

# INTRODUCTION

A famous cowboy once said that being brave isn't about never feeling afraid but about saddling up your horse to ride again after you've fallen off.<sup>1</sup> The goal isn't *never* feeling scared; it's being brave *when* you feel afraid. Through so much of my life, worry, anxiety, and even panic have been parts of my story. For a long time this weighed on me—I felt bad about feeling bad. Through biblical study, God has helped me see that I don't need to be embarrassed about this struggle. So many biblical heroes such as Elijah, Moses, Jeremiah, Esther, and many others struggled with scary thoughts, bad moods, and even dark nights of doubt. Hundreds of verses speak about fear, anxiety, depression, and bad dreams, and none of them say you should be ashamed of struggling with these things or that, if you love God, you won't ever have bad days. If anything, the presence of these difficult emotions is proof that you

are human and that you need God's help. In Psalm 73:26, David said, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (NIV). This verse has encouraged me in many hard moments.

This is not a book that is going to make difficult emotions and moments in your life go away. What I want to tell you in these pages isn't a magic pill or a secret to a stress-free life. Even if there were such a thing (there isn't), you wouldn't really want that—not deep down—because in our hardships is when God comes close and helps us grow into who we were born to be. "The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name" (Exodus 15:3 NIV), and you were created in His image. That means you are called to be a warrior too! How are you ever going to get there if you don't go through hard things? (Hint: You can't. Battles are sort of warrior territory.)

This book is all about what to do when you feel anxious. The Bible tells us to not worry. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (NIV). When you have scary emotions, choose to put your trust in God and saddle up your horse anyway—even after you have fallen off. You will then grow into the warrior God created you to be.

There are ten strategies in this book that demonstrate hard-fought lessons I have learned along my own warrior path. They have helped me and my family big-time, and I am excited to share them with you! Along the way I will introduce you to two characters, Luca and Coral, who will face struggles of their own. Their stories show examples of the lessons we are learning lived out by people your age.

Thank you for reading this book, and I pray you know how loved you are by the Good Shepherd, who is with you on your good days as well as your bad ones!

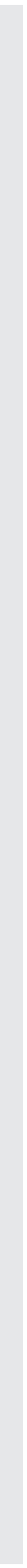
**Levi Lusko, a.k.a. your fellow warrior**



STRATEGY 1

# TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR MOOD





“Dad, help! Where are my lucky socks?! I can’t find my lucky socks!”

It was Saturday morning, and Luca had torn his room apart. He’d already put on his favorite shin guards, soccer shorts, and jersey—a blue-and-white Lionel Messi jersey, of course—but his favorite socks were nowhere to be found. He’d looked in his dresser, his closet, and even the dryer. His nose wrinkled in confusion. *Where have they gone?*

“I’ll look in my drawer to see if your socks got mixed with mine,” Dad called to Luca from down the hall. Luca got down on his hands and knees and searched under the bed. No socks down there—just dust bunnies, a few LEGO bricks, and an action figure he’d forgotten about.

Today was a big day for Luca: the day of the soccer tryouts he’d been practicing for all summer. He was already worried about how the day would go, and the thought of facing tryouts without his lucky socks made him even more nervous.

His dad popped his head into Luca’s bedroom. “Can’t find ’em, Chipper,” Dad said, using Luca’s special nickname. “Might be time to pick some other socks that are just as lucky.”

Luca, frustrated, saw the digital clock on his nightstand and knew his dad was right. He needed to be at the field soon, and he still needed to eat breakfast. He stood up, walked to the dresser, and found another pair that would have to work. He gave them a sniff. Fortunately, they didn’t stink too bad.

Dad and Luca went downstairs and found Mom and Luca's little sister, Anna, at the kitchen table. Mom had made some pancakes and set out a glass of orange juice for Luca.

"We've got a few minutes, Luca. Want some breakfast?"

"I do. Thanks, Mom." Luca pulled out a chair and sat. The fresh pancakes made the whole room smell like a bakery. He doused them in syrup, took a big bite, then picked up his juice glass to wash it all down. But when he reached over his plate to set down the glass, he knocked over the bottle of maple syrup.

*Slosh!*

The sugary liquid oozed down Luca's clean jersey and onto his shorts. "Oh, no!" he shrieked, jumping up from his chair. Dad also jumped up and grabbed a dish towel, but it was too late. Luca's favorite jersey was now sticky and gross.

"Run and change, honey. We need to leave in five," his mom said.

As Luca hurried back upstairs to change into his *not*-favorite jersey, his feelings began to swirl. Without his lucky socks *or* his favorite jersey, how would he possibly do his best today? His mood was already beginning to plummet, and the day had barely begun. He ran to the closet and found another old jersey that would have to work, then yanked off the dirty shirt and shorts. "Sorry, Messi," he mumbled, tossing the sticky jersey into the clothes hamper. Then he pulled on fresh clothes and sprinted back down the stairs.

His parents and Anna were already cleaning up the kitchen table.

"Can I finish eating?" Luca asked. He wasn't sure if it was hunger or nervousness making his stomach feel weird. Maybe it was both.

"Yes, but hurry," his dad said. "We don't want you to be late."

Without sitting down, Luca scarfed down as many bites of pancake as he could. In a matter of a minute, he cleaned his whole plate. Maybe that was a bad idea, though, because right away, he felt a little queasy.

As he climbed into the van with his family, Luca couldn't help but feel a little bad for himself. Nothing had gone right today, and tryouts hadn't even started. As they headed down the road toward the field, he worried the rest of the day would be just as unlucky as his morning. His hands felt a bit shaky, and he wondered why he was already sweating. Luca felt his brow furrowing and a scowl making its way across his face.

## BEWARE OF EVIL LEVI

When was the last time you were in a really bad mood? Did your day start out anything like Luca's? On crummy days, nothing seems to go your way—and just when things seem to be bad enough, something else happens to make you feel even *worse*. Maybe you had a fight with your parents about how much screen time you should get. Maybe you tripped on your shoelace and ate the pavement in front of your friends. Maybe your little brother threw your library books in the toilet, or you worked really hard on your science project and didn't get the grade you thought you should. All sorts of things can put us in a funk—so you're not the only person to ever feel this way. Even a warrior in training has a bad day now and then.

How do you know you're in a bad mood? I don't know about you, but

when I'm in a funk, I almost become a different person—an evil version of myself I like to call “Evil Levi.” It's almost like the normal version of me gets taken hostage by the evil version. When Evil Levi is in charge, he's angry and annoyed, he's snippy and mean to others, and he can't see anything but the bad parts of his day. He feels sorry for himself and spreads his bad mood to everyone who happens to be near him. Eventually, after letting his bad mood completely take over, Evil Levi decides to give up on the rest of the day. *This day is spoiled*, he thinks. *I'll just have to try again tomorrow.*

You've felt that way, haven't you? As though so much of the day has been wasted that there's no use trying to make good decisions. *Tomorrow is a new day. This one's no good.*

Most of the time, we find ourselves in a bad mood when something bad happens to us. When we stub our toes or get picked on at school, those things can make us feel powerless and sad. But what if I were to tell you that you *aren't* powerless—that you have way more say in how you think and feel than you probably ever knew?

You are brave. You are strong. And I want to train you to take control of your life in all the ways you can—and that often starts with choosing your mood. You're becoming a warrior, and before you can be strong on the outside, you must be strong on the inside.

## THE THINGS YOU'RE IN CHARGE OF

The adults in your life make a lot of choices for you, like where you live, where you go to school, and sometimes even what you eat or wear.

(Raise your hand if you've ever fought with your mom about your outfit for school picture day!) It's your parents' or guardians' job to make good decisions that will keep you safe and healthy while you're growing up. But as you grow up, young warrior, you will get to make more and more decisions for yourself. In other words, *you* get to be in charge.

Still, you may be tempted to think that your mood—the way you feel—isn't one of the things you get to be in charge of. Something gross, sad, or annoying happens—something you didn't choose—and it puts you in a bad mood, right? But even though we may not be in control of the things that happen to us, we *are* in control of how we think about them and respond to them. Your brain belongs to you, after all. And part of growing up is learning to take charge of your own thoughts and moods.

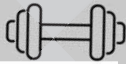
Let me give you an example. When I was in school, I took an art class. It was a lot of fun—paints, pencils, canvases, and creative messes everywhere. I looked forward to this class every day. We each had a little cubby where we would paint, draw, sketch, or color for forty-five minutes. My teacher was a kind woman named Mrs. Losey, and on occasion she allowed us to bring in music to listen to while we worked.

Here's the funny part, though. I have a lot of memories of going to class in a bad mood. But no matter what had happened earlier in the day to fray my nerves or tank my spirit, I never left my art class in a funk.

Why do you think that is?

Now that I'm older, I understand why art class made me feel so much better. It was a safe place where I could take deep breaths, do

something fun and creative, and reset my thoughts and mood. I could put aside all the terrible, horrible, no-good things from earlier in the day and focus instead on something I enjoyed. No wonder I loved going to art class so much!



## TACTICAL TRAINING

Let's take a quick break here to brainstorm a list of what tends to make you happy and ideas to improve your mood.

I am happiest when I'm

\_\_\_\_\_  
[INSERT A POSITIVE ACTIVITY.]

When I'm in a bad mood, being in

\_\_\_\_\_  
[INSERT A PLACE YOU LOVE.]

usually makes me feel better.

When I'm anxious or worried,

\_\_\_\_\_  
[INSERT A POSITIVE ACTIVITY.]

can calm me down.

Part of growing up is discovering the activities, habits, and places that make us feel better. Maybe for you, riding your bike or spending time with your grandad makes you feel peaceful and calm. Or maybe you like reading books, playing with your dog, or listening to music. The things you love and enjoy are as unique to you as your fingerprints because God made you unlike anyone else He's ever made.

As I said, your list is unique because *you* are unique. God made you that way! Now let's talk about how to use what we know about ourselves to make better decisions about our moods.

## CHANGE YOUR MOOD, CHANGE THE GAME

I'm a grown-up, and it's still hard for me to control my mood sometimes—even though I've had a lot of practice! But warriors have to control their emotions. Why? You may not think your mood matters to anyone but you, but have you ever been around someone who just seems to be mad, annoyed, or snippy *all the time*? Their bad moods affect *them* the most, of course, but their sourness can also spread to you. So it's important to realize that learning how to better control your mood will not only make *you* feel better, but it will also make everyone else's day a little better too. Talk about a game changer!

I've got three ideas for you, and I hope you'll try them all. Especially if you tend to worry a lot or get upset often, I hope some of these strategies will help you battle the bad feelings that can ruin your day.

### Step 1: Switch Positions

Have you ever participated in a sport and thought you were terrible at it—until you switched positions? All you needed was a new place to play! Moods can be similar. Sometimes “switching positions” by going to a new place or changing your circumstances can take you one step closer to a better mood.

At your age, you're still not in charge of many of your circumstances (such as where you go to school or where you live). But when you find yourself in a situation that's making you anxious or upset, think about what you *can* change. Here are some examples:

If you're in your older brother's room and he's being mean to you—do you *have* to stay in his room? Or can you find somewhere else to go?

If you're outside at recess and your friend says something mean to you—do you *have* to stand there and take it? Or can you walk away and play with someone else?

If someone at your lunch table is a bully to you or someone else—do you *have* to keep sitting at that table? Or can you ask an adult to help you find a new group of people to sit with?

If you're taking dance classes but you get nervous and panic before each lesson—do you *have* to keep taking lessons? Or can you talk to your parents about trying another activity instead? Or are there calming practices you can do before your dance class starts to help soothe your nerves?

It's true that you can't change all your circumstances, but if you know a situation is ruining your mood on a regular basis, talk to a trusted adult about how you can “switch positions” to avoid those situations in the future.

## Step 2: Think Positive

In the Bible, Paul the apostle told us to “think about what is good and worthy of praise. Think about what is true and honorable and right and pure and beautiful and respected” (Philippians 4:8 ERV). These are some fancy words that mean “*think about good things.*” Do you imagine that thinking about good things—the things that bring you happiness and peace—could help you when you're feeling down?

I admit, this one is a bit harder to master—in fact, I'm still trying! But it *is* possible to have a better mood when you choose to think positive. Let me give you another example here.

Let's say you did poorly on your math homework, and you feel bad about it. (Relatable!) You have two choices now.

**Option 1:** Spend the rest of the week feeling bad about your grade and telling yourself, “I am so bad at math—there’s no way I’ll ever be good at it.”

**Option 2:** Spend the rest of the week trying to figure out what you didn’t understand about your assignment. Ask your teacher or your parents for help and tell yourself, “If I try harder this week, I’ll do better next time.”

Which is the better option? Which is more likely to lead to better grades *next* week and a better mood *this* week? Which choice are you more likely to make?

Taking charge of our thoughts is not easy. It doesn’t always come naturally. But when we choose not to feel sorry for ourselves and not to dwell on negative things, we are choosing a more positive path—one that almost always leads to a better mood.

### Step 3: Talk to God

In the Psalms, a book full of poems and songs, King David wrote about how God, his Father, had taken care of him. One day he said to God: “Your help made me so happy. Give me that joy again. Make my spirit strong and ready to obey you” (Psalm 51:12 ERV). God cared for David when he was feeling down and afraid—and He will do the same for you!

Next time you find yourself in a bad mood, why not talk to God about it? Tell Him what you’re feeling and ask for His help. God loves nothing more than to hear the voice of His young warrior, and He knows just what you need. Want to practice a prayer you can use anytime you’re down in the dumps and need a little encouragement from God?

*Dear God, thank You for loving me and caring about my feelings. Today I'm upset about \_\_\_\_\_, and I need Your comfort and care. Will You help me feel better, and will You change my attitude? Help me to see that the rest of this day can still be good. Amen.*



### WARRIOR CHALLENGE

Taking deep breaths may sound simple—I mean, it is!—but did you know it's one of the best ways to calm yourself when you're upset? Next time you catch yourself becoming the version of you that you don't want to be (looking at you, Evil Levi), try breathing in for five seconds, breathing out for five seconds, and waiting for five seconds. Repeat as needed. You should feel yourself returning to normal with each deep breath you take.

Whenever you face a bad mood, don't let it control you! Look in the mirror, remind yourself that you are a warrior in training, and work out your inner strength by crushing your bad mood to dust.

By the time Luca was on the soccer field, his nerves had gotten the best of him. Normally a confident and strong player, he lined up with the other kids to practice shots and missed five goals in a row. Before long he was fumbling passes and tripping over his own feet. After having the ball stolen from him for the third time, he threw his hands in the air with frustration.

When the players were all given a ten-minute water break, Luca

trudged over toward his family, who were sitting on the bleachers along the field. His shaggy brown hair was dripping with sweat, and his tired legs seemed to weigh a thousand pounds apiece.

“I’m ready to quit,” he said, taking a bottle of water from his mom’s hand. “My tryout is obviously wrecked. I’m not sure why I ever thought I was good at soccer.”

“Hey, that’s my son you’re talking about!” said his dad. “You’ve been practicing for this all summer. Maybe you just need to change your attitude. If you go out there thinking you’re going to play badly, you probably will.”

Luca scoffed. “Hold up. You’re blaming my *attitude* for this?”

Mom took Luca by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Listen, kiddo. I know you’re frustrated. Things haven’t gone your way today. But what Dad’s trying to say is *you* get to decide what happens for the rest of this tryout. You can focus on what has gone wrong, or you can choose to start fresh. You have a whole hour left to show everyone what you can do. Why not try to forget about your mistakes and think about what can go right? We believe in you, Luca. Try to believe in yourself too.”

As he wiped sweat from his forehead, Luca thought about his parents’ words. He knew he had a choice: to give up or try again. He really did love soccer, and he really wanted to make the team—so the idea of quitting suddenly sounded a little worse than the idea of trying his best. He took a deep breath and another long gulp of water. “Okay,” he said. “I’ve got this.”

“Way to go, Chipper!” his dad hollered in a way-too-loud voice. “That’s my boy!”

Luca couldn’t help but laugh. As he trotted back across the field and rejoined the rest of the players, he tried to think positively instead of



assuming he would fail. Before long, the coaches blew their whistles, and Luca started kicking the ball a little harder and a little straighter. He made a couple of shots he hoped would impress the coaches. He stopped focusing on the mistakes he had made and started running faster. Soon, he found himself having fun again. His mood had gone from bad to better, all because he chose to focus on the good.

After the last whistle was blown, Luca high-fived some of the other players and sprinted back to his family. They all gave him hugs even though he was gross and sweaty, and his little sister, Anna, bounced on her toes and clapped. Though Luca was unsure of the outcome, he was grateful for his supportive family and was sure he had tried his best. As they walked through the park back to the van, Luca's dad gave his shoulder a squeeze.

A few days later, when Luca found out he had officially made the team, his family took him out to celebrate at his favorite pizza place. As they were driving home, stomachs full and spirits high, he looked down at his feet and saw something green poking out from under the seat in front of him. He reached down and pulled his lucky socks out from their hiding spot. "Look what I found!" he called out. "They were here this whole time!"

His mom turned and faced him from the front seat, then laughed at the wadded-up socks in his fist. "Just goes to show you that luck isn't real, kiddo. I'd say you did just fine without them."

His mom winked, and Luca smiled. Knowing he had done his best and succeeded felt a lot better than believing in luck anyway.



## GET READY FOR BATTLE

Think about your last terrible, horrible, no-good day—when nothing went according to plan. Reimagine that day with a strategy or two you learned from this chapter. What could you have done differently? How might your day have been better if you had taken control of your mood?