

Contents

- The Labels We Wear 1
1. An Invitation to Examine the Label 9
- PART 1: Learn to Address Stress 23**
2. The Two Types of Stress Draining Us All 25
 3. How Your Self-Talk Impacts Your Health 39
 4. Could Your Pesky Thoughts Be Protective? 55
 5. Your Breath Reflects Your Stress Levels 69
- PART 2: Identify the Root Issues 81**
6. Is It Me or My Trauma Response? 83
 7. The Coping Mechanisms That Kept You Safe 99
 8. Unblocking Your Feelings 115
 9. Looking for a Magic Fix 127
- PART 3: Add Variety to Your Diet 139**
10. A Body in Stress Won't Digest 141
 11. Using Food to Support Your Mood 153
 12. Weight Issues and Restoring Body Peace 167
- PART 4: Exercise Your Body and Brain 181**
13. Engaging in Healthy Emotional Regulation 183
 14. Movement as Medicine 197
 15. Healing Through Rest 213
- Labeled with Wholeness 227
- Acknowledgments 230
- Notes 235
- About the Author 245



The Labels We Wear

“You have manic-depressive illness, and you will struggle with this for the rest of your life.”

Sitting in the psychiatrist’s office with my parents, I was in complete denial as I listened to the latest explanation of my “broken brain.” I’d already won the prize of PTSD. Depression and I had partied, too—and those meds made for a memorable party favor. Now, as an eighteen-year-old college freshman, I was being handed a new label: *bipolar*. I was officially unstable, the walking punchline of a joke about Texas weather. This label completely altered how I viewed myself for many years to follow.

My labels told me that my brain could not be trusted. Neither could my feelings. The next few years involved more meds. More attempts to sleep my sickness away. More struggle. I prayed to God to make me normal, and I frequently ranted my resentment about what he had allowed into my life. When he didn’t come through for me in the ways I wanted, I took matters into my own hands, self-medicating with food, alcohol, and distractions. Filled with doubts about my identity, I picked up more labels. *Anxious. Hungry. Scattered. Overweight. Exhausted.*

When I became pregnant at twenty-two, yet another new label emerged—*single mom*. Unwed and unwanted. Alone. Knocked up, with a child out of wedlock.

It was a lot. A lot of labels. A lot of feelings. And *a lot* to process.

That was how my story began, but it's not how it continued. Slowly, over many years, I became empowered, learning to live beyond all the labels. Discovering how to listen to my body and advocate for myself set me on a journey to wholeness and healing—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

An Invitation to Peace

If you've felt plagued by labels too, allow me to invite you on a journey toward peace. As a health coach who has been in remission from my illnesses for well over a decade, I hope to light a tiny spark in your heart, bringing you closer to wholeness and restoration. I work with women (and some men) of all ages and stages who wrestle with anxiety, depression, panic attacks, mood swings, fatigue, hormonal imbalances, trauma, autoimmune disease, metabolic dysfunction, disordered eating behaviors, body image issues, and so much more. Many of them feel stuck and discouraged by their lack of progress or their perceived inability to “get it together.”

Statistics show that 26 percent of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives.¹ Over 50 percent will be diagnosed with a chronic illness.² You may be one of the diagnosed, labeled for life—or it feels that way.

Or perhaps you've labeled yourself, using terms such as *overwhelmed*, *exhausted*, *too emotional*, *negative*, *needy*, *damaged*, *anxious*, or *addicted*. Maybe these labels have initially been helpful for you to make sense of your symptoms and life experiences. That's okay! Unfortunately, many labels can eventually become constraining, preventing you from living a life of integrated wholeness. The weight of these labels might have kept you from engaging

THE LABELS WE WEAR

in supportive relationships—whether with your heavenly Father, other people, or even yourself.

The invitation to “live beyond your label” doesn’t mean pretending the labels are nonexistent or unimportant. In fact, addressing the labels may be a crucial part of determining how much of your identity has been formed by them. Identifying and examining your labels are necessary parts of the journey to wholeness. But living solely through the lens of labels can negatively impact how you live your life. Creating an identity based on labels leads to unhealthy compartmentalization of mind, body, and spirit—pitting parts of yourself against one another. And for many of us, being labeled can lead to overidentification with the corresponding symptoms. While a diagnosis doesn’t equal a prognosis, labels can become negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Dr. Lissa Rankin writes, “By labeling a patient with a negative prognosis and robbing him or her of the hope that cure might be possible, we may ultimately prove the poor prognosis we have bestowed upon our patient correct.”³

Living beyond your label means you can look at your label (and maybe even appreciate its function) without being defined by it. You can understand that while labels can give a name to a collection of presenting symptoms, they don’t tell you how to manage the symptoms. When you live beyond your label, you can view your symptoms as interconnected pieces of a complex puzzle that makes you uniquely *you*. Assembling the puzzle pieces then becomes a catalyst that forges deeper connections within yourself and to the world around you. This helps you see that no matter your label—whether it’s been given *to* you or *by* you—your life has a purpose, and so does your pain.

I struggled for years to make connections between my mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health. I shoved away unpleasant symptoms so I could push through life, even if doing so numbed

LIVE BEYOND YOUR LABEL

me too much in the process. But none of us can live a life of wholeness if we're living a life of compartmentalization. Made in the likeness of a three-in-one God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), you bear God's image in your body, mind, and spirit. Every part of you matters to God. No part of you is cut off from his transformational presence, no matter what label you've received. In fact, God uses your body, mind, and spirit to integrate wholeness into everything he's designed for you to be and do. Even the pesky symptoms you experience can alert you to a need for integrated wholeness.

I don't want you to simply address your symptoms. I want you to look beneath the symptoms, to dig into the roots of your labels and examine contributing factors—without judgment or criticism. This coaching method is what I use with my clients as well. It's an approach that comes from the field of functional medicine, and it completely altered the way I view my health, helping me to untangle decades of painful symptoms. The Institute for Functional Medicine defines this methodology as “a systems biology-based approach that focuses on identifying and addressing the root cause of disease. Each symptom or differential diagnosis may be one of many contributing to an individual's illness.”⁴

Functional medicine allows us to look beyond our labels and peel back the contributing causes like the layers of an onion. For example, if a client is diagnosed with depression, I consider all the factors that might affect the manifestation of their diagnosis: lifestyle, genes, nutrition, sleep patterns, inflammation, medications, vitamin and/or mineral deficiencies, immune health, metabolism, digestive health, toxin exposure, hormones, or even surgeries. I imagine myself as something like a holistic detective, looking for patterns of imbalance so I can offer support through tools that bring healing to the mind, body, and spirit.

My Christian faith allows me to take an even more holistic view of functional medicine. God cares about your body, just as

he cares about your mind and spirit. He created you with a body that he declared very good. He's given you one vessel to live out your purpose, and he's provided you with incredible tools within your body to seek homeostasis (balance). When the body is out of balance, it signals you with alerts. By honoring the design you've been given and partnering with it, you can better appreciate the Creator who put you together.

Through this method, I'll share what I discovered on my healing journey and how I have supported hundreds of clients with their own journeys. My favorite part about this is that it equips *you* to advocate for *you*.

Reading *Live Beyond Your Label*

Live Beyond Your Label is organized into four parts, according to the acronym LIVE, which represents the four foundational components of my coaching method:

Learn to address stress

Identify the root issues

Add *Variety* to your diet

Exercise your body and brain

Part 1, "Learn to Address Stress," explores the two types of stress everyone experiences and how they manifest in daily life. We'll focus on the mind-body connection and ways to support a healthy stress response in the body and brain by addressing thought patterns and incorporating new tools for calming, such as breath work.

Part 2, "Identify the Root Issues," focuses on how trauma, coping mechanisms, and blocked feelings may be at the root of your struggle to move forward in your healing journey. You'll learn how

LIVE BEYOND YOUR LABEL

to view your journey with a fresh perspective, discovering tools to help you partner with and listen to your body, even when you feel like your body is working against you.

Part 3, “Add Variety to Your Diet,” explores how stress hinders digestion of vital nutrients. You’ll learn how to have a healthier relationship with food and your body as you continue to partner with it. We’ll also consider a new perspective on the body weight conversation, and how even with weight fluctuations, your body is on your side, trying to protect you.

Part 4, “Exercise Your Body and Brain,” focuses on practicing healthy emotional regulation to pursue peace with your own mental well-being and that of others. You’ll learn how movement is an essential tool for shifting mood and see what kinds of movement practices can be therapeutic for different mood states. You’ll discover how rest and sleep are not the same thing, but both are necessary for continued healing and growth.

The end of each chapter features activities to enable you to make the mind-body connection. These exercises are designed to help you connect what you’ve learned in a holistic way by showing you how to gently partner with your unique body and brain instead of fighting against them or forcing them to change.

I wrote *Live Beyond Your Label* because I want you to know that there is hope. The pages of this book brim with what I hope will be a fresh perspective and tools to support your healing journey. I share a lot of my own stories because I don’t want you to feel alone in yours. My story also introduces tools I’ve used with hundreds of clients—people like you—whom I’ve coached and supported. You’ll notice an emphasis on nutrition, movement, and rest, but in a far gentler way than you may be used to. My goal is to help you keep primary things primary—your relationship with God, your relationship with others, and your relationship with yourself.

THE LABELS WE WEAR

As we travel together through this book, it's my prayer that you'll become increasingly empowered to look and live beyond your label. I hope you'll begin to view your life, and all your interconnected parts, with grace and self-compassion. I hope you'll stop beating yourself up, stop overthinking and self-judging. And I hope you'll give yourself permission to adopt a mindset of curiosity so you can learn to just *be*.

This book doesn't take the place of medical advice. It's not a substitute for medication, a wellness program, or your daily Bible reading. Consider it just another tool in your toolbox—one that will enable you to walk away empowered and advocating for yourself with a renewed perspective of your mind, body, and spirit.

Are you ready to start digging deep to unearth the roots of your labels? If so, I'm eager to be your companion on the journey. I, too, have been stuck in my stigma, overwhelmed by all the well-meaning health advice. I've been where you are, but I'm no longer there. I walk in the freedom that comes from living beyond my label.

You can too. Let's do this!



AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE THE LABEL

I lay sprawled across the center of my parents' king-size bed, waiting for the phone call from the doctor's office. The complete silence of the house, usually a comfort, made the waiting more ominous. The first pregnancy test was inconclusive. Too soon to tell. The exam at the doctor's office hadn't helped my anxiety. Echoes of the doctor's findings filled my head: "Your exam revealed internal abrasions and lacerations, indicative of rough intercourse or sexual assault. Do you want to file a report?"

File a report? How do I file a report about a night I don't remember? How do I explain months of self-destructive alcohol abuse combined with heavy psych meds that make memories unreliable? How do I explain to the doctor that I knew something bad was going to happen, and I was just waiting for the inevitable?

The ringing phone hijacked my downward spiral.

“Your results are in, and we want you to come to the office to hear our findings.”

My mom came with me, and to my horror she had invited my dad to meet us at the office. I couldn't believe she'd asked him to be there. Maybe it comforted her, but it didn't soothe my cycling thoughts. *When Dad hears, it will confirm what he already knows about me: I'm a failure; I'm not the daughter he can be proud of. He'll be angry. He'll be embarrassed and ashamed of me. I failed him and everyone else. I'm the preacher's daughter who got knocked up.*

Sitting with my parents at the doctor's office, feeling completely alone, I listened in numb shock. *Pregnant.* My parents asked questions, and they heard the same exam report. Abrasions and lacerations. Hearing the words again, in the presence of my parents, brought me fear and shame.

And there was more. “Due to the nature of your psychiatric medication and the birth defects it causes, termination of the pregnancy may be advised.”

No. I won't terminate the pregnancy. I didn't know what to do, but I knew that wasn't the option I wanted. It was the only thing I was clear about in that moment.

Back at my parents' house, before I'd gotten the call from the doctor's office, I'd received a different type of phone call. I'd answered it only because I thought it was the doctor's office.

“Erin, is that you?” asked my mom's friend Suzy, who sounded like she was in her car. “Can you look up a verse for me really fast?”

“Um, okay.” Putting down the phone, I grabbed the nearest Bible, which wasn't far. My dad's sermon prep chair was to my right.

“Look up Zephaniah 3:17.”

I opened to the passage and read it aloud: “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE THE LABEL

As I ended the phone call with Suzy, I felt a strange peace wash over my entire body. *Whatever happens, God is here. Whatever the results, he is with me.* The verse from Zephaniah became my anthem for the remainder of my pregnancy.

While many believed my mental instability was a red flag that precluded healthy parenting, I chose to keep and raise my baby girl, who was born healthy and whole. I gave her the name Isabel, which means “consecrated to God,” because I wanted her to grow up knowing her life has meaning and purpose. And though she was a surprise to me, her life was no surprise to God. The pregnancy may have shocked my small-town church community, but it didn’t shock God. He used her new life to bring *me* new life.

As a twenty-three-year-old single mom who was also managing mental health issues and working on a teaching certificate, I didn’t fit into any category. The singles’ group at church was filled with nonparents. The moms’ group catered to stay-at-home moms with husbands. The small groups usually consisted of couples. My teacher coworkers were mostly single, living unencumbered by any responsibility beyond turning in lesson plans on time. My friends from college and high school were experiencing young adulthood the “normal” way—starting jobs, dating, and going out without first having to find childcare.

I was different. I wasn’t normal. *I was alone.*

The label *alone* framed most of my story and core belief system up to that point. I had given myself that label long ago—before the unexpected pregnancy, before the label *bipolar* was handed to me at eighteen, and before *depressed* was plastered on me in eighth grade. I carried that label even before the event I experienced at age nine that garnered me yet another label: *traumatized* with *PTSD*.

Alone weighed down my feet like cinder blocks, stemming from trauma and a belief that nobody really understood my feelings or my fear. Add to that the three scary-sounding diagnostic

labels—*PTSD*, *depression*, and *bipolar* disorder—and it's not hard to see how my identity was overburdened with labels by the time I was eighteen.

What Are Labels and How Do We Get Them?

Labels are the shorthand ways we identify ourselves in a world that is constantly changing. They can be positive or negative and may be based on any number of things, such as personality traits, appearance, behaviors, health, social status, or experiences. Positive labels that affirm our strengths, skills, and relational connections can help us understand our role in the world and help us make meaning from difficult circumstances. Labels can explain personality traits and why we do the things we do. For example, I'm very extroverted, so it's hard for me to decline invitations to social events, but I also burn out easily. Labels also help us make sense of our actions and even how we relate to one another. For example, one of my labels is *firstborn*, a neutral label that is simply a fact but also one that reveals something about my identity. Like many firstborns, I see the need for efficiency and problem-solving. I tend to overperform and have a strong sense of personal responsibility to make sure others are "okay." Knowing that these are common traits for firstborns helps me understand the *why* behind how I show up for others.

Unfortunately, many of the labels we give ourselves are negative rather than positive. Negative labels limit and undermine our strengths, skills, and relational connections. They keep us stuck—in hopelessness, self-defeating behaviors, or toxic relationships. Negative labels can also become core beliefs or identity statements that hold us back from living out our God-given purpose.

Whether we pick them up in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, we all have labels. Some of them we give ourselves, and some

What Are Core Beliefs?

Core beliefs are deeply rooted beliefs we all have, usually emerging from childhood, that impact how we see ourselves, the world, and the role we play in it. Just as labels can be positive, neutral, or negative, so can core beliefs. One of the things that makes beliefs “core” is their rigidity, sometimes even in the face of evidence to the contrary. For example, we might believe we are unlovable even when others consistently demonstrate their love for us. Or we might believe our worth depends on our performance or achievement and feel we are worth more when we succeed and less when we fail.

Core beliefs don't exist as thoughts alone; they also exist in the biochemistry of the brain. In fact, core beliefs can become so entrenched in the neural networks of the brain that we interpret every life experience as confirming our core beliefs even when that may not be the case. That's why it can be very difficult for us to accept or even consider any information that contradicts our core beliefs. Core beliefs become part of our internal operating system, influencing everything from self-perception and behaviors to decision-making and relationships.

are given to us by others. Three of the most common kinds of labels are diagnostic labels, experiential labels, and self-assigned labels.

Diagnostic Labels

Diagnostic labels are given by medical or mental health care practitioners. The purpose of giving a condition a diagnostic label is to identify the most effective treatment plan for relief of symptoms and for healing. Some of my clients experience relief when they get a diagnosis. For example, when Amy's doctor diagnosed her with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), she felt validated. It gave her a framework to understand her condition and propelled her to seek support. Our coaching sessions helped her create habits to minimize the stress that overwhelmed her self-protective, hypervigilant brain.¹

Unfortunately, diagnostic labels can sometimes create unintentional confusion. This can happen when medical or mental health conditions are misdiagnosed or when there doesn't appear to be any clear diagnosis. Diagnoses can be especially difficult for mental health disorders because they are based on a cluster of symptoms over a specific period. There is no blood test for trauma; there is no brain scan or lab work to determine if someone has depression or bipolar disorder. The diagnoses are based on symptoms alone—and symptoms can often mimic other disorders.²

Consider my client Kelly, who struggled with her diagnosis. Having grown up experiencing repeated trauma, she went on to marry a man who was verbally and emotionally abusive. When her mental health symptoms became too much for her, she sought the help of four psychiatrists over a period of years and received a different diagnosis from each one. One said her problems were psychosomatic—all in her head. Another told her she met the criteria for bipolar disorder. Another told her it was her thyroid creating the symptoms. And yet another diagnosed her with both bipolar disorder and ADHD. *What in the world?* All Kelly wanted was respite from her symptoms. What she received was more confusion and a whole bunch of labels that provided no relief from her struggles.

Identifying and living with a diagnostic label can be challenging, often requiring nuanced conversations with medical and mental health care professionals. I struggled to understand myself for many years after being diagnosed with PTSD, depression, and bipolar disorder. What aspects of my behavior were symptoms of an illness, and what was just me being me? Here's what I've found to be true for me and for those I work with: If getting a diagnosis brings you the support and tools you need, awesome! If not, then maybe it's time to get curious about new ways to advocate for your mental and physical health so your diagnosis doesn't keep you from living a full life.

Experiential Labels

All your experiences—positive and negative—shape your identity. However, trauma not only shapes your identity, but it also redefines the world and alters your perception of it, sometimes permanently. As physician and trauma expert Gabor Maté states, “Whether we realize it or not, it is our woundedness, or how we cope with it, that dictates much of our behavior, shapes our social habits, and informs our ways of thinking about the world.”³

One of the ways trauma can permanently alter our perception of the world is by tricking us into believing it’s not safe to feel safe—even when it is safe. My client Jamie experienced this as a result of growing up in a home where there wasn’t enough food. She was the youngest in her large family, and finances were tight. By the time the big kids grabbed food, she was left with little and often went to bed hungry. As an adult, she struggled with overeating. She couldn’t get enough because there was always the what-if question in the back of her mind. *What if I don’t get more tomorrow? What if I won’t ever have this specific type of food again?* Her childhood trauma labeled her *hungry, impulsive, and unfulfilled*. As a result, she felt addicted to food.

Even the negative experiences you may view as “not that bad” can leave a lasting imprint on your nervous system, altering the lens through which you view the world. Maybe you were bullied in middle school and some of those taunts remain with you today, creating a label such as *loser, reject, or outcast*. Maybe you experienced sexual harassment, but others brushed it aside or even laughed it off, so you blamed yourself, creating a label from that scenario—*tease, flirt, or even worse, whore*. Maybe you always felt somewhat anxious but didn’t want to burden anyone, so you stuffed it down, creating a label—*nervous wreck, high-strung, or scattered*.

Whether or not you’ve experienced what you would consider trauma, you’ve no doubt experienced some form of adversity in

your life. And those experiences shape how you perceive yourself and the world around you. Those adverse experiences likely caused you to create new labels.

Self-Assigned Labels

Most of us say some pretty mean things to ourselves. In fact, the habit of negative self-talk is often so deeply entrenched in who we are and how we go through life that we barely realize we're doing it anymore. Self-talk creates our labels. These labels inform our narratives and become themes in our stories that can shape our behaviors and decisions in self-defeating ways.

You may think your self-given labels are all in your head, but the truth is they're also in your body. Your thoughts are chemical messages that get broadcast through your bodily systems. "Thoughts are real things," writes Dr. Caroline Leaf, a neuroscience researcher. "And, like all real things, they generate energy: little packets of energy called photons, which are the fundamental particles of light."⁴ The labels you give yourself, whether based on your diagnoses, experiences, or self-talk, can impact your physical health, even leading to accelerated aging. Dr. Leaf points out, "If we don't manage our minds, the organs in our physical bodies will get older than our actual chronological age."⁵ When you give yourself a negative label and live tethered to that label, it is detrimental to your mental *and* physical health. Creating an entire identity based on a label may even limit your ability to live the abundant life that God has planned for you.

This is not to say that you are somehow to blame for your mental or physical health concerns. You are not. But there is an undisputed connection between your mind and your body. And just as your body tries to protect you with symptoms that sometimes become problematic, your patterns of thinking do the same.

AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE THE LABEL

My client Patricia labeled herself *lazy* and *unmotivated* when, as a young child, she struggled to keep up with schoolwork and zoned out during lessons. Her parents knew she was struggling, but this happened long before quiet, well-mannered girls were given diagnoses of ADHD. Patricia believed if she tried harder, she'd get better. After failing throughout her educational years, she resigned herself to the fact that school wasn't for her. Calling herself *lazy* and *unmotivated* was her way of protecting herself from more failure. By the time she made an appointment with me to get help managing stress hormones, she was in her fifties but still beating herself up for her lack of dedication as a child, which only amplified her stress.

Like Patricia, you may have given yourself labels to understand yourself better or to make sense of your behaviors. That's very common! Unfortunately, it becomes problematic when the label you've made for yourself becomes your identity and holds you back from living in the truth of who God says you are.

Understanding your labels and where they come from is essential for your healing journey. When you can identify the labels that weigh you down, you can prevent them from becoming a false identity.

You Are Not Your Label

I hear identity statements like these from my clients all the time:

“I know it's just my anxiety talking, but . . .”

“Sorry about the rabbit trail. Ignore my ADHD brain—I'm back on track now.”

“My mom's bipolar, and I'm bipolar. I'll never have it together.”

What Labels Have You Been Given?

Place a check mark next to any words that describe a label that was given to you—by yourself or someone else.

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ADHD | <input type="checkbox"/> perfectionist | <input type="checkbox"/> not enough |
| <input type="checkbox"/> depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> emotional | <input type="checkbox"/> different |
| <input type="checkbox"/> anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> unstable | <input type="checkbox"/> loser |
| <input type="checkbox"/> negative | <input type="checkbox"/> stressed | <input type="checkbox"/> weak |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bipolar | <input type="checkbox"/> dramatic | <input type="checkbox"/> helpless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> heavy | <input type="checkbox"/> triggered | <input type="checkbox"/> exhausting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> obsessive-
compulsive | <input type="checkbox"/> broken | <input type="checkbox"/> tired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weird | <input type="checkbox"/> hungry | <input type="checkbox"/> invisible |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sick | <input type="checkbox"/> boring | <input type="checkbox"/> alone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> imposter | <input type="checkbox"/> addicted | <input type="checkbox"/> traumatized |
| <input type="checkbox"/> failure | <input type="checkbox"/> impulsive | <input type="checkbox"/> needy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> overachiever | <input type="checkbox"/> unworthy | <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> unlovable | |

The last example is particularly difficult for me to hear. As someone who's been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and suffered for many years before finding stability, I understand how easy it is for a diagnosis to become an identity. For some reason, people seem to feel free to make identity-defining jokes about bipolar disorder especially. "Oh, did you hear? She's bipolar, so that explains it." It's hard to imagine someone saying, "You're acting depression" or, "You're acting anxiety" in the same way they say, "You're acting bipolar."

Bipolar disorder is an illness someone has, not an adjective. Like other mental illnesses, it is diagnosed from a set of symptoms presenting for a period of time. Contrary to what is often represented, most bipolar sufferers have only one to two mood cycles per year. It's not a permanent state of being, or even a semipermanent state of mood swings. Yet it is deeply misunderstood, leading others to make identity statements that are both inaccurate and

AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE THE LABEL

harmful. Please hear my heart: If you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder or any other mental health condition, you have a medical diagnosis of a disorder and you exhibit symptoms of an illness—but you are *not* your illness.

Equating our identity with our struggles is such a human thing to do. It's how we seek to make meaning of our messes and confusion. *Why did this happen to me? Because I am my label. Why do I have these problems? Because I am my label. Why don't I fit in? Because I am my label.* It's a pretty efficient system for making sense of things, right? And yet it's also a lie.

No matter what you've been told or what you've told yourself, you are not your label. Your label is not your identity—and you don't have to be limited by it. What you struggle with may impact how you function, but your label doesn't define you or diminish your value and worth. If you find that hard to believe or accept right now, that's okay. Especially after years of struggle, it can be difficult to separate your identity from your symptoms. But it is vitally important to do so. And I can promise you that it *is* possible—not just because I've experienced it personally and helped others to do the same, but because this freedom is rooted in a foundational truth of Scripture.

Thanks to Jesus, you are not your label. Because of the grace and belonging you have in him, you have a new identity—a lasting identity that never changes, despite the diagnosis, the trauma, and what you tell yourself. Your foundational identity is this: *You are a child of God* (see 1 John 3:2). This identity is unchanging—no matter your diagnostic, experiential, and self-assigned labels.

If your story is like mine or that of some of my clients, your labels have probably built up over a lifetime. You likely carry heavy wounds, sorrow, shame, and more. Perhaps the thought of even acknowledging your labels feels overwhelming. If so, I invite you to receive these words as the Lord's invitation just for you:

LIVE BEYOND YOUR LABEL

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

MATTHEW 11:28-30, MSG

Jesus doesn't burden you with anything that doesn't fit and isn't supposed to be there. Instead of labels, Jesus offers you identity markers such as *loved*, *redeemed*, *precious*, *forgiven*, *gifted*, *empowered*, and *freed*. As a new creation in him, as a child in his Kingdom, you already have a premium identity. When you identify first with who you are in Christ, you no longer have to carry the burden of identifying with your label or its limitations.

Learning to live into your new identity in Christ isn't a linear process; no healing process is. And I'm not going to sugarcoat it: Learning to live beyond your label is hard work. There are no shortcuts. It takes courage to break with old patterns, address stress, and identify your triggers. Implementing change with new tools requires determination. But there *is* relief that comes from awareness and change. And if you're willing to work through your discomfort and dig deeper into the root of your struggles, you *can* experience freedom from the burden of your label.



MAKING THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

To help you start recognizing the ways in which your mind influences your body, and your body influences your mind, I invite you to try the following exercise. To begin, use the prompts on the next page to learn how to pay attention to your body. Then listen to your body as you identify and examine your labels.

AN INVITATION TO EXAMINE THE LABEL

- ***Pay attention to your body.*** Your body is always sending you signals in response to your thoughts, but you might not always notice. You can practice paying attention to your body any time by noticing felt sensations in four areas: the head, stomach, chest, and back. If reading those four body parts makes you think of the children’s song “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” and if using that melody helps you remember “Head, stomach, chest, and back”—go for it!
 - › *Head.* You might notice tension in your head, jaw, neck, or face. Perhaps you have been clenching your teeth a lot, creating tension throughout your jaw.
 - › *Stomach.* You may feel butterflies in the pit of your stomach or like you’re about to plummet from the peak of a roller coaster. Maybe you have some cramping or tightness in your abdomen.
 - › *Chest.* You might be aware of tightness in your chest, feel like it’s difficult to take a deep breath, or notice your heart pounding.
 - › *Back.* You may feel discomfort in your back, anywhere from the upper to lower portion or any of the sides. Perhaps you feel some pinching sensations or soreness from overexertion.

As you pay attention to each felt sensation, try to describe it more specifically. For example, does it feel like light flutters or strong pricks? Is it buzzy or wavy? Is it fleeting or long-lasting? Is it soft or heavy, hot or cold, tight or loose, close or far away? What other ways can you describe the sensation?

Try to maintain awareness of your body as you work through the next part of this exercise, which is to identify your labels. Noticing felt sensations that certain words bring up for you is a useful tool to help you partner with your body and pay attention to its signals.

LIVE BEYOND YOUR LABEL

- **Identify your labels.** Consider which label(s) you identify with, including diagnostic labels, experiential labels, and self-assigned labels.
 - › *Make a list.* Use a journal or a pad of paper to write down as many labels as come to mind. If you're uncertain what your labels might be, begin by reviewing the list in "What Labels Have You Been Given?" (page 18).
 - › *Narrow down your list.* Briefly review your list and circle the one or two labels you struggle with most.
 - › *Examine your label(s).* Consider each of the labels you circled from the perspective of an interested observer. Pick them up one at a time, like you're picking up an interesting rock on a nature trail. Turn them over and notice what you notice without judgment or harsh words. Allow yourself to be curious about what you see. For example:

My label of not enough plays a pretty big role in my life. I wonder how much that's impacting me?

My label of dramatic causes me to feel pretty negative toward myself.

I have more labels than I thought I did. I wonder how they show up in my daily interactions?

I notice that I have both diagnostic labels and self-assigned labels. I feel more bothered by the labels I give myself than the diagnostic ones. That's interesting.

- **Notice your body.** What felt sensations, if any, were you aware of as you worked through your labels? Or what felt sensations are you aware of now? The goal is to simply notice what you notice.