of the Holy Spirit living in us. So we're equipped, but we've got to lean into it.

Caroline: That's very helpful, Amy, because bravery we could think of in terms of personality. Oh, if I had Amy's personality, my, I'd be higher on the, no, lower on the FOPO scale. Whereas it's actually not about that. The way to grow bravery is actually to revere God more. The more Jesus shapes our identity, then that actually gives us courage in the spaces that are harder. And I can also see how that would reframe how we approach work. For example, feedback will matter, but it won't define me.

Now, at the beginning, we talked about FOPO behaviours, so staying silent even when you have a good idea, agreeing with people to avoid conflict, downplaying our strengths, seeking constant validation, managing how others perceive us rather than acting from our values. And then you added not having the hard conversation or giving useful feedback.

So, what's one of these potential behaviours that you'd like to work on? You know? Finding your identity in Jesus. I'm thinking, how does that play out practically? And if you want, I've thought of an example so I can go first.

Amy: Okay, you go first. Then I'll go. Now I've got time to think about it.

Caroline: For me, it's that example I shared about the giving the good idea. And when I have a good idea, buzzing around in my head, that I really want to get out, and I can think to myself, actually, you're pretty desperate to share this idea, why is that? So I want to ask myself the question: This good idea that you want to share. Is it for the good of others? Or is it so that other people will feel good about you? I think for me, that's the kind of a practical question I can ask myself in the moment when the idea is buzzing around and just wants to come out.

Amy: Love it. I think I've touched on mine, but I reckon it is, um, being able to take the first step in having a difficult conversation without somehow being impacted by, ooh, what will the recipient of this think of me? Because it's not about me. It's about them. Um, and it's about the good of them. The team, the company, you know, all of that.



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And I think by, by letting my own, well, it's pride, isn't it? Get in the way by worrying about the FOPO element of starting a conversation that can potentially be a little tricky, then I'm doing everyone a disservice. So, I think mine's still the difficult conversations point.

Caroline: Well, thanks, Amy. I've really enjoyed our conversation. And I look forward to having another conversation with you in the future.

Listeners, just so you know, I have a variety of conversation partners on the Her Work podcast. Each conversation partner brings a workplace related challenge for us to explore. The episodes will drop twice a month and you can find them on Spotify or Apple Podcasts. If you'd like to get in touch, please feel free to email me at caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org. On the City Bible Forum landing page, you'll find the Bible references. You'll also find some reflection questions. These have been designed so that you and a friend can listen to the podcast and use the questions as a springboard for a discussion around your own particular challenges. Until next time.