


GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD



Stopping
the Spiral
of Toxic
Thoughts

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

JENNIE ALLEN

Best-Selling Author of *Nothing to Prove*

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To the guy who always gets me out of my head.

*Zac Allen, you rescue me from myself
constantly and always point me to Jesus.
I love you and I like you.*

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Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

—ROMANS 12:2

This means it's possible.

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Part One

ALL THE THOUGHTS

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Thinking About Thinking

TAKE EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE." THEY SAY AUTHORS write books for two reasons: either the author is an expert on the subject, or the subject makes the author desperate enough to spend years finding the answers. The latter most definitely describes me.

This morning I woke up intending to write to you. *But first*, I thought, *I need to spend time with God*. So what did I do? I picked up my phone. I noticed an email about something I was working on, in which the sender was “constructively” critical of my work. Just as I decided to set my phone down, something else stole my attention . . . and the next thing I knew, I was on Instagram, noticing others’ wins and glories contrasted with my work in process that seemed to not be measuring up. In minutes with my phone, I decided that I was an inadequate writer, I was spending my life chasing things that mean nothing because I am nothing, I have nothing to say. I was spiraling fast into discouragement.

Then my husband, Zac, came in happy, having just met with God, and I snapped at him. My spiral began to spin faster and more chaotically. In less than an hour, I had diminished myself, criticized all my work, decided to quit ministry, ignored God, and pushed away my greatest advocate and friend.

Wow. Brilliant, Jennie. And that was only this morning? And now you want to try to help me with my chaotic thoughts?

Well, I hear you. And I imagine all my life I will be in process with this. But because of the discoveries I get to share with you here, instead of my spiral stealing a day, a week, a few years . . . just an hour into it, there was a shift in my thinking.

I did not stay paralyzed. I am free and joyful and writing to you.

I want you to know that you do not have to stay stuck either. God built a way for us to escape the downward spiral. But we rarely take it. We have bought the lie that we are victims of our thoughts rather than warriors equipped to fight on the front lines of the greatest battle of our generation: the battle for our minds.

The apostle Paul understood the war that takes place in our thoughts, how our circumstances and imaginations can become weapons that undermine our faith and hope. The Bible records his bold declaration that we are to “take every thought captive to obey Christ.”¹

Take every thought captive? Is that possible? Have you ever tried?

Once, a bird flew into our tiny house and wouldn't fly out. It took more than an hour for our whole family working together to catch that silly little sparrow. Shooting the bird with a BB gun? Easy. But capturing the wild sparrow flailing through our house was an altogether different task, a nearly impossible one.

How much more impossible to capture a wild thought on the fly? Yet the book I build my life on is telling me to capture *all my thoughts, every one of them?*

Is God serious?

Is this even possible? Because honestly my thoughts run wilder than that hyperactive sparrow.

And yours do too. I see the same wild chaos in your eyes and those of nearly every woman I meet. Like the young woman in so much pain who

sat across from me this week, drowning in anxiety she has been fighting for two years. She looked at me, pleading, “Help. Tell me what to do!”

“I don’t want to live anxious,” she said. “I’m in counseling. I’m in Bible study. I’m willing to take medicine. I want to trust God. Why can’t I change? Why do I feel so stuck in this?”

Goodness, I relate and have fought the same thing.

It’s incredible, if you think about it: How can something we can’t see control so much of who we are, determine what we feel and what we do and what we say or don’t, dictate how we move or sleep, and inform what we want, what we hate, and what we love?

How can the thing that houses all those thoughts—just a bunch of folded tissue—contain so much of what makes us who we are?

Learning to capture our thoughts matters. **Because how we think shapes how we live.**²

THE PATTERNS THAT KEEP US STUCK

The subject of neuroscience has captivated me for years now, ever since one of my brilliant daughters began educating me on the science of the brain. When Kate, now a junior in high school, was in the seventh grade, she came home from school one afternoon and announced to the rest of us—her two brothers, her sister, my husband, Zac, and me—that she was going to cure Alzheimer’s disease someday.

We smiled, but years later she still is reading books and articles on the subject, listening to every TED Talk on the brain, sharing research with me. Things like . . .

Did you know that more has been discovered about our minds in the last twenty years than in all the time before that?

Did you know that an estimated 60 to 80 percent of visits to primary care physicians have a stress-related component?³

Did you know that research shows that “75 to 98 percent of mental, physical, and behavioral illness comes from one’s thought life”?⁴

Did you know that, with what we know about the brain today, when Scripture is talking about the heart, it really could be talking about the mind and the emotions we experience in our brains?

Well, no, Kate, I did not. But that’s very interesting.

The truth is, it *is* very interesting to me.

Somewhere along the way, Kate’s fascination became mine too. Because she taught me that what she is learning in science is also scattered throughout my Bible and many of the truths in the Bible concerning our thought lives have been backed up by science. This all became increasingly important to me as I became gripped by the idea that taking control of our minds could be the key to finding peace in the other parts of our lives.

For several years I’d been in deep running IF:Gathering, the organization I believe God prompted me to start to disciple women and equip them to go disciple others. I loved our community, our gatherings, and the impact we seemed to be having, but over time I noticed a troubling trend among the women I loved and served every day.

Women would feel conviction at an event or as they worked through our discipleship resources, and they would surrender their lives more fully to Jesus. They would soar on the wings of that resolve for a week, a month, sometimes a year or even two. But inevitably at some point they’d slip back

into old habits, old patterns of doing life. Maybe you know exactly what I mean.

Maybe right now you're thinking of that toxic relationship you finally got out of but then, in a weak moment, resumed.

Or you finally found peace about a less-than-desirable season of your life—but now your emotions have spiraled downward again, and all you do is complain.

Or you were convicted about your porn habit and stopped, only to slip back into the habit weeks later.

Or you recognized a pattern of being critical of your spouse, surrendered it, and truly started to change . . . just before you circled back to where you began.

Why, I wondered, don't the changes so many women desperately want to make stick over the long haul?

And why did I still struggle with some of the same fears, negative patterns, and other sins that I had been fighting for years?

Even as I observed this boomerang effect at a broad level, I was also in relationship with dear friends, women I knew well, who seemed to battle the same issues year after year. Each time we'd get together, I'd hear the same song, five hundredth verse.

What prevented them from thriving? Why couldn't they get unstuck? Kate's discoveries as she continued to study the brain suggested one strong possibility:

It's all in our heads.

BREAKING THE SPIRAL

There is much we don't know about the brain. But what's also true, like Kate says: we've learned more about the brain in the past twenty years than we knew for the previous two thousand. We once thought of the

mind as an immutable thing. The brain you were born with and the way it worked—or didn't—were just “how it was”; no sense fretting over what can't be changed. We now know that **the brain is constantly changing, whether or not we intend for it to.**

In hopes of discovering how women can break free from our problematic patterns, I started picking up heady books about the mind and about neuroscience and about how real change occurs. I watched TED Talks that Kate pointed me toward about our brain's plasticity.

I listened to brainy podcasts.

I watched brainy documentaries.

I talked to brainy people.

I began to see a pattern at work in many of us. Our emotions were leading us to thoughts, and those thoughts were dictating our decisions, and our decisions were determining behaviors, and then the behaviors were shaping our relationships, all of which would take us back to either healthy or unhealthy thoughts.

Round and round and round we go, spinning down, seemingly out of control, our lives becoming defined by this endless cycle.

Depressing.

Unless. Unless there is a way to interrupt it.

How many of us are spending all our energy in conversations and counseling and prayer, trying to shift the most visceral thing about us—our emotions—yet having no success?

If you feel sad and I tell you to quit feeling sad, has any progress been made?

What if, instead of spending our energy trying to fix the symptoms, we went to the root of the problem, deeper even than the emotions that seem to kick off our cycles? The reality is that our emotions are a by-product of something else.

Our emotions are a by-product of the way we think.

EMOTION

THOUGHT

BEHAVIOR

RELATIONSHIPS

CONSEQUENCE

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What's good about this news is that we can change our thinking. The Bible tells us so. "Do not be conformed to this world," one verse says, "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."⁵

My deep dive into the inner workings of the brain confirmed what the Bible says: we can take every thought captive. Not only can our thoughts be changed, but *we* can be the ones to change them.

The problem is, we get on this spiraling train, often unaware of where our thoughts could eventually lead. The well-known Puritan theologian John Owen said that the enemy's goal in every sin is death. His actual words were "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."⁶ It's time for us to fight.

"The average person has over 30,000 thoughts a day." Of those, so many are negative that "according to researchers, the vast majority of the illnesses that plague us today are a direct result of a toxic thought life."⁷

The spiral is real and stuffed with more thoughts than it seems we can manage.

But what if, instead of trying to take every thought captive, we took just one thought captive?

What if I told you that one beautiful, powerful thought could shift this chaotic spiral of your life for the better . . . every time you thought it? What if you could grab hold of one truth that would quiet the flurry of untruths that has left you feeling powerless over your brain?

One thought to think. Could you do that?

Such a thought exists. More on that later.

I understand that despite the straightforward nature of my ask—that you take hold of one truth to focus your mind—fulfilling it is no small thing. Why? Because a full-fledged assault is taking place in those folds of tissue that make you who you are. **The greatest spiritual battle of our generation is being fought between our ears.**

What we believe and what we think about matters, and the enemy knows it. And he is determined to get in your head to distract you from doing good and to sink you so deep that you feel helpless, overwhelmed,

shut down, and incapable of rising to make a difference for the kingdom of God.

Even if you're one of those who won't be shut down and you are loving God and people as you go, a million toxic thoughts haunt you each step of the way.

Whether you find yourself shut down or just haunted by nagging discontent, here is my declaration on behalf of both you and me:

No more.

And I say “on behalf of both you and me” for a reason. The great irony is that while I thought God was directing me to all this great, ground-breaking information—how my friends could heal their lives by healing their brains and by thinking more thoughtfully about their thoughts—so that I could help everyone else, what I couldn't possibly have known at the time was that I was about to need this healing myself.

What We Believe

AT LEAST I'M NOT AS DUMB AS HER."

Those words were spoken behind my back by Derek in my sophomore biology class.

Derek was three times the size of every other awkward fifteen-year-old in my grade, a guy everyone feared. I was a shy, quiet student who barely opened my mouth. How could he possibly find me dumb? The thing was, I *wasn't* dumb. I made all As and a few Bs with little effort—even in the most academically challenging classes.

I look back at that sophomore girl sitting there at the long science lab table and wish I could hold her face and tell her how not-dumb she is, but I'm not sure she would listen. Within an hour of Derek saying she was dumb, those tiny folds of tissue between her ears had built an entire case against her value, her security, her intellect, and her potential that would play on repeat for a decade to come.

A recent college grad with a degree in broadcast journalism, I was interviewing for a job at a news station. Two men from the station took my friend and me to dinner. They didn't want to talk about the job; they

wanted to get to know us. After realizing they were hitting on us, I sat there and thought, *I will never be taken seriously in business by men.* That thought made me believe I did not have anything to offer as a woman in business. I built a case against my education, training, and gifts that would affect me for years to come.

My husband and I found ourselves in one of our first real fights as a newly married couple. He ignored me, and I slammed some doors pretty hard. He moved on, but I couldn't stop thinking, *He doesn't really love me.* And my mind started to build a case against our marriage.

After losing my temper with my eight-year-old son, I lay in bed later that night and thought, *I am failing as a parent.* For years, off and on, that thought twisted its way deeper into my mind.

The thing is, I have always believed lies. And not just believed them but built entire chapters of my life around them.

I'm pretty sure the same is true for you.

LIES WE BELIEVE

My friend Christina, a licensed therapist, tells me that Psychiatry 101 teaches therapists that when you and I choose to believe a lie about ourselves, it's one of these three lies we believe:

I'm helpless.

I'm worthless.

I'm unlovable.

Reflexively I tried to prove her wrong. "Seriously, Christina? Only

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three?” I told her that I’ve been known to believe three hundred lies about myself—in a day.

“Nope,” she said. “Each one of those three hundred lies fits into one of these three.”

For the sake of argument, let’s assume that Christina is right. The question I have for you is this: Which of the three do *you* most relate to?

Is there one you’re more vulnerable to?

These lies—*I’m helpless, I’m worthless, I’m unlovable*—shape our thinking, our emotions, and the way we respond to the world around us. They trap us in their cycle of distraction and distortion and pain, preventing us from recognizing the truth we should believe. Most detrimentally, they change how we view God. **Every lie we buy into about ourselves is rooted in what we believe about God.**

Let’s say I tend to feel worthless and invisible. And let’s say I read Ephesians and learn that God, because he deeply loves me, chooses me and adopts me.¹ Even if I don’t overtly deny the validity of that premise, I still doubt it is true for me. I nod at the truth, but I never fully absorb it and let it shape my identity.

Then let’s say I am married to a spouse who is typically distracted with work. I don’t feel seen in our marriage, which confirms my deep-seated fear that I am indeed worthless and invisible. So even in the most inconsequential of arguments with my husband, I feel anxious and start to spin every time he’s short with me.

I can’t see all that he has on his shoulders, I can’t empathize with his stresses, and my needs exceed his ability to ever meet them.

Before long we are full-on fighting constantly, and we don’t even know why.

My husband now has become the enemy in my mind and can’t ever seem to say what I need to hear or be whom I need him to be.

And the spiral of my thoughts has now invaded my relationships and robbed me of joy and peace.

No human is ever meant to be the person who fills our souls or holds in place our worth. Only God can do that. But until I throw off the lie that God's love isn't for me, my emotions, decisions, behaviors, and relationships will remain twisted up in the mistaken belief that I'm worthless.

When we begin to think about our thoughts, perhaps for the first time, we can stop the downward spiral. We can reset and redirect them. That's our hope. Not that we would wrestle each and every fear, but that we would allow God to take up so much space in our thinking that our fears will shrink in comparison. I love the quote from A. W. Tozer that says, if God is "exalted . . . a thousand minor problems will be solved at once."² Sign me up. I want that.

Want to know a secret? We can have that. But please know that the enemy of our souls has no intention of releasing his grip on our minds without a fight. And let me tell you, he doesn't play fair.

Here we are just getting to know each other, and I'm about to let you in on some of the worst mental hell I've experienced. I'm preparing you now because it's heavy, and I don't much like heavy. I like fun and happy things. But if I don't take you into the darkness with me, then you might not believe me when I say that it is well worth the effort to face the recesses of our thoughts, believing that God can bring about life and peace.

I know this is possible, this shifting of our thoughts and in turn our lives. I know, because it's happened for me.

But before I discovered the thought that shifts us from turmoil to peace, I experienced the all-out attack of the enemy.

UNDER ATTACK

It was my first visit back home to Little Rock in several months. As I sat in the passenger seat of my mom's white SUV, I took in the familiar landmarks: my old high school, the Chili's restaurant my friends and I had frequented after football and basketball games, and the pool I always

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swam in growing up. I was reminded of just how comforting coming home can be.

Soon we arrived at our destination: a Baptist church where I was scheduled to deliver two talks with a book-signing event sandwiched between.

During my first talk I swung for the fences with the women seated before me. I was bold and clear in my presentation of the gospel message. “There’s a real enemy with demons at his beck and call,” I told the few thousand women gathered. “He wants to take you out. He’s determined to steal your faith.” I ached for them to experience the freedom Christ offers and for them to refuse to sleepwalk through their lives.

After that came the book signing, with the expected hubbub. Afterward I somehow found myself standing totally alone, something I try to avoid at large events for the sake of personal safety. The participants had already headed back into the auditorium to take their seats, conference organizers were buzzing around, tending to details, and staff were all covering their various posts. There I stood in the foyer, just me and one other person, a kind-looking woman I didn’t know.

I realized I needed to get moving and find my seat ahead of the next session, which was about to start. I took two steps toward the auditorium when suddenly that kind-looking woman was in my face. Her expression darkened, her warm smile disappeared, and her eyes narrowed as she focused intently on me.

“We are coming for you,” she said in an urgent whisper. “You need to quit talking about us. We are coming for you.”

Her comments were so out of context that I couldn’t sort out what she meant. “Ma’am,” I said, “I’m confused. What are you talking about?”

With chilling certainty she said, “You know exactly what I am talking about.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, still seeking clarity.

She repeated, “Quit speaking of us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

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Again she said, “You know exactly what I am talking about.” But I didn’t.

And then I did.

I took several steps backward, turned toward the auditorium, approached one of the security guards who’d been asked to cover the event, and said with as much composure as I could muster, “The woman who’s in the foyer just made threats against me. Can you please keep an eye on her?”

Moments later I took the stage and began my last talk. Partway through, I heard shrieking in the hallway that ran alongside the large auditorium. The tiny hairs on my arms stood on end as I briefly paused. I knew exactly who was screaming, and I knew exactly what this was about.

Figuring the security personnel would take care of the distraction, I launched back into my talk. This was just a crazy woman making empty threats. I would go home and forget all about it.

Then the devil overplayed his hand. While the woman was screaming bloody murder in the foyer, the power went out. I’m talking *all* the lights, the *entire* sound system, the *giant* screens behind me—everything. We were silent, there in the dark.

Did I mention that this was a huge megachurch with backup systems for its backup systems? On a sunny day during a heavily staffed event, the power doesn’t just go out.

The screaming continued as we all listened, stunned.

“This has never happened before,” the pastor of that church would later tell me. “The screaming you heard was that woman you pointed out to the guard, and her daughter. What was that all about?”

Dang.

I mean, I proclaim Jesus and I believe everything He taught. He taught about the enemy and showed His power over demonic forces. The enemy wasn’t mysterious to Jesus. To Him, spiritual warfare was matter of fact. Jesus cast out demons regularly—that’s what the Bible says.

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But while I believe that there is a real devil and that he has real demons working for him and that a battle for our hearts and souls and minds is playing out all around us all the time, I'll tell you this: I'd never before seen such an undeniable manifestation of Satan's work.

The experience could have been terrifying, but instead, it had a different outcome initially: it made me wild with faith. I vividly remember that night. I talked about Jesus with everyone who would listen, including the waiter at the restaurant my family and I went to afterward and my sister's friends who happened to be in town. I was overwhelmed with how real and true it all was—God. Heaven. The enemy. This war we're in.

I'd never before been as sure as I was that day: *all* of this was true.

Which is why the spiral of darkness that followed caught me so incredibly by surprise.