

New York Times bestselling
author of *Get Out of Your Head*

JENNIE ALLEN

**You
Are
Not
Alone**



**A Kid's Guide to
Overcoming Anxious Thoughts
and Believing What's True**

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Anxious Thoughts and Believe What's True**

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WaterBrook

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To my kids: Being with you in your thoughts
and struggles turned out to be the good stuff!

Thanks for letting us into the hard and the good
of your lives. We love you so much, Conner, Kate,
Caroline, and Coop.

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

—JESUS

No matter how alone we might feel, He promised:

He will always be with us.

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Part

One

1

Letter to the Reader

HI, FRIEND. CHANCES ARE IF YOU ARE READING THESE WORDS, the thoughts in your brain feel a little chaotic sometimes.

Have you ever played on a Sit 'n Spin? In case you never have, they are big plastic disks with a handle in the middle, like a kid-sized spinning top. You wrap your legs around the middle, sit down, and spin yourself. Sit and spin.

That is my brain.

Fear and worry constantly bother me. I sit in my anxious thoughts and spin around and around.

When I started a new school in ninth grade, my brain was extra spinny. I walked in to find my gray locker in a sea of humans I had never seen before. They all seemed perfectly at ease in the chaos. I was not. I couldn't find my locker, and no one offered to help me. I started to spin.

Questions whirred around me . . .

- *Does anyone like me?*
- *Does anyone want to be my friend?*
- *Does anyone even know I exist?*

Being a person who always felt like she had to win every-

one's approval, this year of school about did me in. Every night as I would try to fall asleep, my brain kept crawling onto my imaginary Sit 'n Spin. I spent hours whirling in worry.

We worry about the things we love, the things that matter most to us. At that point in my life, what mattered most was acceptance, approval, fitting in.

We worry about what we value. I valued the admiration and approval of my family and friends. So I would lie in bed and worry about what they thought. The unknown opinions of a few people took over my mind.

Since then I've learned that me and my spinny brain are not alone! Lots of us sit and spin. That means you are not alone either. (You're going to see a bunch of special sections throughout this book titled "You Said . . ." The answers to the questions in those sections came from people your age.) This is a book about all the ways our brains can spin—and all the ways God wants to help us with our spinny brains.

You are not alone!



How do you deal with big thoughts and feelings?

If you're like me, sometimes you don't!

Some days it feels like your thoughts and feelings are running wild. They feel huge and mysterious. You get overwhelmed, melt down, and freeze up. You can feel so discombobulated or nervous or embarrassed that it's downright scary. And once the cycle starts, it just keeps going, doesn't it? Like a spiral sliding down, down, down. It's a terrible feeling! And it can seem like it's running the show in your life.

I bet you don't want to live this way. Neither do I! So why do we feel so stuck inside our spinning heads and sinking hearts?

It's crazy if you think about it: How can something we can't see—*thoughts*—control so much? Our thoughts often decide:

- *what we feel*
- *what we do*
- *what we say or don't say*
- *how we move*
- *how we sleep*
- *what we want*
- *what we hate*
- *what we love*

In this book, we're going to learn how to stop anxious thoughts.

The thing is, you can choose what to think about! But you will need some help. Learning this new skill will take tools, training, and most of all, prayer and grace from God. But you *can* do it! Choosing your thoughts is a whole new way to live and grow. Come with me, and let's learn how to stop anxious thoughts from spiraling down and spinning out.

And if you don't know Jesus, I want to tell you all about Him. Bookmark this page and go to page [XX] to learn what it means to know God. Then come back here! When we believe God loved us so much that He sent Jesus to earth to die on a cross for us, and when we give our lives to Him, we get to be with God forever. He gives us His Spirit to help us.

The Bible tells us we can “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV).

Like, capture every thought? And bring it to Jesus?

Really?

Really.

“*Take captive every thought*” . . . That means it's possible.

2

You Are Not Alone

Fighting for a Free and Healthy Mind



DID YOU KNOW YOU'RE PART OF AN epic battle? Not with suits of armor and swords. Not with dragons or spaceships or superheroes. Not with armies or tanks or big explosions.

You're in a battle for your mind. It's a quiet, invisible battle that goes on between your ears. But it's a fight just the same.

Don't worry. *You're not fighting alone.* People all around you are fighting it too. Adults are fighting alongside you. God is fighting with you, and He promises the big war is already won. Still, while we're living in the brokenness of this world, we have to fight through the everyday battles.

What is this daily battle?

Maybe you've felt it. It's all those messages that trickle into your mind, the ones that make you start thinking, *I'm helpless. I'm worthless. I'm unlovable.* It's when out-of-control thoughts and feelings seem to drag you down and take over.

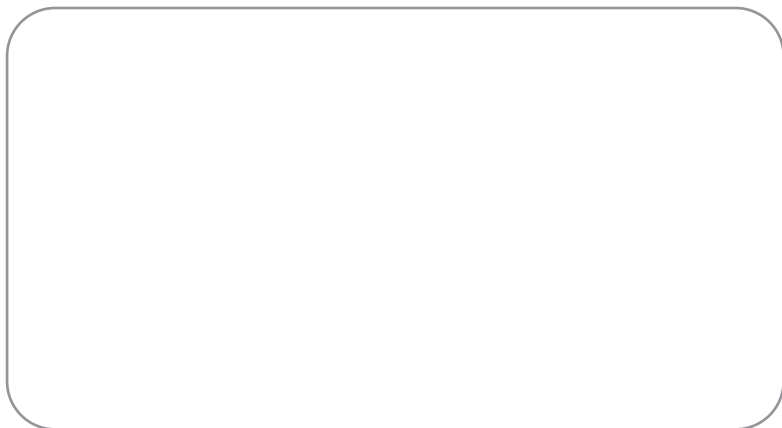
If it feels like you're under attack from all sides, it's because, well, you are.

You may hear a lot about anxiety, depression, fears, and

worries. People used to be too embarrassed to talk about that stuff, but not as much these days. Kids are talking to one another about their struggles. And that's great. It's so much better to be aware of and open about the battles we face, isn't it?

Still, you're under a lot of pressure. Because of the internet, you have access to all the information in the world. If you have access to a tablet, computer, or phone, it's not hard to find out all about world problems, city problems, and neighborhood problems every single day. Add that to the family problems you carry from home and the pressures you feel at school, *and that's a lot of problems*. Way more than you were meant to handle alone. And then, there's media—TV shows, internet videos, games, chats, maybe even social media. A lot of you are constantly getting input from hundreds, even thousands, of other people! So you're carrying a lot of pressure, a lot of people's opinions, and a lot of people's burdens. It can be so heavy.

Do you ever feel like your mind is under attack? Or see your friends struggling in this way? Draw a picture of yourself fighting this battle in the box below, labeling the things you're fighting against.



Yep, there's a battle going on for your mind. But you have everything you need to step up and fight—and win. The Bible tells us,

Our fight is not against people on earth. We are fighting against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness. We are fighting against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world. (Ephesians 6:12, ICB)

Sounds scary, right? How do we fight against something we can't even see? With these special weapons God gives us:

We fight with weapons that are different from those the world uses. Our weapons have power from God. These weapons can destroy the enemy's strong places. . . . *We capture every thought* and make it give up and obey Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4–5, ICB)

Let's dig in and find out more about how to win this fight.

Who Are We Fighting?

We're not just fighting spiraling minds and bad feelings. There's someone behind it all. God's enemy—Satan, the devil—is real. And his biggest delight is discouraging God's children and keeping them from being the powerful warriors they are. The Bible says he “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). He “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). “He is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). He's no joke.

But Jesus is just as real—and way more powerful. The Bible tells us, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy

the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20). “God defeated the spiritual rulers and powers. With the cross God won the victory and defeated them. He showed the world that they were powerless” (Colossians 2:15, ICB).

He’s got this battle covered!

To find out more about how Jesus fights—and how He fights for you—turn to the “Who Is God?” section starting on page [xx]. If you don’t know Jesus very well, that’s the perfect place to start!

Jesus will have the ultimate victory. While we are on earth, though, we still have to deal with the world’s brokenness. But we get to draw close to Jesus. We can take the weapons He gives us and fight to know His victory in our everyday lives until we see it fully in heaven.

**I’m not a victim to
my thoughts. I can
INTERRUPT them.**

What you believe and what you think about matter, and the Enemy knows it. He wants to get in your head to distract you from doing good. He wants to sink you so deep that you feel helpless, overwhelmed, shut down—like you can’t make a difference for the kingdom of God. He wants you spinning and spiraling.

So we start by *thinking about our thoughts* and what we believe.

Fighting in Your Head

The fight starts in our heads. In the brain God created for you.

There is much we don't know about the brain. But did you know that scientists and doctors have learned more about it in this generation than we knew for the previous generations combined? Amazing!

One of the things we've learned is that the brain is constantly changing, whether or not we mean for it to. That means we can change our thinking! The Bible tells us we can. One verse says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Sounds good, right? Refreshing. Like deep breaths for your brain.

If we don't renew our minds—give them a regular refresh or reset—they tend to spiral out of control.

Here's how the spiral works for a lot of us:

Feelings lead to thoughts
Thoughts lead to actions
Actions have consequences
Consequences make us feel feelings
And then it starts all over again.

Kind of makes me dizzy!

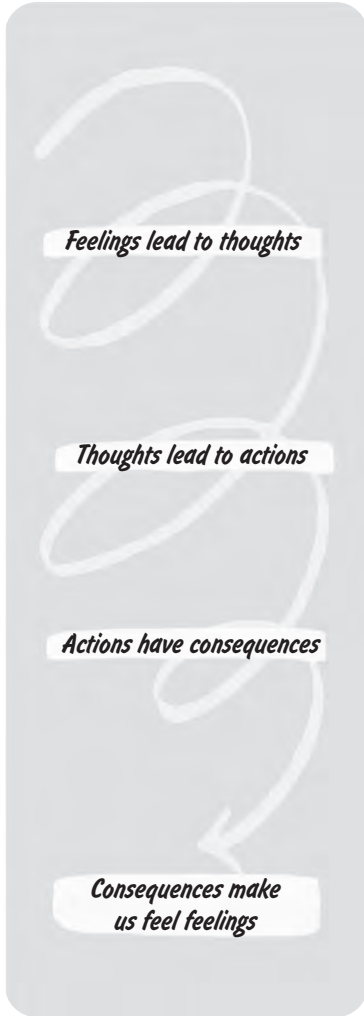
But the good news is, we can stop the spiral. How? By taking *control of the thoughts we choose to think*.

We can do as the Bible says and "take every thought captive." Not only can our thoughts be changed, but *we* can be the ones to change them!

You.

And I.

Can change.



God has given us that power, and science proves we can. God built our brains full of little paths, like trails that are too small to see. They're called *neural pathways*. Those pathways are built—believe it or not—by our thoughts!

It's a little like making a road in the woods. At first you can see only a faint trail of flattened leaves on the ground—it's been walked down just a few times before. But over time the path gets so popular that someone comes and puts gravel on top of the dirt. Then they pour cement on top of that gravel. And then they put in signs and streetlights along the way. Eventually the path is so nice and clear that it would be silly to take another route. That path is just the path you always take. Those thoughts are the thoughts you always think.

Do you want to take a new path in your mind? Think a new thought! If the paths you've made always take you down a spiral of fear, or anxiety, or bad feelings, you can make new ones.

You can *redirect* the traffic. Put up a sign that says, "Road closed! New thoughts, this way!"

And because *how we think* directly leads to *how we live*, that choice makes a huge difference in your life.

Your Growing Brain

Knowing more about the science of our brains can help us have patience with ourselves as we work through things.¹ Here are some things about your brain that you may not know:

When we are somewhere between the ages of eight and thirteen, chemicals called *hormones* start to act. These hormones are part of the amazing system God made that helps your body grow and mature. Your brain, too, is growing and adapting in this time of life called *puberty*. The part of the brain that's in charge of emotions is getting really active. You're undergoing huge changes in your body, so it's normal to feel a little out of whack. Your emotional system is very sensitive. The front part of your brain, which helps you handle your emotions, is under construction!

So a growing brain + changing hormones = an extra challenge. Like dealing with growing pains, but in your emotions and thoughts.

Part of your journey will be learning what to do with big feelings. Your brain might need a break sometimes! You need understanding and gentleness. We'll talk more about how to take breaks when you need them as your brain grows and matures the way God intended.

What thoughts do you wish you didn't have anymore?

How does it feel to know you can control your thoughts?

The Weapon of Choice

Throughout the coming chapters you and I will learn how to go to war with the weapons that God has given us, weapons to use against things that try to stop us from growing steady, sound minds.

I can grab one thought—I have a choice.

We may not be able to take *every* thought captive in *every* situation we face *every* day. But we can learn to take *one* thought captive. Right? Can you grab on to one new thought?

I think you can. Are you ready? Here's a powerful thought:
I have a choice.

That's it.

I have a choice.

If you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior, you have the power of God in you to help you choose! You no longer have to let the Enemy bully you. You have a God-given choice in what you think about, and God gives you the power to make it. You have a choice in where you focus your energy. You have a choice regarding what you live for. That thought is like a mighty weapon in your hands!

I have a choice.

That means our behaviors or circumstances are not the boss of us.

Our feelings are not the boss of us.

Our thoughts are not the boss of us.

We have a choice because Jesus gives it to us. It's a huge, strong weapon.

Fighting Lies with Truth

What if I told you that all the untrue thoughts swirling around in our minds come from only three things we tell ourselves that are not true? Surprising, right? I figured there would be millions—at least as many as there are people! But when you think about it, every one of our untrue thoughts fits into one of these three lies. When we choose to believe these untrue things about ourselves, it can really throw us off. These lies are:

- *I'm helpless.*
- *I'm worthless.*
- *I'm unlovable.*

Which of the three do *you* most relate to? Is there one you find yourself thinking often?

These untrue things we tell ourselves—*I'm helpless, I'm worthless, I'm unlovable*—shape our thinking, our emotions, and the way we act in the world around us. They trap us. They distract us from the truth we should believe. We forget who our good God is and who we are. The Enemy uses these lies to make us believe wrong things about God.

**God says: “I am
who I am.”**

(EXODUS 3:14)

How does that happen? Let's say you sometimes feel worthless and invisible. You might read the Bible and learn that God says He chose you as His adopted child and you are deeply loved (see Ephesians 1:4–5).

Then something happens. Let's say your parents come home, and they're distracted with work. They have to rush around and do other things, and you don't feel like they see you. Up comes that old lie *I'm worthless and invisible*. So you might get sensitive to little things they do, and you might feel anxious and start to spin. Your parents might become the enemy in your mind, and you start to fight them because you think, *They made me feel so bad!* But really, it was the untrue thing—the lie—in your mind that made you feel bad.

No human, even a mom or dad, was ever meant to fill your soul with their love or give you your worth by paying attention to you. Only God can do that. But until you stop believing the lie that God's love isn't for you, you will stay twisted up in the thought that you're worthless.

Instead, that's when you can say: *Hold on! I have a choice. I can choose a different thought. I can look for the truth instead!*

When we begin to think about our thoughts, we can stop the spiral. We can reset and redirect. That's our hope. Of course, we don't have to wrestle each and every thought and fear that pop into our minds. That sounds like a ton of work, right? We'd never do anything else! But we *can* allow God to fight for us—and that looks like letting His truth take up so much space in our minds that our fears will shrink because they have no room. We crowd out the bad with the good.

LIE: *xyz*

TRUTH: *xyz*

We can invite our thoughts to spin around Jesus and His love instead. How?

- *by praying*
- *by remembering words from the Bible*
- *by talking to others*
- *by learning about the way your mind is made*
- *by trying practical tools that work with the way God made you*

All these things are like mighty weapons, powered by God's goodness and love for you. Every spiral can be interrupted. Not one thing you go through is outside God's reach. *You are not alone in this fight.*

**God says: I am
the beginning and
the end. I am the
first, and I am
the last.** (SEE REVELATION 22:13)

Here's a tool to start thinking about your thoughts—right now.

How to Use Your Mind Map

Step One:

In the middle of a blank piece of paper, write the main feeling you're experiencing right now. It could be good or bad. You might write "anxious."

Or "peaceful."

"Overwhelmed."

"Angry."

"Afraid."

Whatever it is, write it down. Now draw a big circle around that word.

Scattered around that large circle, write everything you can think of that is causing you to feel that way. You might write "School is overwhelming" or "Chores" or "Friends being mean" or "Sports." Draw a circle around each of these things and then draw a line from each to the big circle in the middle.

Keep going until you can't think of anything else that might be causing your emotion.

Step Two:

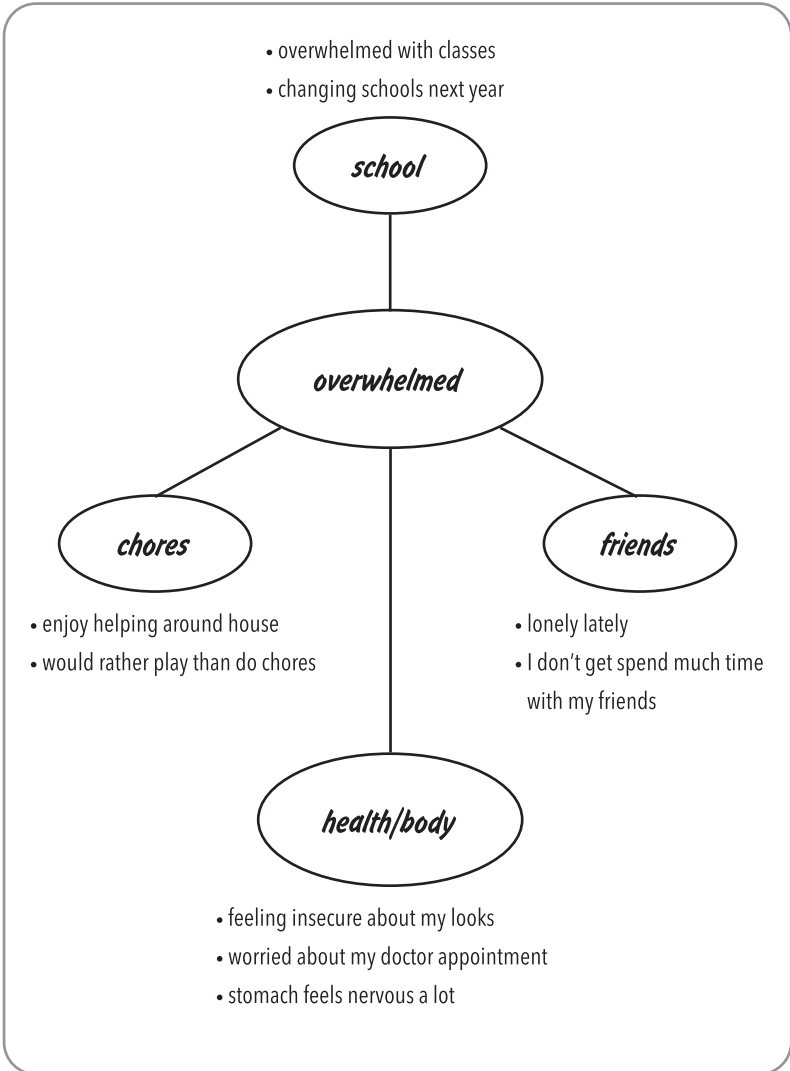
Talk to God. With your paper in front of you, pray through each thing you've written down. Tell God about it. Ask Him to show you what you are believing wrongly about Him and yourself.

Step Three:

Look for patterns in your circles. Are you worrying about things you can't control? Are you angry about how people have hurt you? Are you obsessing about things you don't have? Are you sad about sin in your life?

What is the point of this exercise? It's so you can see plainly how your thoughts are telling a story about God that is either true or untrue.

MIND MAP EXAMPLE



YOUR MIND MAP

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a mind map. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the lower half of the page.



So, how does it feel to know you have these awesome weapons? The battle you're in doesn't sound so scary anymore, does it? God has given you His Spirit and the power, weapons, and tools to shift your spinning thoughts.

And when you're willing to go ahead and fight? Pretty cool stuff starts to unfold. When you think new thoughts . . .

- *You change your brain.*
- *You grow.*
- *You blaze new trails.*
- *Everything changes for you—for the better.*

And remember—God is fighting for you. Your loved ones are fighting for you. I'm fighting for you. You are not alone!

God, thank You for giving me a choice about what happens inside my head. Please remind me today to grab this one thought—*I have a choice*—every time I feel my mind slipping into a spiral. I will rely on Your power and love! Amen.