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PART 1

Introduction



A Bold Step

About the Book

When we run our lives on automatic, we often miss the subtle moments when stress and worry become intertwined, forming mental and physical holds on our bodies and minds. Living without pause, we set the stage for anxiety to emerge unwittingly until our overall well-being declines. This book is for you if you want to battle stress, worry, and anxiety with mindfulness and meditation, but you are concerned that these practices conflict with your Christian values. In this small volume, allow me to gently guide you through a six-week mindfulness program, sensitive to Christian thought and grounded in Scripture so you can practice without fear or guilt. Here, you learn to *unwind* from the holds of anxiety, worry, and stress on your life. The program is a focused and gradual process where you learn that the conditions you battle are temporary, and you can learn to release them with time. We will move slowly and thoughtfully, and learn to unwind from the mental and physical holds on our lives until we achieve each stage of release and healing.

Over forty million Americans suffer from anxiety, and 37% go untreated due to the lack of access to medical care or the stigma associated with a mental health diagnosis.¹ The evidence supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness for worry, stress, and anxiety is overwhelming, covering forty years of research and

thousands of studies that consistently demonstrate meditation and mindfulness work to complement medical treatments for anxiety, or as a stand-alone practice that you can do at home.

This book is unique because I have deep, personal experience with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and I can attest that the daily practice of mindfulness finally healed me through a combination of meditation, prayer, and faith. I practiced for several years using traditional, mainstream, and Buddhism-based methods, and I regularly found myself uncomfortable with the words and approaches the teachers used to explain the current wisdom of meditation and mindfulness. Along the way, I modified the training for my Christian mindset, and the results were fantastic. I based this approach on two fundamental principles: (1) “The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4), and (2) God created all things for his purposes (Col. 1:16), including meditation.

In the following chapters, I share the six-week Christianity-based program for mindfulness. This book is not about medical advice; you can think of it as a dialog among friends having a living room Bible study with a teacher who has defeated anxiety using a Christianity-based approach to mindfulness and meditation, and I want you to defeat anxiety, too.

Mindfulness the Christian Way

Mindfulness includes the practice of meditation, but the practice of mindfulness itself is the conscious, active awareness of your thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors in such a way that you understand with your heart how your actions affect yourself and others. Jesus asks his followers to abide in this way when he says, “Do unto others” (Luke 6:31). You can be mindful informally, while sitting in a meeting, walking down the street, shopping in a store, leading your team at work, or when with your family. From my perspective, the fruits of the Spirit drive the core of Christianity-based mindfulness behavior, and these are love, joy,

peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Meditation the Christian Way

Meditation is a deliberate act of focus which, like physical exercise, requires you to show up every day to show improvement. It is the formal, personal act of mindfulness where you set aside a particular time to train your brain to focus on singular objects of awareness. You start with your God-given breath, move to the body, and expand to the other present-moment experiences that God has given us. It is just like exercise for the body, but instead of exercising your muscles to make them stronger, you exercise your mind and soul to reflect the attitudes of Jesus. I believe these behaviors are captured in the command to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). “Be still” means stillness of body, but it also implies stillness of spirit, mind, and soul. Indeed, the Bible gives us insights regarding what we should practice when being still.

Anxiety, Stress, and Worry for This Program

When I worried, I continuously dwelled on negative thoughts. I even worried about things that were never going to happen, which added unneeded extra stress. Anxiety started to emerge. When I worried like this, I would worry automatically, without paying attention to what was going on in my body and mind. When I worried, it seemed like anxiety was just in my mind, but anxiety had also settled into my muscles and body. I carried an unconscious tension in my jaw, shoulders, stomach, and legs. Worry affects the mind, but if it goes unchecked, it can lead to stress. If stress goes unchecked, the body stays in fight or flight mode. I do not believe God intended us to stay in this state of mind because it causes our focus to shift to self and we can lose sight of him. In this program, I refer to stress, worry, and anxiety together because they all work in unison to generate holds on

our thoughts and generate tension in the body. In each chapter, we will take a moment to find tension in the body and mind and gently release it.

We can start right now. Just unclench your jaw. Let it hang loose. You do not have to open your mouth to let your jaw hang. Separate the top teeth from the bottom teeth. Raise your shoulders toward your ears, feel the stretch, then slowly drop your shoulders back into place. As you learn to stop and become mindful of the tension in your body and mind like this, you can break the cycle of stress.

Why This Book?

This book is different from other Christian mindfulness books because it focuses on battling anxiety using mindfulness techniques, and not as a general defense of Christian mindfulness. This three-part book covers a complete program for fighting stress, worry, and anxiety. Each week you will ease tension in your body and mind by learning a mindfulness technique, starting with breath and body awareness, then advancing to practices of love, forgiveness, and humility—the more complicated techniques for some of us to learn and practice in daily life.

I hope my perspective as a Christian, professional educator, and certified mindfulness teacher can help you find profound insights into the benefits of regular mindfulness practice. My view blends facts from research with practical Christianity to teach mindfulness and meditation in an accessible way, with no questions and no apologies about using this God-given tool to help you fight anxiety.

The Model in a Nutshell

Part 1

Chapter 1 covers the basics, along with an outline of the book. I placed lessons throughout the text so you can start learning the techniques as you read. In many ways, the text is interactive, and

I invite you to take time to practice when prompted. For instance, in Week 1 of the program, I prompt you to feel the sensations of the breath in your nostrils as you breathe. Try it now. Continue to notice the feelings of the breath as the air moves in and out of your body. With that, you have learned the most basic technique of meditation. Each chapter builds on the next, so by the end of the book, you can create a Christian mindfulness practice that works for you using the tools in the final chapter.

Chapter 2 is the logical pathway to a mindfulness and meditation practice that complements your Christian values without in-depth theological discussion, fear, or guilt. Authors have written entire books defending Christian mindfulness from church history to current practice, but here we use Scripture and cover this defense in a single chapter. I share my testimony about how God gave me meditation and mindfulness to conquer my anxiety; then, I introduce you to the Christian pathways for adopting meditation with a guilt-free approach to healing.

Chapter 3 is a brief presentation of the scientific facts regarding how mindfulness and meditation practices work for the alleviation of stress, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, and other ailments. I also assert that mindfulness is a suitable complement to your current approaches to alleviating stress and anxiety.

Part 2

Week 1 covers breath awareness as the core meditative practice using simple biblical principles. You will learn to pay attention to the breath as a way to slow down runaway thoughts. You will learn to focus on the breath as the principal weapon against anxiety, discovering the origin of breath, starting when God spoke creation into existence and beyond, so you can pay attention to the breath with your heart and your head.

Week 2 covers body awareness, a more advanced technique that uses simple biblical principles to appreciate the body that

God gave you without judgment or guilt. Feeling where these sensations reside will help you unwind your physical tension. You will learn to use the body's sensations as the objects of meditation, to experience the present moment fully, and to experience what anxiety "feels" like in your body in order to conquer it.

Week 3 covers the advanced practice of love and kindness meditations. These are perfect Christian mindfulness practices and meditations supported by biblical teachings and science. You will learn that showing love and kindness to yourself and others, in a focused, mindful way, helps you become aware of our shared humanity, and to use this awareness to promote your healing. Understanding your shared humanity gives you the tools to unwind from hate and bitterness.

Week 4 covers forgiveness meditations (the most advanced technique, from my perspective). Similar to loving-kindness, this essential act of Christian spirituality is one of the cornerstones of healing in Christianity-based mindfulness practices. In a focused session, you will explore the advanced practice of the mindfulness of forgiving yourself and others, beginning to unwind from resentment on the road to reducing your anxiety.

Week 5 covers gratitude, using studies from the Bible and evidence from science to learn how to deepen your mindfulness practices toward combating anxiety. Gratitude teaches you how to be thankful for what you have, and gratitude is essential for well-being! You will learn to unwind from selfishness.

Week 6 covers humility as a core mindfulness attitude. Here you will learn to meditate on God's commands to be humble and inherit the earth, not for yourself but for others. You will learn to adopt the countenance of Christ and become ever so mindful of his presence in our lives. You will learn to trust him, mindfully, on your way to healing, and learn to unwind from pride.

Part 3

The Epilogue covers how to stay on track, and I provide a six-week planning template and words of encouragement for continued practice. I show you how to build a guilt-free practice with the simple rule of, “It’s okay to miss a session!” Don’t judge yourself or fret, because when you do, you create more tension! Allow yourself to release judgement gently.