

“Anxiety is running rampant not just in our culture but in this moment in history. The Hobbsses offer a down-to-earth, practical approach to overcoming anxiety that everyone can benefit from. *When Anxiety Strikes* will help you experience the breakthrough you’re searching for.”

MARGARET FEINBERG, author of *More Power to You*

“This book is the gift of two faithful disciples who are listening for how God is speaking through the realities and rhythms of their own lives. Dena and Jason Hobbs are prayerful theologians who offer thoughtfully integrated reflections on Scripture, brain, and body. The insights and practices they provide here promise to sustain us in difficult moments as well as reshape our responses to triggers that cannot be avoided. I look forward to sharing this resource with pastors and church leaders who want to honor and facilitate the ways many in our congregations find wholeness in our bodies and spirits.”

NIKKI COLLINS, national coordinator of 1001 New Worshiping Communities, Presbyterian Church USA

“*When Anxiety Strikes* is an excellent book for anxiety management and a valuable resource within the Christian tradition. We are fortunate to have this book combining personal narrative, pastoral wisdom, and clinical insights.”

HAROLD G. KOENIG, MD, director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health, Duke University Medical Center

“As a family therapist who responds weekly to persons in crisis, I am eager to recommend this practical assembly of exercises and remedies that Jason and Dena Hobbs have provided for the care and relief of those coping with these debilitating attacks. The authors write from personal experience and with spiritual insight, offering encouragement and help in the process.”

DANIEL G. BAGBY, PhD, AAMFT, AAPC, Theodore F. Adams Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

“The earth seems to be shifting under our feet with a global pandemic, ecological crises, wars, you name it. No wonder we are anxious. But anxiety undermines health, leads to bad decisions, and hurts relationships. And those who don’t know they are anxious are actually most at risk of anxiety damaging their health or flaring out destructively. If we are human, anxiety is an issue. Saying ‘have faith’ is a platitude. We need real help. This book offers that help. It grounds the ancient wisdom of Scripture in our bodily experience and builds upon that scriptural foundation with practices we can actually do to make it through the week.”

THE RT. REV. DAN EDWARDS, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese
of Nevada (retired)

WHEN
ANXIETY
STRIKES

HELP AND HOPE FOR MANAGING YOUR STORM

JASON HOBBS &
DENA HOBBS



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INTRODUCTION

Dena's Story

IN LATE JANUARY 1998, I lay awake for most of one night, unable to get a good breath. I was not sure if I was having an asthma attack or worse, but I knew something was *definitely* wrong. In the wee hours of the morning, I made a call to an ask-a-nurse hotline supplied by our insurance company and was referred to my local emergency room. I remember them saying that I should go to the ER because of my “deep sense of dread” regarding my condition. After my husband drove me to the hospital and helped me get checked in, I was called back to be examined. While the nurse was taking my vitals, he got a strange look on his face. My pulse was racing hard. He hooked me up to a machine that monitored my blood pressure and pulse. My blood pressure was elevated and my pulse was 120 beats per minute while I lay totally still. Within the hour a cardiologist was at my side reading my first EKG and echocardiogram. I was twenty-four years old and convinced I was about to die.

A couple of hours after I had checked in and my heart had been cleared, I was given tranquilizers to help lower my heart rate. When it calmed to below 100 beats per minute, I was discharged with a prescription for Klonopin and told to follow up with my

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regular doctor later that day. I am not sure if anyone uttered the words *panic attack* to me that morning.

Once home, I searched online for information about a medicine I had taken some weeks earlier for a mission trip to Africa—a once-a-week antimalarial drug, Lariam. I remembered feeling bad each week I took the pill but reasoned malaria would be worse. So despite my concerns and at the urging of my doctor and others, I kept taking the medication. But that day, as I read the responses to my online search for “Lariam side effects,” tears streamed down my face. Story after story recorded how Lariam had induced panic and anxiety.

When I met with my general practitioner that afternoon, I told him I thought I was having panic attacks brought on by the Lariam. I thank God he chose to believe me. He encouraged me to make an appointment with a psychiatrist specializing in panic and anxiety and to seek supportive therapy, both of which I did.

I had no idea that day of the long road of healing that was ahead of me. I felt like I had been hit by a truck. How could this have happened to me—and why? The answers to those questions took months and even years to tease out, but healing did come. It came in layers and spirals, rising and falling, again and again, and it is still coming to me. And when it comes, it does not just heal my anxiety, but it changes my whole life. If my road had not included a struggle with panic, I cannot imagine who I would be now.

For the truth is that anxiety was a part of my life before my trip to Africa, before the Lariam, before the panic attacks. The intense panic attacks merely served as a wake-up call to an underlying condition I had suffered from so long I didn't know there was another way to live. Anxiety, like a lens through which I viewed everything, affected all of my life, but the panic awakened me. I now know how I can change that lens, keep it from controlling me, and allow it to draw me further into God's grace and healing love. Either because of nature or nurture, it is possible anxiety will always be present in my life in some form or fashion. The ongoing

journey to heal my anxiety taught me and continues to teach me so much about myself, the world, and how to live in it that I cannot imagine another way. My prayer is that your journey through anxiety will draw you into healing and love as well.

Jason's Story

I am a runner. I have moved into triathlons more recently, but at heart I am a runner. Runners set a pace and stick with it. We keep going. At the time of Dena's panic attack, I was about halfway through a master of social work program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I had learned various diagnoses for mental disorders, yet despite this training, I did not know what was happening with my wife.

We had not reached our second wedding anniversary or finished our degrees. Dena still had to go through her ordination process. I still had to find a way to help house the homeless. We had set our pace and were starting our race. How could something so troubling happen after Dena's trip to Africa, a trip she had believed to be God's will for her?

After the fright of that night in the ER, we followed a trail of referrals and doctors and therapists and medications. Many of you know this trail. It starts with your general practitioner, who may prescribe an immediate-need medication like Xanax or Ativan. Then, since your anxiety disorder can affect other systems in your body, you're referred to a gastroenterologist, who checks for problems with your digestive system. You may have an endoscopy, a colonoscopy, or a gallbladder scan. You may see a cardiologist and have a stress test. And you may finally find a psychiatrist who understands the medications and how to prescribe them. And hopefully you find a pastoral counselor or therapist that "gets it."

I have to admit I did not get it at first. I was worried, frustrated, scared, and exhausted. Dena's sleepless nights were my sleepless nights too. We lived in Richmond at the time, and there were

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favorite places we could no longer go because she had had a panic attack there. It made no sense but anxiety is “sticky” that way. Because the terror you feel attaches itself to a place, a person, or an event, it is enormously difficult to go back to that place without reigniting that emotional state.

Most of the time I was understanding and gentle. But there were times when I was simply exhausted by it all. If you are the spouse of someone struggling with anxiety, know that it does get better. It will require patience. It will call on your endurance. Maybe that is where my running helped; I set a pace, stayed away from “the ledge,” and kept going.

But I will admit that I was not always sure where God was in our struggle. In this book, we will talk frankly about the feeling that God is absent, that God has left us. If we are honest, this is how we feel at times.

There is something to be learned from the anxious periods in our lives, something God is trying to communicate to us when we are at our most frightened. Perhaps he wants us to trust him more, but anxious periods could also be a warning that something in our life is wrong. They could be our call to reach out to those around us, or they could be that proverbial last straw after a lifetime of criticism from parents, intimate others, or even our clergy.

Throughout the Gospels—in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—we read of Jesus quieting the wind and the waves in the midst of a storm. Since we see several mentions of this, we know it was important to the gospel writers. These were stormy times for the early church—they were being persecuted and killed. When the disciples ran around the deck of the boat wondering where Jesus was, afraid they were all going to drown or be struck by lightning, Jesus said, “Peace. Be still.”

Dena and I have both learned to listen for that moment when God says, “Peace. Be still.” Along the way we’ve also learned more about medication, how moving our bodies helps, how correct breathing (which seems so simple) helps so much. We have

learned that reaching out to others is vital, and that our thoughts about the world affect how we feel and see ourselves and everything around us.

I hope this book helps you down this path as well.

What Anxiety Is

Anxiety Is on a Spectrum

Your anxiety may be mild, moderate, or severe. Throughout Dena's life, she has experienced anxiety at different levels. If your anxiety is mild, this book and a few good friends may be all you need to discover a new quality of life. If your anxiety is further along on the spectrum, don't despair. This is in no way your personal failing, and it does not mean you have less hope. What it does mean is that you may need to ask for additional help to deal with your anxiety. Dena has found a qualified psychiatrist who prescribes her appropriate medication to help her do the work of therapy and self-care to heal her anxiety further.

While we hope that this book will be tremendously helpful to you in your journey with anxiety, *this book is not a substitute for a trained mental health provider*. If you or a loved one are unable to leave the house because of debilitating depression or anxiety, or if you or a loved one is suicidal or homicidal, please call emergency services at 911. If the need is not an emergency but it is urgent, call your doctor and discuss your symptoms.

Anxiety Is a Body-Related Event

When a clinician diagnoses an anxiety disorder, many of the symptoms are body related: racing heartbeat, tightness in the chest, chest pain (noncardiac), shortness of breath, feeling a narrowness of vision, feeling that the room is "closing in," muscle tightness, nausea, frequent diarrhea, tingling in fingers and extremities. Many people diagnosed with anxiety also suffer from physical ailments such as irritable bowel syndrome and gastroesophageal reflux disease in addition to back and shoulder pain.

Anxiety Is a Mind- and Spirit-Related Event

Throughout this book you will read about connections between the physical, mental, and spiritual. We will briefly touch on the biology of stress. There are dietary changes you can make that will help, along with relaxation techniques and breathing methods that will help you quiet yourself when you are worried or anxious. You will learn to recognize and challenge thought patterns that bring on your anxiety, and you will learn to practice soothing techniques for your body. And because we believe that we are body, mind, and spirit, we will integrate faith and community into the steps we will take together.

Our communities of faith are a tremendous resource, especially when we are hurting and scared. But cruelly, anxiety often causes us to back away from this helpful place. When we feel anxious, and certainly when having a panic attack, we can feel very alone, forsaken, fearful, and in some ways isolated from family, friends, coworkers, fellow students, and even God. One of the hallmarks of panic disorders is the sneaky way in which the fear of the next panic attack leads you to avoid places where you have had a panic attack. So you no longer go to that store or up that street or even to that church. This is why the structure of this book encourages community. We encourage you to engage or reengage those communities. Use this book in a group setting when possible.

Also, speaking of anxiety and faith, we want to include a word about our use of yoga-like exercises. We are aware that some Christians are uncomfortable practicing yoga poses as they are concerned doing so would be akin to participating in another religion. While some Eastern religions have adapted these basic and ancient postures such as standing with arms outstretched, bowing, and lying prostrate into their religious practices, these movements are simply movements and are also a part of Jewish and Christian traditions. As Susan Neal writes in her eloquent and thorough article, “Should Christians Practice Yoga?,” “God knows our hearts. He knows who we are worshipping. Exercising a certain way, including

yoga posturing, is not wrong or sinful because God evaluates what is in a person's heart (Mark 7:14–15, 20–23).”¹

We have chosen to include yoga-like movements as part of our daily exercises as they so effectively reduce muscle tension and tightness while also calming the mind. Since anxiety can cause significant muscle tension and even pain, this release of body tightness is important to recovery. We have made every effort to frame the stretches we use with prayers and meditations that bring us closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate healer. We hope these stretches and movements bring you physical relief and that the accompanying Christian prayers help heal your body, mind, and soul.

Anxiety Is and Is Not a Spiritual Problem

One of the more difficult questions about anxiety is whether it is a sin. Our short answer is no, sort of. Although you can find verses in the Bible that imply a yes or no, in the end Scripture is a story of our brokenness and need for redemption. With respect to anxiety, we prefer to talk in terms of brokenness because the word *sin* carries the connotation that you have done something wrong. All of us are outside of God's will in one way or another. Paul writes about that in Romans: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). There we are. All of us.

But, back to that question: Is anxiety a sin? In Philippians 4, Paul tells us, “Do not worry about anything” (v. 6). He is encouraging trust in God to provide for us. In Matthew 6, this is more artfully explained by Jesus when he says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink” (v. 25). Jesus reminds us that the birds of the air are cared for, so we will be too.

Is there brokenness present when we are anxious? Yes, broken is how we feel. Is anxiety some deliberate act of rebellion against God's will? No, we don't think so. There is a fallenness to our broken condition. Some brokenness we have chosen and some was inflicted by others. And in all of that, we pray for God's grace and

healing. As we pray for healing, it will sometimes mean changing our behaviors in ways that lead to healing. And other times, that will mean forgiving ourselves and others because it is what we are called to do.

And through it all, know that God is with you. God is with us when we do not “feel” it. God is with us in our fear and worry and anxiety.

Using This Book

We have structured *When Anxiety Strikes* to be read daily for eight weeks, each week focusing on a different theme:

1. *Breath*: learning the basics of breathing techniques to soothe anxiety and stop panic
2. *Body*: learning to care for our bodies in a way that reduces anxiety
3. *Movement*: using movement such as yoga and exercise to reduce symptoms
4. *Mind*: identifying our anxious thought patterns
5. *Change*: changing patterns of behavior and thoughts that lead to anxiety
6. *Spirit*: attending to our spiritual needs and reducing spiritual shame and stigma regarding anxiety
7. *Community*: strengthening our ties with support in our family, friends, and faith communities

A final chapter, “Commissioning,” guides readers through an eighth week of integrating the learning and practices into their daily lives.

While each week has its own theme, every day of the week borrows from one of the other themes. So all the daily readings in chapter 1 are primarily oriented toward *breath*, while chapter 2 primarily orients toward *body*. Yet, day 1 of *each* week includes an element of *breath*, and day 2 of *each* week includes an element

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of *body*. As we journey together through these days and then weeks, you will find yourself revisiting some principles and practices. The landscape may look similar, but we hope that you will find yourself looking at a particular principle or practice from a new perspective. As with the path of faith, learning to better manage anxiety is not a one-and-done accomplishment but an unfolding journey.

In addition, as you circle around to these familiar places, we hope you find that you are returning to practices, figuring out what fits best for you and your anxiety, and integrating these principles and practices into your life. In time and with practice, you will find more and more places in your life where you walk with God.

Each daily reading has a Scripture passage, a meditation or personal narrative expanding on the passage (these are most often written by Dena), a short activity, and a section with practical advice for reflection (typically written by Jason). Space on the page follows each reading so you can journal and engage with the reflections more fully. The everyday format creates a structure that can foster better habits for you. Our goal is that by the end of the eight weeks, you are more firmly on your way to recovery.

We have used this material in small group studies, and participants have reported great benefit in engaging these themes and practices in community. On the other hand, you may choose to work through this book on your own or with only one or two others. However you use the book, we encourage you to access the downloadable audio meditation prayer provided with the book's purchase.

We are so glad you've decided to take this journey of healing with us. In buying and beginning this book you have already taken your first step! There is hope and healing for anxiety. We not only believe this but have seen it countless times with our own eyes. As you learn to manage your own anxiety, know that we are praying for you and cheering you on as you return to the full abundance of life God desires for you.

CHAPTER 1

BREATH

DAY 1

LOSS OF BREATH

Read Ezekiel 37:1–14

Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. (v. 9)

THE PICTURE WE SEE AT the beginning of this passage from Ezekiel is bleak. All signs of life for the Israelite people are gone. There is no joy in them, no movement, no breath. All that is left is a valley of dry bones. At times, this is what it feels like to suffer from anxiety and panic. The fear with which we struggle can at its worst completely take over our life. Once vibrant people become almost unrecognizable shadows of themselves as anxiety steals moments and days from them and the ones they love.

There are certainly times when I have felt this way. Fear over one thing or another begins to limit my choices and activities. At times my world has gotten small and sad. And the breath. One of the sure signs my anxiety is flared up is that I have trouble getting what feels like a good breath. My inhaleds are shallow and constricted. I hold some of my exhaleds back for fear that breath will not return. Even though I fear my impending death, I am alive, but not fully. I am not alive in the way that God wishes for me to be.

From the midst of this anxious place, consider the miracle of Ezekiel's vision. If you read the entire passage, you may hear the echoes of the old spiritual "Dem Bones"—one bone connected to the other. That is the vision, bone by bone, sinew by sinew. And after Ezekiel prophesies to the bones and sinews and the Israelites start to look like people again, there is still one thing missing. There is one last element that means life to a human . . . breath. And then Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, and the breath comes

and the people rise up alive. Full life has truly returned to the people once again.

The beauty of this miracle is that breath and life can be returned to us as well. God does not wish for us to live a life of fear but instead one of fullness and joy. But how do we receive this Ezekiel-like gift of reviving breath? Our first small step in returning to fullness of life will be learning to breathe again, and the first practice we learn is that of diaphragmatic breathing. This deep belly breath triggers our parasympathetic nervous system to relax, and it reverses the effects of anxiety. It is a great tool to practice not only when you feel your anxiety rising and panic coming on, but also on a daily basis to keep your body running calmly.

We'll be exploring the practice of breath each day this week in a slightly different way. We hope that in doing so you will be able to feel God's healing Spirit blow into your brokenness, not to destroy but to rebuild. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. This week we'll take steps to receive this gift of abundant life, one breath at a time.

Daily Exercise: Basic Belly Breath

Today you will learn how to use the muscle below your lungs that enables the breath, your diaphragm. Find a comfortable position sitting or lying down. Do this in a place and at a time when you can be uninterrupted for five to ten minutes. Bringing your focus to the diaphragm, the thin muscle that separates the abdomen from the chest, helps you take a deep, full breath. The contraction and relaxation of the diaphragm muscle is what helps us breathe. When you inhale, the diaphragm curves down, causing your belly to expand out. When you exhale, the diaphragm releases back up, and your belly falls.

To practice deep, diaphragmatic breathing, place your hand above your belly button and gradually tune into the breath. With your next inhalation, let your breath deepen to the point that your belly rises and presses out into your palm. Continue to take

deeper and deeper inhalations so that your belly continues to puff out like an inflated balloon. On your exhalation release all the breath out, nice and slow. Allow the next inhalation to naturally fill your lungs deeply again. Practice this belly breathing for five minutes. As you breathe, allow yourself to gently receive more fullness of life with each full breath. When you are finished allow your breath to return to a natural flow. Notice if your body or mind feels any different. You can repeat this breathing exercise anytime you wish or feel the need to do so.

Reflection

Take a few minutes, maybe after using the breathing exercise for today, to think about when you have felt “fully alive.” Write a bit about that time or place.

What do you need to connect with again so that those feelings of dryness, of death, can become life and movement, filled with the breath of God?

DAY 2

GIFT OF BREATH

Read Genesis 2:4–9

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (v. 7)

I LOVE THIS BEAUTIFUL PASSAGE from Genesis. In contrast to the grand, sweeping creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, Genesis 2 shows us a God who carefully and specifically creates Adam. I can imagine God sitting on the new earth, slowly shaping the first human with great love and the materials of dust, dirt, and mud! We are gritty creatures for sure. God designed us to be more than a soul floating in space or some mind on a pedestal. We are embodied creatures. Crafted from the earth itself, with fingernails to catch dirt and toenails that collect sand so that we might remember from whence we came. Bodies called “good” and blessed by God. And how does God bring this enfleshed creature to life? He breathed breath into Adam’s nostrils, and Adam exhaled.

But these bodies of ours have limits, don’t they? From dust we came and to dust we shall return. In the meantime, we have plenty of peculiarities and struggles with these clay-made vessels. My own body is unique and wonky, with ticklish feet, moles on its neck, and a shoulder that gets sore and achy when I carry too much. And then there is the heart that races when I am scared, the gut that wrenches in times of stress, and the hands that tremble. Not to mention the strange, unexplained tingling sensations that occur in random places when panic sets in. Anxiety is a disorder of the body as much as it is a struggle of the mind or spirit.

But God blesses even this anxiety-prone body. God blesses it

and calls it good. Frustrating as it can be, my anxious body has taught me to slow down and attend to the gift of God's breath and Spirit in my life. As long as I learn to live in and work with my body, these sometimes trembling hands can serve and praise their Creator. Anxiety is only part of the dirt that reminds me where I came from and then calls me back to my Creator's lips.

Daily Exercise: Three-Part Breath Awareness

Find a comfortable sitting or lying position in a place and at a time when you will not be interrupted for a while. Let your attention drift to your breathing, and become aware of its flow. Place your hand on your belly as with the diaphragmatic breath, and allow your breathing to gradually slow and deepen. As your breath flows down to the bottom of your lungs, be aware of your belly pressing into your hand. Spend a minute or two focused on this sensation of belly breath. Next, move one hand over to your body's side, along your lower ribs. See if you can feel your ribs rise outward into your palm when you breathe. Feel the sensation of your breath expanding into the ribs God knit together in your good creation. Now, move one hand to your collarbone. As your breaths deepen, your collarbone will rise at the top of your inhalation. The upper body and shoulders can be a place where we hold tension. Let your upper body and shoulders relax on each exhalation. Feel the sensation of your chest smoothly rising and falling with your slow, steady breaths. Finally, let your attention move to your back. If you are sitting in a chair or lying down, notice how your back presses into the support behind you when you inhale and releases when you exhale. Again, if you are holding any obvious tension in the back, softly let it release on your exhales. Take one more minute to feel the sensation of your upper body receiving God's gift of breath: the belly, the chest, your sides, and back. Let this breath bless and heal your mind, body, and soul. Let your body return to a normal, easy inhale and exhale. Notice any differences in body, mind, or spirit since you began the exercise.

Reflection

Dena writes about her physical experience with anxiety. What symptoms let you know you are starting to feel anxious? Part of learning coping skills is recognizing the beginnings of the anxiety. Contrary to how we sometimes feel, anxiety does not happen all of a sudden. Typically there are small signs before a full panic attack occurs. Take a minute to think about and write down your small signs.

As you think about these signs, know that God blesses them, even in the areas in your life that feel broken. Part of knowing God's grace and forgiveness in our lives is allowing grace and forgiveness into our broken places.

DAY 3

EMBRACING MOVEMENT

Read Psalm 23

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for You are with me. (v. 4 NKJV)*

AT ITS VERY WORST, ANXIETY expresses itself as a fear of death. Panic attacks are such real, powerful events that the sufferer actually feels they are in danger of dying. Pain in the chest and the pounding of the heart can make us think we are having a heart attack, no matter our age or health.

When our anxiety is not expressing itself in a fear of death, there is the fear of life. *If I go to that store again, will I have another panic attack? What if I get sick on our vacation—maybe we'd better just stay home.* Thoughts and fears like these can make life smaller and smaller until there is little “safe” space left. Untreated panic disorder can lead to agoraphobia, which begins when the sense of panic becomes so large and the fear of having the next panic attack so strong that no place feels safe, except possibly home.

Once we become stuck at home as a result of our fear, we become just that . . . *stuck*. We are not traveling, walking, dancing, or moving in any significant way. If you have experienced this as I have, you know how it can steal your joy. As human beings, we were designed for movement. Look at your legs and roll your shoulders. This body was meant to get out and move!

In the beloved Twenty-Third Psalm, our lives with God are beautifully described with the metaphor of a shepherd with his sheep. Notice how much the sheep in this passage are moving. The shepherd leads them to green pastures, then to watering holes,

along good paths, and even through dark valleys. The sheep and shepherd move through life together. This is precisely what God desires for you and me. God wants to lead us to good and beautiful places, if only we can get unstuck. Sure, valleys can sometimes be dangerous, and the danger can be frightening. Going through difficult places may feel like more than we can handle. But getting yourself moving does not have to start with the hard things—like taking a plane ride, driving on the freeway, or visiting that relative you have been avoiding.

Today we will start with small movements. Once our joints loosen up and our breath deepens, we can see where we will go from there. We were not meant to live in fear. If that is where you are presently, then know this is not where you have to stay. With God by our side, we can begin to move through life again. Life can be scary, but there is so much goodness and beauty as well. Today we take a step toward enjoying life again.

Daily Exercise: Gentle Walk with Breath Awareness

Find time in your day to take a gentle walk for ten to fifteen minutes. It can be at any time, in any place, and with anyone that makes you feel comfortable. If you are having a hard time getting motivated, remember research indicates that fifteen minutes of cardiovascular exercise a day can be as effective as antidepressant medication for helping mild to moderate depression and anxiety.² A small walk is a powerful thing! As you walk, notice the rhythm of your breathing. How many times do you inhale and exhale between each footstep? Notice your arms swinging as you move. Notice the feel of your gait. Is it long or short? There is no right or wrong answer. Notice the feeling of your steps, the surface under your feet. Be aware of how it feels to move and breathe. Even if you feel stiff, sluggish, or tired, try to be grateful that your body is indeed moving you forward.

Anxiety can lead us to draw inward, to feel small and weak and stuck. Stretching our legs on a walk reminds us that God wants us

to move through those green pastures, by the cool waters, enjoying the faster pace of our hearts and our breathing. As you open your eyes to the sights on your walk, you may also notice your thoughts opening and broadening too.

Reflection

Even though we recommend ten to fifteen minutes for a walk or other exercise, remember to do what *you are comfortable doing*. Just because you do not walk for fifteen minutes does not mean you have failed. Anxiety typically forces us into an all-or-nothing thinking pattern. We feel as if everything must be “just right” or perfect. If it is not perfect, then we should not do it at all. This kind of thinking can be a barrier as we work through this book together. Your journey to healing is about small, imperfect steps.

Although we have focused on walking, what other movement-based activities could you do?

DAY 4

WATCHING THE WINDS

Read John 3:1–10

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (v. 8)

IN THIS CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS, Jesus portrays the wind as a mysterious force that comes from an unidentifiable place, blows around for a bit, and then leaves just as mysteriously. Perhaps you have had occasion to watch the wind blow. Where we live in the southeastern United States, we often see the wind kick up right before a thunderstorm. We do not so much notice the wind itself, but we see the leaves rustling on the ground, dust kicking up, and trees swaying. But if we are not paying attention, we can miss the presence of the wind altogether, even though it is always around us.

Though Jesus in this conversation is using the wind as a metaphor for the mysterious, life-giving wind of the Spirit, there are other winds that blow through our lives. In Ephesians 4:14 Paul uses the imagery of wind to describe the confusion that can result from unhelpful thinking. These winds can scatter our thoughts and unsettle our balance. Often we do not pay attention to our thoughts while they blow unnoticed through our mind like background noise. We may not notice where they are coming from, yet they are affecting us all the time. It may only be when our thoughts kick up storms of panic and anxiety that we really notice them at all.

The first step in understanding and controlling our thoughts is to pay close attention to them. Just as you can look for that small breeze in the tops of trees or the gentle movement of a flag, you

can learn to notice and listen to your thoughts. Become a wind watcher—watch how your thoughts blow, how they ruffle you, what it is like when your thinking kicks up a storm within you. Like Nicodemus, we do not have to understand it all or take any action just yet. That will come in time. For now, we will practice curiosity toward what our thoughts have to show us.

Daily Exercise: Counted Breath

Find a comfortable seated position. Allow your breath to deepen as with belly breathing. On your next inhalation slowly count to five. After five beats of inhalation, let your body exhale to a count of five. If this breath is too shallow or too deep for you, you can count to a higher or lower number as it suits you. This method of counted breath is great for increasing lung capacity and for steadying the thoughts and mind.

Today we will add to this practice of counted breath a practice of thought awareness. On the inhalation, notice and acknowledge the thoughts you are having, whatever they may be. Do not judge them or be angry at yourself for having these thoughts. Just notice them. On the exhalation of your breath, release the thought and let your attention to it flow away with your breath. Again, we are not judging our thoughts or even trying to stop them or change them. We are practicing an awareness of our thoughts. Continue this counted breath/thought awareness practice for five minutes. When you are ready to finish, release the mental exercise first, and then after your next counted exhalation, allow your breathing to return to normal. Take stock of your body, mind, and spirit. Both this breathing and the ability to acknowledge and release your thoughts are there for you when you need them.

Reflection

A trap into which we sometimes fall is that of being angry or upset by our thoughts. This is particularly common in people with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In that situation, there may be a

particularly offensive or frightening thought. A person’s reaction of intense fear or anger to that thought actually helps make it stronger. It is better to acknowledge the thought, then gently move to another one. One neuroscientist, David Eagleman, describes our consciousness as a churning sea from which we sometimes have thoughts break through to the surface.³ Offensive or frightening thoughts that break through should be allowed to slip like a sea monster back beneath the water.

You might also imagine a difficult thought being like a toddler vying for your attention. Sometimes it is best to say gently, “Yes, I see you,” then move back to what you were doing before the interruption. Giving negative attention to the interruption can sometimes feed an undesirable behavior. You could also imagine yourself at a gathering where there is someone that you do not want to see. You might glance over a shoulder and see them, gently nod your head, then go back to the conversation in front of you. Don’t give the difficult thought any more energy than it deserves.

What did you notice about your thoughts during the exercise? You do not have to write down the particulars if you do not wish to. In general, are your thoughts about certain people, situations, or concerns?

DAY 5

WINDS OF CHANGE

Read Isaiah 43:18–19

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (v. 19)

THIS PROPHECY OF ISAIAH WAS written to God's people in Babylonian exile. Their homes had been warred upon and destroyed. Those in exile had been taken as prisoners across the desert to a strange land. Knowing they could not return home, they were bereft. Sadness and anger became a habit for them. All they knew was how to mourn.

It was to these downcast people that God introduced the idea that things were about to change. God begins to show the people the possibility they could go home. There was much rebuilding to be done. Though home was going to be different than the memories to which they had been clinging, there was new hope for their future, where formerly there had been no hope at all.

Sometimes in our journey with anxiety and panic we get familiar with being scared and sad. It becomes normal. The negative thoughts and feelings that have uprooted us from the life we once enjoyed are now all we know. And one quality of fear is that it builds upon itself. Fear tends to focus on the negative and the scary. Fear makes us draw into ourselves, our homes, our "safe" places.

Into these tight, dark places the breath of God comes, saying, "Do not get stuck in the past. Look, I am going to do something new." God reminds us that our lives do not always have to be this way. We do not have to be held prisoner by anxiety or our negative thoughts or difficult memories. The past can be the past; we can move forward into a better land that God has laid out for us.

Healing from anxiety will require us to do some new things. We may exercise more. We may talk about our fears more or with new people. We may learn to think in a new way. Most importantly, we will lay hold to the promise that God's Spirit is springing up a new work within us, a work that will feel as refreshing as rivers bubbling up in a desert.

We pray you will open yourself to the possibility of God doing something new in you.

Daily Exercise: Alternate Nostril Breathing

Breathing is so common and natural that we usually take it for granted. But since we are reading about doing a new thing today, we will also practice a new way of breathing. Alternate nostril breathing (ANB) can seem strange at first, but not only will it make you think about your breathing, it also has health benefits. Regular practice of ANB can reduce stress and even lower blood pressure. Also, it cleans out your sinuses! So let's get ready to try a new way of breathing.

Tune in to your breath. For this breathing technique, we will use the thumb and ring finger of your right hand. On an inhalation, close off the right nostril with your thumb and breathe through the left nostril only. When you switch to exhalation, release your thumb from the right nostril and use your ring finger to close off your left nostril. Exhale through your right nostril only. Keep your same hand position and now inhale through your right nostril. Switch your hand back, using your thumb to close the right nostril and releasing your ring finger from the left nostril so that you can exhale through it. Keep the same hand position and inhale left again, beginning a new cycle of breath. Repeat this pattern of inhale left nostril, exhale right nostril, inhale right nostril, exhale left nostril for a few minutes. It will take a minute or so to get the hang of this different way of breathing. Even though it seems odd at first, try not to strain, but instead breathe gently from side to side. Once you find your rhythm, allow yourself to open to this

difference and enjoy a fresh, new breath. You can even visualize the breath drawing down and releasing from deep down within you, opening up areas for God to do a new work in you.

Reflection

Anxiety does sharpen our senses! That is what it is supposed to do. Though we might not face a charging tiger or some other deadly threat, we can become focused on worrisome situations around us. Yet, God asks us to look for the “new work” that he is doing in us and in the world. Where do you see just a glimmer of hope? Where do you see God’s work springing forth in even the smallest of ways?

DAY 6
INFILLING

Read John 20:19–23

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (vv. 21–22)

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS passage the disciples have taken refuge behind locked doors because they are terrified. The One they had believed in and forsaken everything to follow had been killed. As Jesus’s disciples, they may be next on the list to die. As bad as their fear and persecution must have been, I think the worst part for them must have been that Jesus was gone. They had loved him like no other, and now the void left by his absence must have created an ache in their hearts like no other ache.

But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus stepped into this fear and void—right through that locked door. “Peace be with you.” If that were not enough, Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit, and they would never have to be without the presence of the divine again.

There have been times in my journey with anxiety that I have wondered where God was. My inability to feel his peace was not for lack of praying and drawing close to God. At times I have been ashamed of my fear and thought if I were a better Christian I would not struggle so much. But thankfully, the years, good teachers, and God’s mercy have taught me differently. A popular saying admonishes that if we feel distant from God, then it must have been us that moved. I know what this is trying to communicate:

that we should always move toward God and not away. But I disagree with its premise that God does not move. Here, in John's gospel, we see a God who goes to hell and back, seeks us out, and then walks through doors just to be with us again. God certainly moves, and he does so to come after us in our fear and loneliness and to fill us with his own Spirit.

This does not mean that we will never feel scared, sad, or lonely again. But it does mean that even when we feel this way, we can rest in the truth that God is still with us. We may not feel the peace or the presence, but—felt or not—God is still with us.

Daily Exercise: Circle Breath

Find a comfortable standing or seated position. Begin by allowing your breath to deepen into a nice, even flow. Now add a simple hand motion with the breath. With arms starting at your side, raise them outward and upward on an inhalation until they are lifted above your head. Then allow your hands to touch overhead with your elbows bent. On the next exhalation, bring your touching palms down the centerline of your body until they rest in a prayer position over your heart. Breathe and move in a slow, flowing motion, continuing to circle your hands up on inhalation and then draw them in to prayer position down to your heart on exhalation. Do this for a few minutes, and then add an inner intention of opening yourself to God's infilling Spirit on the inhalations and drawing this good gift of the Holy Spirit down deep within you on the exhalations. Let yourself be open to the gift of God's healing, strengthening Spirit that is always available to you. You may or may not feel the Spirit's presence with you, but rest in the assurance that just as your breath is constantly with you, felt or not, the Spirit is as well. When you are ready to finish, close with your hands in prayer over your heart and notice any changes in your body, mind, or spirit. Return to normal breathing and movement, and know this exercise is always available for you to use when you choose.

Reflection

We talk often about going places to meet God or experience God. At times this can feel more like our effort instead of God's. Think about a time when God has come to you. It may have been in an expected place, like church or at a retreat where you were seeking God. But there are also times when we are hiding, scared, and fearful. God may come to us during those times through things such as a person, a song, a book, or even an animal. Write briefly about this time.

DAY 7

COMMON BREATH

Read Acts 2:1–13

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability. (vv. 2, 4)

THIS PARTICULAR PASSAGE RECOUNTS EVENTS from the day of Pentecost. One of the messages in this passage that we sometimes miss is that it was a time of great unity. The Holy Spirit came *to a group*, and his coming unified that group. Everyone could hear and *understand* what the others were saying. This story is the opposite of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11, a story of pride and unity that had no need of God.

One vital resource anxiety steals from us is our social support. This can happen for a variety of reasons. Maybe we are ashamed to admit we struggle with anxiety. The stigma of anxiety prevents us from sharing our burdens openly with others. Maybe in our pride we want to handle it ourselves like the people at Babel. Or maybe we are so scared and tired that it is hard to reach out anymore. Whatever the reason, when we lose our community, we lose an important resource for overcoming our anxiety. We become disconnected from those around us. What is doubly sad—and ironic—is that many of those around us in church share the same fears and worries! If only we could reach out to them and face our fears together.

When I was first diagnosed with panic disorder, I was so ashamed that I told almost no one. Not my family, not my friends,

not my teachers. I thought the panic was my fault, that it meant something was wrong with me personally. But one day when I was struggling, our next-door neighbor asked me what was wrong. She asked so genuinely that I told her I had been having panic attacks. I will never forget how she looked at me with kind eyes, nodded her head, and said, “Yeah, I have had those too. They are really rough.” I was so relieved someone else understood my struggle, I almost cried. This neighbor became a lifeline to me as I healed from that first round of panic disorder. She made an incredibly difficult time a little easier.

Like the disciples at Pentecost, we always need God to come to us. But we also need community, ideally a community of believers. Community offers us support and nurture, and it also provides us the needed challenges of community! This Holy Spirit wind from above is one that will unite us in authentic community where we share one another’s burdens.

This day, know you are not alone in your struggle. There are others who suffer and know your pain, and there are others who may not understand but who love you and want to support you as best they can. Let’s move toward reaching out to those who want to support us. Let us enjoy the gift of community.

Daily Exercise: Breath of Blessing

Find a comfortable and quiet seated position. Deepen your inhalations and lengthen your exhalations as you practice the belly breath. After several full, steady breaths, begin adding an intention of blessing. On each inhalation take in God’s blessing for you, and on each exhalation send out God’s blessing for someone else. On sequential exhalations, you can name individual family members and friends, members of the group with whom you may have been participating in this study, or those you may know with special need of God’s nearness. However your prayer develops, be aware of the surrounding and uniting presence of God’s Spirit that fills us all.

Reflection

Who are the supportive people in your life? Where are the places of community for you? If you have disengaged from them, what will it take to go back? Think of one or two people who you could trust enough to tell them, “Sometimes I am afraid.” Jot down their names, holding these relationships in prayer and wondering with God if this is the time to be open with them about your fear and worry.

CHAPTER 1 REVIEW

How was your experience with chapter 1?

Was there a reading or an exercise that particularly resonated with you or that you enjoyed?

Was there an exercise that you struggled to complete due to physical or other reasons?

Was there a reading or an exercise that you resisted or even disagreed with? (This is okay and normal.)

Were there places where you surprised yourself at how well you did or how your mood or health improved?

Were there places where you were surprised at how hard things were?

If there were places where you felt great or the study was easy, we rejoice. However, if week 1 was hard for you, don't despair. New habits are hard, and learning these new practices takes time. There is a reason we do this for several weeks. It is all about walking the path and doing the practice. Even when the practice is hard, you are making important progress. Do not expect perfection or judge yourself (especially against other participants if you are in a group meeting; everyone will struggle at some point). It is all grace, one small step at a time.

That being said, if you felt like you were hitting your head against a wall all week or that the course was almost impossible for you, it could be a sign that you need to increase your level of intervention. If you do not have a therapist yet, ask your group leader or a trusted friend for a recommendation. If you have a therapist and were hitting a wall all week, consider bringing up a conversation

CHAPTER 1: BREATH

about medication. This does not mean you have to commit to medication, but you are willing to think about the possibility.

If you are struggling and need to seek out additional help, please do not beat yourself up. It in no way makes you a failure or a bad person. You are simply a person who is having a hard time. The best thing you can do is set yourself on a path that will help you get to a better place. There is no shame in asking for help. There is hope that you can get to a much better place.