

"Every parent needs Sissy Goff in their corner."

—EMILY LEY

Sissy Goff, *LPC-MHSP*



THE
WORRY-FREE
PARENT

*LIVING IN CONFIDENCE
SO YOUR KIDS CAN TOO*

“Every parent needs Sissy Goff in their corner. Her grace-filled advice always reminds me of what’s at the heart of my worries—my desire to be the best mom I can be. This book gave me the tools to be exactly that.”

Emily Ley, bestselling author of *Grace, Not Perfection*

“In this well-researched and deeply practical book, Sissy Goff serves as a trusted guide and counselor to help you overcome the crushing weight of worry and move into more freedom and peace as a parent. Whether you are just stressing a little over minor things or feeling suffocated and strangled by fear of the present and future, Sissy’s words of encouragement will be a balm of hope and hands-on help for your weary heart!”

Crystal Paine, *New York Times* bestselling author, podcaster, founder of MoneySavingMom.com, and mom of six

“My friend Sissy has done it again. Drawing on years of clinical practice and extensive research, Sissy wrote a book specifically to support parents. Parents are living busier and more distracted lives. When meeting with parents who express worries about their kids (or themselves), I first offer encouragement and then a resource—a tool to help them feel calmer and more equipped. This gem of a book does both. Anxiety plays tricks and lies. Sissy offers truth and helps parents gain mastery over anxiety by guiding us to do our own ‘worry work.’”

Chinwé Williams, PhD, owner and principal therapist, Meaningful Solutions Counseling & Consulting; coauthor of *Seen: Healing Despair and Anxiety in Kids and Teens through the Power of Connection*

“Our family has been greatly impacted by the words, wisdom, and counsel of Sissy Goff. *The Worry-Free Parent* is another powerful tool that is helping my wife and me navigate the imperfect journey of parenthood. We all need help along the way, and helpers like Sissy are a gift from God.”

Christian recording artist *Matthew West*
and his wife, *Emily West*

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Raising Worry-Free Girls
Braver, Stronger, Smarter
Brave

Coauthored with Melissa Trevathan and David Thomas

Are My Kids on Track?
Intentional Parenting

Coauthored with Melissa Trevathan

Modern Parents, Vintage Values
Raising Girls
The Back Door to Your Teen's Heart

THE WORRY-FREE PARENT

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Sissy Goff, *The Worry-Free Parent*

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This book is dedicated to
my wonder of a little sister, Kathleen Weber:
I admire you more than you know. I learn every day from
the way you offer such beauty . . . through your smile,
your present-in-the-moment-ness, your lovely
sense of hospitality, and of course, your style.
I want to be more like you when I grow up.

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Introduction

“I need you to tell me two things: First, that what I’m feeling is normal. And second, that I’m doing a good job.”

It was a first for me. Never before had a parent sat down in my counseling office and told me right off the bat what she needed. Usually, there are a few more pleasantries. “Hi,” “Hello,” “This is a really cute office,” maybe a short description of her children. But this brave and honest mom cut right to the chase. Why? Because she needed to hear truth.

We all do. But especially those of us who are worriers.

Let me stop for a second to introduce myself. My name is Sissy Goff, and I’m the director of child and adolescent counseling at a magical place called Daystar Counseling in Nashville, Tennessee, where I’ve had the privilege of counseling kids and their families since 1993. If you were going to take your kids to counseling, this is the kind of place you’d want to go. We’re in a little yellow house with a white picket fence. We have popcorn popping in the afternoons after school. Our offices look like living rooms. And our most beloved therapists are dogs. Daystar is about as warm and inviting as you can get when it comes to counseling offices—on purpose—but we’ll get back to that idea later.

Because I meet with kids, I also spend a lot of time with parents. In the past few years there has been one issue I’ve talked about

most with both: anxiety. You may have read the statistics already. At the time I'm sitting down to write this book, one in four kids is dealing with anxiety. Because I've been seeing more and more kids facing this issue, I've tried to do a deep dive to help. At this time, I've read thirty-five books on the subject, become certified as an anxiety specialist twice over, and written three books about it already. Those books are about your kids. One is for the elementary-aged girls in your life, called *Braver, Stronger, Smarter*. One is for the middle and high school girls, titled *Brave*. And one is for you and about all of those girls, *Raising Worry-Free Girls*. This book, however, is the first one specifically *about you*.

Of all the things I've learned about anxiety, potentially the most important is this: Anxiety is an isolator, but it's certainly not an isolated issue. It has an amazing ability to spread. In almost every situation in which I've had an anxious child or teen in my office, they have had at least one anxious parent. Now, that's from my observation. The research says that if you have anxiety as a parent, your child is seven times more likely to deal with it themself.¹ We'll talk more about who gave it to whom later. But it's a little like other things we've experienced recently—if one of you has it, another is likely to get it too. And this book is meant to help us stop the spread.

I'm getting ahead of myself. As I said, I've been counseling kids since 1993, but that also means I sit with a lot of parents—a lot of worried parents whose primary concern is their kids. In fact, these days I probably spend about half of my time in what we call parent consults, which are sessions with parents whose kids might or might not be in counseling. These appointments are a little like the well visits you do with your pediatrician. I have folks who come in yearly, or even quarterly, just to touch base about how their kids are doing. They're asking the "Are my kids on track?" types of questions (which is also the title of another book I cowrote). "Is this normal?" "What do we need to be doing specifically with this child at this age?" "Could there be more to this behavior?" "How do I help them work through this situation?" They're asking the questions every intentional parent has along the way.

My guess is that you're that type of parent too, just because you picked up this book. I would also guess that you love your kids deeply. That you try hard. That you're thoughtful and probably really smart too. That you're at least a little bit of a worrier (thus, buying a book called *The Worry-Free Parent*), and that you have the same two questions as the mom you met at the beginning of this introduction, who happened to be in my office for a parent consult.

So I want you to consider this book your own parent consult at the Daystar house. Actually, this will be a few months' worth of parent consults. We're going to do just what we'd do if you were sitting in my office. We'll talk some about your kids and talk even more about you. I'm going to ask you a few questions throughout these pages. In fact, I'd love for you to grab the workbook that goes along with this book. You could even have a friend read the book with you and talk through the questions together. We're going to talk about your past. We're going to talk about what's happening now with the kids you love. And then we're going to talk about the future—for you as a parent and for you as a person. My hope is that you'll gain a lot of practical help in the present, a lot of understanding about the past, and a lot of hope for your (and your child's) future. We're going to be talking about all three timeframes because worry impacts all three. Worry uses the past to define us. Worry distracts us in the present. And worry defeats us in the future . . . and we're not even there yet. Oh, and one of the most important things to establish is that worry lies. He uses the past, present, and future to lie to you about who you are and who you can be as a parent. He tries to make you believe those same lies that I believe that mom was believing. So let me tell you two of the most important truths you'll find in this book:

1. What you're feeling is normal. You are going to find yourself in the pages of this book often as you listen in on conversations I've had with other parents who feel just as overwhelmed and as anxious as you do.

2. You're doing a great job. Just the fact that you're reading this book helps me know that you're trying hard as a parent. You want to do all you can to love your kids. And you're brave enough

to look at how your life impacts theirs. I truly believe from all my years of counseling that to look at your own life and deal with your own stuff is one of the very best gifts you can give your children.

I'm honored you'd invite me on the journey with you. Together, we're going to find a whole lot of truth and a whole lot of freedom for you as a parent *and* as a person.

For now, I want you to imagine that I've just walked down the stairs of the Daystar house to greet you for your first appointment. You've got a cup of coffee in hand, and we're heading upstairs for our first conversation together.

Worry-Free Takeaways

1. All of us need to hear truth, but especially those of us who worry.
2. Anxiety is an isolator, but it is not an isolated issue.
3. If, as a parent, you have anxiety, your kids are seven times more likely to deal with it themselves. My experience is that most kids who are anxious have at least one anxious parent.
4. The fact that you picked up this book means you're a parent who loves your kids deeply, tries hard, is bright, is conscientious, and is all the things that not only make you a good parent but also lend themselves to your being an anxious parent.
5. What you're feeling is normal.
6. You're doing a great job.
7. To look at your own life and deal with your own stuff is one of the best gifts you can give your children.

SECTION 1

Understanding the Past

1

Understanding Worry and Anxiety

Let's take a little inventory here:

As you're reading this, do you feel worried?

Do you have a stress level you'd rate higher than a six out of ten?

Are your shoulders hunched up around your neck?

Is your jaw clenched?

Have you gotten frustrated with any of your children in the past twenty-four hours?

Have you reacted with the same emotion and intensity as your child?

Have you had a hard time falling asleep?

Have you had flashes of thoughts of your children being hurt?

Have you had intrusive, irrational thoughts?

Have any of those thoughts felt like they got stuck on a loop in your mind?

Have you had a worried reaction that was bigger than the situation warranted?

Have you had worst-case scenario thoughts regarding your kids?

Have you felt like a failure as a parent?

My guess is that you answered yes to at least one of these questions, if not most or all of them. The reason I know is, again, I sit with parents who are much like you every single day. They're parents who have come to my office to talk about their child's level of anxiety. But inevitably we end up talking about their own worry and anxiety. For some parents, that anxiety has been in place for quite some time, so they recognize it; but for others, it seems to have caught them by surprise.

I was a guest on a podcast recently, and the interviewer made an interesting statement: "We're the first generation of healthy parents." How does that statement land with you? As a counselor with over three decades of experience, I believe it's *mostly* true. Of course—and thankfully—there are the exceptions among us who grew up with parents who were ahead of their time in helping kids understand and process emotions, but I don't believe most of us were passing feelings charts around the dinner table or coming up with family coping skills lists. The great news is that, like this interviewer, I do believe most parents today are prioritizing the mental and emotional health of their kids in a way previous generations didn't have the understanding or maybe even the motivation to do. But perfectionist that I am, I would rephrase her statement. Maybe "the first generation of healthy parents" is a little too far. I'm not sure if you're anything like me, but I'm a person who tries to prioritize mental and emotional health. Much like I'm a person who tries to prioritize physical health—and I still eat a little too much queso from time to time. Just can't help myself. I'm also a person who gets frustrated more than I'd like. Who gets caught in looping thoughts and reacts bigger than the situation warrants. I'm trying, but still can't help myself sometimes. So why don't we say "the first generation *pursuing* mental and emotional health"?

Pursuing health is different than *are healthy*. I'm just not sure any of us will be fully healthy this side of heaven . . . although we can certainly try for ourselves and for the kids we love. Plus, it takes a little pressure off to think of it more as pursuit than arrival, don't you think? I want you to hear me say over and over in this book that giving yourself grace is more important than trying harder. More on that later.

Basically, all of this pursuing and arriving and first-generation lingo mean we're forging a new path. We desire to help the kids we love have tools we never had when we were growing up. And we know enough, for the first time, to try. Maybe we've even been in counseling for a season ourselves, or at least have been curious about it. We're aware of the things we wish didn't happen in our parenting—that something inside us is triggered when our kids are triggered. We know we can match their emotion and intensity and do so more often than we'd like. We know we can get stuck in the what-if spiral. We know we get angrier than we wish we did. We realize it can sometimes be hard to let go of our need for control and simply enjoy our kids. The desire is there. We're just not sure how. Where do we even begin to start?

We always want to start with where we are—specifically, we want to start with an understanding of what's happening inside us. There's a reason you get triggered and angry more than you wish you did. There's a reason you go to the worst-case scenario when it comes to these little people you love. There's a reason you even wonder, from time to time, if something is wrong with you that you can't seem to be the parent you long to be. And it's not because you're a failure as a parent or as a person. And we're going to circle back to that idea too, over and over throughout this book.

Let me interrupt here to say something about the rest of our time together: I know you're busy. You are trying hard to get this parenting thing right, *and* you're likely meeting yourself coming and going. Remember, I talked to you yesterday—or a mom who's a lot like you. She managed to come see me in between dropping off her son's forgotten soccer cleats, picking up the dry cleaning, leaving her third business meeting of the day, and driving

the carpool. (Makes me anxious just thinking about it.) I have a sneaking suspicion you have just as many balls in the air.

As the lives of parents have gotten busier and more intense, my messages in counseling parents have gotten simpler. In each session, I try to leave parents with a few takeaways that are not only practical but are easy to remember. And so it will be with the next few chapters. Five things. I want to give you five things, for now, that I believe can help you understand what is going on inside you. These are five things I know to be true about anxiety that I think are particularly important for parents to hear—and can shed a little more light on this journey that you and, as a result, the kids you love are on.

Five Things True about Anxiety

1. The more we understand about worry and anxiety, the easier they are to fight.

Sun Tzu was a Chinese general, writer, military strategist, and philosopher who lived in ancient China somewhere between 544 and 496 BC. His most important and well-known work was a little book called *The Art of War*. It is still one of the most influential works of literature to impact military strategy across the globe. It's also applicable to the emotional (and even social) battles we fight on a daily basis. For example, Tzu said, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."¹

For our purposes—and for the purposes of your parenting and your kids, we're going to consider worry and anxiety our enemy. To understand that enemy is the goal of this chapter. We'll talk more about ourselves in the next. As philosopher Sir Francis Bacon said, "Knowledge is power." Understanding this enemy of worry and anxiety is one of the most important tools in your fight. The more we know, the easier this battle will be. And so I want to start with some basic questions I am asked regularly by parents.

■ **What is anxiety, and how is it different from worry?**

In *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, I talk about a “worry continuum.” It starts with fear, moves to worry, then to anxiety, and then to what is considered an anxiety disorder. Fear is completely normal and, in fact, helpful. Fear keeps us alive when faced with a life-threatening situation. And fear is specifically tied to a certain object or situation. I’m afraid of spiders, but only if I happen to find one crawling on or near me. We usually only have a reaction to our fears when presented with the feared object or situation itself. We’re afraid *of*. As a parent, I would imagine you are fearful of a variety of things happening to your child—pain, loss, injury, to name a few. But when fears are truly fears, they don’t have the power to impact our emotions unless we come face-to-face (or at least in near proximity) with them.

Worry is different. Worry is more pervasive than fear, but it’s also more abstract. We worry *about*. We don’t necessarily worry about objects, but we do worry about situations. Most of those situations are either past or future oriented. We worry we might have irreparably damaged our child’s level of confidence with our angry words getting to the car. We worry other parents are judging us or our child for one reason or a million others. We worry that our child might be struggling to make friends. We worry about almost anything bad we can imagine happening to the kids we love. A lot of parents tell me they worry they’re storing up reasons for their kids to be in counseling later . . . and might as well start saving for it now. Worry comes in all shapes and sizes and is a normal mode of thinking for most parents. Not helpful, but normal. For some parents I see, I truly believe they consider worry a prerequisite to parenting.

As we already established, fear is an adaptive learning mechanism that helps us survive. Fear causes our sympathetic nervous system, our body’s God-given EMS system, to kick into gear to help us avoid an imminent threat. We’ll come back to that idea later. Anxiety, on the other hand, is maladaptive. It misinterprets threats, distorts our thinking, and often causes our sympathetic

nervous system to react without sufficient evidence. Anxiety also causes our worried thoughts or images to get stuck. With kids in my office, I talk about anxiety being like the single-loop roller coaster at the fair. A worst-case scenario thought pops into your mind, and no amount of reasoning or rationalizing can get it out. And the worst-case scenario quickly becomes a real-life perspective. Your teenager isn't home fifteen minutes past curfew, and the wreck you're certain he was in plays on repeat in your mind. You see a photo of your daughter at summer camp sitting alone on her bunk, and rather than thinking she's enjoying a minute of downtime, you've already got her abandoned by all her friends and feeling lonely and depressed. The teacher stops you after class to tell you that your three-year-old son pushed another boy on the playground, and you immediately believe not only that he's struggling to make friends today but that he will do so forever and will likely be the class bully. You get the idea. My guess is you've gotten the idea thousands of times since your parenting journey began.

An anxiety disorder is different from anxiety in that it (1) is more intense, (2) lasts longer, and (3) interferes with daily life.² For anxiety to be categorized as a disorder, it typically needs to be present for at least six months. There are a myriad of anxiety disorders, with the five most common being generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and social phobia or social anxiety disorder. The following descriptions of them are offered by the US Department of Health and Human Services:

Generalized anxiety disorder, also known as GAD, is “characterized by chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it.”

Obsessive-compulsive disorder, OCD, is “characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions).” The behaviors can include hand washing, checking (on items like locked doors), cleaning, and counting. These compulsions “are

performed with the hope of preventing obsessive thoughts or making them go away. Performing these so-called ‘rituals,’ however, provides only temporary relief, and not performing them markedly increases anxiety.”

Panic disorder is characterized by what most of us consider panic attacks, “unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress.”

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop after experiencing a traumatic event, defined as “an event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.” Traumatic events can include accidents, military combat, natural or man-made disasters, and violent personal assaults on ourselves or another that we have witnessed.

Social phobia, or social anxiety disorder, is signified by “overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations.” Social phobia may occur anytime a person is around others, or may be specific to a situation such as speaking or eating in front of people.³

Let me say clearly that this book is not meant to serve as a diagnostic tool for you to determine if you have an anxiety disorder. If you suspect that you might by the end of this book, I recommend finding a trusted therapist who specializes in anxiety. My desire, however, with this book and all the anxiety books pertaining to kids, is to help you not need to go to the counselor’s office. My hope is to provide you with tools to use at home that can make a difference not just for you, but for the life of your family. However, if the tools in this book don’t seem to make a difference, or enough of one, I’d recommend seeing a professional. Sometimes we just can’t get enough perspective on our own to make sense of our worried thoughts and we need that extra support. I’ve certainly done it myself numerous times over the years—as has almost every person I know who is *pursuing* mental and emotional health. Don’t

be afraid to ask. There are kind, deeply compassionate, and profoundly helpful counselors all over the world. We're a pretty good bunch. I think you'd like us.

For now and for our purposes, I'm going to use the words *worry* and *anxiety* interchangeably. If you consider yourself a worrier, I believe you're probably operating with some degree of anxiety. And I would venture to guess that because you picked up this book, you're likely a worrier.

■ **How much anxiety are you seeing today? Among adults?
Among kids?**

Let's talk about the kids first:

- At some point in their development, 30 percent of children and adolescents will experience anxiety; 80 percent never receive help.⁴
- One in three teenagers is struggling with anxiety.⁵
- Girls are twice as likely as boys to suffer from anxiety,⁶ but boys are taken in for treatment more.⁷
- Again, if you have anxiety, your kids are seven times more likely to deal with it themselves.⁸

Which brings us to you:

- 31.1 percent of adults will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lifetime.⁹
- Women are more than twice as likely as men to develop an anxiety disorder.¹⁰
- Only 36.9 percent of adults suffering from anxiety receive treatment.¹¹
- Half of those diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.¹²

In other words, anxiety is the most prevalent disorder among both kids and adults, but it's also the most treatable.

■ Why is it so prevalent?

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, “Anxiety disorders develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events.”¹³ That would pretty much describe all of us, wouldn’t it? We’ve all experienced a complex set of risk factors. Many of us have some sort of family history for anxiety, which we’ll talk more about in the next chapter. We potentially have a personality that’s wired for tension and stress. And we all have lived through a pandemic—which will go down in history as one of the most traumatic events of this century, for children and adults alike. In fact, after so many years as a therapist, I truly believe that all adults today live with some degree of anxiety, whether they know it or not.

One definition of anxiety I read stated that anxiety occurs when “our thinking and planning brain spins out of control because it doesn’t have enough information.”¹⁴ Truth be told, most of us don’t feel like we have enough information—about our futures, about our pasts, about ourselves, and especially about the lives and futures of the kids we love. So there again, we are—all of us—living, walking, breathing incubators for anxiety. Those are the generalities. We’ll talk more about the specifics for you in the next chapter.

2. Anxiety left untreated only gets worse.

Statistically speaking, there are likely a lot of us who fall into the 63.1 percent of adults who never receive treatment. Maybe this is even your first attempt at some kind of help. I’m honored if this book is the beginning of your journey to battling worry and anxiety. But I certainly don’t want to diminish the impact your untreated past has had. The average age of onset for anxiety is seven.¹⁵ Take your age and subtract seven. That is likely how long this anxiety storm inside of you has been brewing. And I believe becoming a parent strengthens the storm significantly.

Our brains develop and strengthen neural pathways based on use. The scientific term is *neuroplasticity*, defined as “the brain’s ability to change and adapt as a result of experience.”¹⁶ In fact,

some theorists call it a “use it or lose it” phenomenon. Doctors and authors Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson say that “where neurons fire, they wire, or join together.”¹⁷ Basically, we create well-worn paths in our brain. The paths that are used most frequently become easier to use. That circuitry strengthens in our brain. It’s why you likely have no idea which pant leg you put on first each day, but my guess is that if you paid attention, it would be the same leg. Getting dressed is a well-worn neural pathway in your brain. As are brushing your teeth and making coffee. And, for many of us, worry has also become a well-worn path.

Worry is not only a well-worn pathway, but it works for us. Or so we believe. Worry often serves a purpose. Many of us try to use worry as a coping skill. We overthink because we believe we’re coming to a more helpful conclusion. Or maybe we believe worry motivates us. It energizes us to do the task in front of us. Maybe we worry to keep ourselves from being blindsided by bad news. Worry makes us, somehow, feel more in control. And, in some families, it can even be a way of showing that we care.¹⁸

I often told my mom not to worry when I was growing up. It could have been about any situation. She was quite the worrier. It didn’t matter if it was telling me to call her when I arrived at my destination, keeping tabs on me if I was sick, or even asking if I was okay when I coughed from the next room. With all the independence I could muster at six and sixteen, I’d tell her I was fine. Her response, however, was always the same: “It’s a mother’s job to worry.”

You may feel the same way. You may subconsciously wonder, *Where would I be without my worry?* Or even, *Who would I be without it?* Worry can eventually become a way of life. But the truth is that worry interferes with our lives much more than it enhances them. In fact, I’d like for you to think of three ways you might have believed worry helped in the past. What are three ways it interferes with who you want to be as a parent and as a person today?

Anxiety left untreated only gets worse. The same is true for worry. The neural pathways are strengthened, and we spend more time worrying than we do experiencing. We feel anxious more

than we feel confident—or even brave. In order to beat worry and anxiety, the truth is pretty plain: We have to fight. And we've got to fight on all levels. It's why this book (and all my books on anxiety) offers practical tools in three areas: help for the body, help for the mind, and help for the heart. Worry tries to defeat you in all three places, so we've got to fight it in each of those places.

The bottom line is that this book is for the parent who wants to change. Not just change your kids, although I believe that will come as a result. This book is for those of you who are tired of the sleepless nights, the emotional ups and downs, and the defeat that comes at the hands of worry and anxiety. You can do this. You're already learning a great deal. And there's a whole lot more understanding of the past, help for your present, and hope for the future to come.

3. Worry plays tricks.

One of the first things I do with kids who come into my office with anxiety is have them give their worry a name. It's one of my favorite tools, and one we'll talk more about in the "Help for Your Mind" chapter. I had one girl who named hers Princess Worry because she said she was the Queen and could boss the princess around. I have had several girls who named their worry Bob—go figure! With younger girls, I typically start out calling it the Worry Monster, or Worry Bug, if they're afraid of monsters. My colleague and friend David Thomas has young boys who call theirs the Hulk because they often get angry when they get worried. In my book for teens, however, I called it the Worry Whisperer. That's what it feels like . . . even for those of us who are adults. Worry whispers things in the back of our minds that feel like truth. But, spoiler alert for the rest of the book: They're not. He uses those whispers to play tricks on us. In fact, I told the teenage girls there are two primary tricks worry plays on them. He tells them,

1. Something is wrong with you.
2. You're the only one who feels this way.¹⁹

For you, I'd like to add a third primary trick he plays on you—or lie he tells you. We could certainly call it either.

3. You're a failure as a parent.

At this point, I have no idea how many thousands of parents I have sat with in my counseling office. They're parents of kids of all ages and all circumstances who have come for help. I believe every single one of those parents has one thing in common: At their core, they're anxious that they're failing as parents. It's not a fear *of* failure, like spiders or snakes. It's not even a worry *about* failure that hangs around a little more often. I believe it's an anxiety that undergirds every late pickup, every forgotten school note, every blown temper, and almost every normal day in between. And I would guess the same is true for you. The anxiety may not even be a conscious thought, but it's likely one that lies just under the surface and is tapped into all too easily.

Anxiety plays tricks, remember? And the tricks it plays are insidious. Its primary goal is to consume our thoughts in a way that defeats us—that keeps us from being present to our lives and with the kids we love. So the worry loops around the very things we're most afraid of. In fact, we could do a timeline from the age of onset right up through adulthood. For younger children, anxiety often loops around something bad happening to one of their parents, which is the scariest thing they can imagine happening at that age. They get a little older, and it's getting in trouble or even getting a stomach bug. A little older, and it might be a fear of getting a bad grade or getting on an airplane. A little older, and it's performing poorly in a track meet or embarrassing themselves socially. A little older (like today, for you), and it's being a failure as a parent. Worry is wise to target our fears right where we live, or think, with enough power to consume our thoughts and make us truly feel like a failure.

Let's dispel that lie right here: You are *not* a failure as a parent. Even the fact that you would read a book about your own anxiety rather than just that of your children means that you are inten-

tional. The fact that you deal with worry and anxiety means that you care deeply, you're trying hard, and you're getting a whole lot more right than you are wrong. We'll come back to that idea later too. But for now, I want you to trust me. You're not a failure. Nothing is wrong with you, and you are certainly not the only one who feels this way. I hope that truth is starting to sink in. But I also know worry's well-worn tricky pathways, and the shame that treads upon them can be deep.

4. Worry needs truth. And a whole lot of other tools too.

In every book I read in my research on anxiety, there was one phrase I came back to over and over and over: anxiety distorts. It distorts our perception. It makes small problems seem medium, medium problems seem big, and big problems seem insurmountable. In fact, it's not even the problems that are, well, the problems. It's the stories we tell ourselves about the problems—in other words, the thoughts we have as a result of any given situation that might be considered problematic.

Let me give you a real-life example. I'll never forget an encounter I had with a mom a while back. Her daughter was in one of my middle school counseling groups and had been for several years. In my mind, she was a very connected part of the group. When this mom sat down in my office, however, she was angry. Not just a little angry, but *very* angry with me. (Keep in mind that anger is a secondary emotion, meaning there is always another emotion lurking beneath the surface of that anger.)

“Sissy, I'm upset about how Sophie is doing in group. She doesn't feel connected to the other girls. They walk in each week and don't speak to her. When she talks, no one asks her questions or is responsive to her. She is trying really hard and feels like the other girls just won't accept her.”

Let me go ahead and say I have had almost exactly the same conversation probably ten different times with parents over the years. And almost every situation has gone the same way. I decided to do a little detective work and pay extra attention the next few weeks in group. As a side note, when I walk into group, the girls

don't speak to me either. Because, you know . . . teenagers. I proceeded to overdo my own entrance in a silly way just to help them realize that they're completely unaware. And the word *unaware* is what I really would use to describe those girls. To the mom's point, some of them might be closer friends than others. But they were not purposefully leaving this girl out, or any of the girls from any of the situations. Once or twice, they may not have been as responsive to her as they were to the others. But the next week, the same thing happened to a different girl. Because, again, teenagers. But this girl whose mom came in to meet with me felt awkward. She believed that others saw externally the discomfort she felt internally. As a result, the story she told herself was that the other girls didn't like her. That they didn't want her to be a part of their group. And then she saw what she was looking for. We all do, by the way. It's a phenomenon called *confirmation bias*.²⁰ Confirmation bias presupposes that we see what we want to see or what we are looking for. She was unconsciously looking for confirmation of what she felt on the inside, or even what she expected was going to happen. And that is exactly what she saw. She didn't see that the girls didn't speak to me either. She didn't see the questions they did ask. She saw all of the things that confirmed her theory. And it was that theory, or the story she told herself, that was the primary problem.

Let's stop right here and look at a cognitive behavioral therapy tool called the cognitive triangle. It's one of the foundational principles of CBT, which is the most highly researched type of therapy for anxiety with the most evidence-based results.²¹ The triangle is an illustration with thoughts at the top, and feelings and behaviors providing each corner of the base.

The premise behind the triangle is that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all interconnected. Therefore, it's the thoughts we have (the stories we tell ourselves) that impact our feelings, which then impact or dictate our behavior. CBT asserts that if we change any part of the triangle, change will occur in the other parts as well. Most CBT interventions go directly to stopping and changing those distorted, anxious thoughts.



For this girl, the story she told herself of being left out (thoughts) caused her to feel isolated and hurt (feelings), which caused her to talk to her mom and decide to drop out of group (behavior).

We could look at the same CBT triangle with her mom, because both fell prey to confirmation bias. She was afraid that her daughter was being rejected by friends. Her mom's behavior (coming to see me) was a result of her emotion (anxiety and anger), which was a result of the story she was telling herself about the story her daughter told her. I hope you're following. She was anxious about her daughter's level of anxiety and worried that it was beginning to spill over into depression. She was doing her best to be a good, protective mom. But she missed the important fact that anxiety distorts. And anxiety often distorts our perceptions. Truth be told, I missed it the first time a parent came to me with the above situation. I didn't know as much about anxiety in my earlier years as a therapist. But I know more now. And I'm committed to helping you find the truth that I believe can set you and your kids free.

Worry needs truth. This mom needed truth too—as did her daughter. The daughter would have been much better served if we had been able to talk about confirmation bias and distorted perceptions and she had learned what to do with those anxious thoughts. Sadly, this young girl never came back to my counseling office, feeling that group had been yet another place she had

been left out. I did try to present the truth of what I had seen in group to this mom. But she trusted her daughter's words and perceptions more than she did mine, with good reason. She was trying her best to help her daughter. We just didn't know enough to provide the tools and the truth that would have helped—for long after her middle school years.

Honestly, almost every time that scenario has presented itself, it has gone the same way. My hope is that together we can do something different, for ourselves and the kids we love. In the Help for the Present section, you're going to learn to be a good detective and differentiate between perceptions and reality. We're going to stop those anxious, distorted thoughts right when they start. We're going to find our way to truth. And to a whole lot of other tools too.

5. Every parent worries. Especially the good ones.

The book I wrote for elementary-aged girls is called *Braver, Stronger, Smarter*. I decided on the title based on two things: First, I love Pooh. And I particularly love the quote “You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”²² Second, as anxiety rates were rising exponentially and I was seeing more and more kids in my office battling anxiety, I noticed one primary theme that was true across the board: Every single one of those kids was really bright. It didn't matter their age or gender. Every one of them was conscientious. They tried hard. They cared deeply. They wanted to get things right. As I tell anxious kids in my office every single day, they're really the coolest kinds of kids.

The same is true of you. You worry because you care. You are conscientious. You want to be the best parent you can possibly be. But that care sometimes gets the best of you, and it's hard to turn the volume down. We're going to get there together.

Spoiler alert: The braver, stronger, smarter idea is actually another CBT tool. It's called *thought replacing, reframing, or flipping the thought*. We take the worried thought and flip it on its head. We're going to be practicing all these tools quite a bit throughout

our time together. In fact, practice is another of your most important tools. The number one reason we don't work through our anxiety is we don't practice the tools we've learned that can help. So let's practice right here.

Negative thought: I'm an anxious parent, which means I'm failing myself and my kids.

Positive thought: I care so much about my kids. I've never wanted to get anything right as badly in my whole life. And I'm doing a much better job than I know. (That last sentence is my addition.)

Psychologist and author Dan Allender said in a conference I attended a few years ago that good parents get it right 50 percent of the time.²³ How's that for a statistic? Fifty percent of the time. As bright and conscientious and caring as you are, I know you're doing way better than that. And we're creating new neural pathways, even as you're reading this chapter, that are going to help you to be the parent and person you deeply long to be. You're doing great already!

Worry-Free Takeaways

1. Most parents today are prioritizing the mental and emotional health of their kids in a way previous generations didn't have the understanding or maybe even the motivation to do.
2. We always want to start with an understanding of where we are and what's happening inside of us.
3. The more we understand about worry and anxiety, the easier they are to fight.
4. Anxiety left untreated only gets worse.
5. Worry plays tricks.
6. Worry needs truth. And a whole lot of other tools too.
7. Every parent worries. Especially the good ones.