



reframing

anxiety

A Counselor's
Guide to Finding
Peace Through Curiosity

KAREN ROUDKOVSKI PHD, LPC-S

“*Reframing Anxiety* is layered with clinical wisdom, biblical insight, and personal narratives from the author’s own journey. Dr. Roudkovski’s book is a needed resource for counselors, clergy, and Christians in the clutches of anxiety. Each chapter is filled with practical tools that the reader can use to remain hopeful in a fallen world. This book is sure to bless its readers and remind them of their eternal identity in Christ.”

—DeAron Washington, PhD, LPC, assistant professor
of counseling at Belhaven University

“Dr. Roudkovski has written the sort of book counselors hope their clients will discover. With clear prose, she demonstrates that anxiety is not an enemy to be annihilated but a signal to be understood, teaching readers to draw near enough to their fears to listen to them yet stand far enough away to see the world without the distorting tint of panic. Quietly at home within the framework of acceptance and commitment therapy, this volume offers a remedy to the intellectual pathogen that has convinced many sincere Christians to equate anxiety with a lack of faith.”

—Jennings and Helga Riley,
owners of Riley Counseling and Consulting

“Drawing from both clinical expertise and personal experience, Dr. Roudkovski offers a compassionate, biblically grounded guide for navigating anxiety. She invites readers to meet their symptoms with curiosity rather than avoidance. Packed with practical wisdom, this book equips readers with actionable tools they can put into practice right away.”

—Katherine K. Majeste, PhD, LPC, assistant professor
of counseling, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Reading *Reframing Anxiety* is like sitting across a campfire from a mentor and friend, where you gain wisdom, understanding, and truth. Dr. Roudkovski

shares personal and relatable experiences that help each reader put themselves into her shoes, helping them to recognize their need for healthier practices around anxiety. She invites readers to self-reflect and gives practical steps for understanding their anxiety as a tool, not a barrier, in their life. I look forward to recommending this book to many friends, family members, and clients!”

—Ellen Michel, LPC

“*Reframing Anxiety* is the kind of book I want every client to read—gentle, practical, and grounded in biblical truth. Dr. Roudkovski offers a comprehensive and deeply relatable guide to anxiety, beautifully combining clinical expertise, personal experience, and biblical wisdom. She provides practical tools that help readers view anxiety as meaningful information, inviting them to respond to their anxiety with compassion, kindness, and curiosity.”

—Ashley Jamison, PhD, LPC

r e f r a m i n g
a n x i e t y

KAREN ROUDKOVSKI PHD, LPC-S



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture verses have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible[®], Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible[®] and CSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Verses marked NET are quoted from the NET Bible[®], <https://netbible.com>. Copyright ©1996, 2019. Used by permission from Biblical Studies Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

Verses marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version[®], NIV[®]. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[™] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.[™]

Verses marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Italics in Scripture indicate emphasis by the author.

Cover design by Lindy Kasler

Cover images © TWINS DESIGN STUDIO / Shutterstock

Interior design by KUHN Design Group

 This logo is a federally registered trademark of the Hawkins Children's LLC. Harvest House Publishers, Inc., is the exclusive licensee of this trademark.

Reframing Anxiety

Copyright © 2026 by Karen Roudkovski

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-9197-1 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-7369-9198-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025947785

Harvest House Publishers respects the value of human creativity and instructs its authors and designers not to use generative artificial intelligence (AI) in publishing its works.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 / BP / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Katerina and Joseph

*May you always know you are deeply
loved and divinely purposed.*

Contents

Author's Note	9
Introduction: My Journey and Preparation for Our Journey Together	11

PART 1:

What Is Anxiety?

1. Defining Anxiety	17
2. The Biology (and Benefit) of Anxiety	33
3. Describing Our Experience	53

PART 2:

What Causes Anxiety? A Holistic Approach

4. Underlying Causes	65
5. More than Thoughts	91
6. Anxiety Disorders	107

PART 3:

What Does the Bible Say About Anxiety?

7. Anxiety and Scripture	127
8. Fear	143
9. Worry	155
10. Is Anxiety a Sin?	171

PART 4:
Anxiety and...

11. Trauma	187
12. Grief	201
13. Other Emotions	211

PART 5:
What Can We Do About Anxiety?

14. Our Thoughts	221
15. Our Behaviors	243
16. A Curious Approach	265

Conclusion: Hope for the Future While Living in Tension	271
--	-----

Appendix A: Ten Recommendations for Supporting a Loved One with Anxiety	277
--	-----

Appendix B: Finding a Counselor in Your Area	281
--	-----

Notes	283
-----------------	-----

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Limitations of this book: This book isn't a replacement for professional counseling.

By reading this book, you are not engaging in a therapeutic relationship with the author.

You can find therapists in your area by visiting the resources in Appendix B.

About the stories in this book: Other than my personal stories, the case studies in this book are representative and do not reflect the experience of any particular person.

Introduction

My Journey and Preparation for Our Journey Together



We were on an adventure of a lifetime. A cross-country mother-daughter trip. Wide open roads. National parks. Louisiana to California. An absolute dream. I wanted to take a snapshot of every moment in my memory.

I love road trips: planning, dreaming, and seeing sights along the way. The best road trips are not rushed, where you can take your time. Stop at any roadside attraction that strikes your fancy. Meander through small towns. Explore a national park.

As we were driving around the rim of the Grand Canyon, I noticed that I was nervous. Since there were drop-offs on both sides, I imagine many people would be slightly anxious, so I wasn't concerned. But the nervousness increased until I wasn't just a little nervous. I was really nervous. The kind that makes your palms sweaty, heart race, throat tighten, and limbs grow weak. If you are reading this book, you will likely know what I'm talking about.

That's odd, I thought to myself.

I've spent a lot of time in the mountains. I was no stranger to roads with drop-offs.

We continued our journey, exiting Arizona and moving into Utah on our way to Zion National Park, with my 22-year-old daughter at the wheel.

As we wound through the mountains, I was relieved, thinking, *It's good that we are on the side with the mountain and not on the drop-off side...But I don't think it's going to stay that way.*

Soon, we entered a tunnel. Peeking through the windows at the side of the tunnel, I noticed a towering mountain beside us.

In front of us, I saw daylight. As the tunnel opened into the open air, I was surprised to see that we were exiting the tunnel on a sharp curve to the left. Directly in front of us was a drop-off.

But no worries. There was a stone guardrail that was maybe three feet high. It felt more like three inches.

My daughter easily maneuvered the curve.

Me? Instant panic as we rounded the curve, and I observed the drop-off, which was now outside my window. I tried to hide my anxiety, but it was pouring out of my body.

My fingers sunk into the fabric of the seat. My heart was pounding, and I tried to inhale, but it felt like breathing through a straw. Tears filled my eyes and threatened to spill. As my chest continued to tighten, I thought surely my heart was clenching into a ball that was traveling into my throat, further blocking my breath. My stomach dropped into the floorboard. Palms sweating and tingling. Feet uncertain whether to run or melt into my weak legs. All of this within seconds. I went from normal to panic before I could even remind myself that I was safe.

Perhaps, at this point, you might be expecting me to tell you that I breathed a prayer, my fear receded, and I never again struggled with anxiety. My dear reader, that is not the case. I did whisper

some prayers of desperation, and my brain knew God was right there with me. But my body? The symptoms I was experiencing? Those sensations remained until we got off that mountain, and it took me the rest of the day and some ice cream to begin to regulate my nervous system.

I can assure you I didn't wake up that morning hoping that I'd be gripping a car seat, fighting for my every breath, inundated with intrusive thoughts of us launching off the side of the mountain as though propelled by jet fuel and rejecting the completely illogical urge to walk myself down that steep mountain. I didn't sign up for this. I didn't want anxiety to be the thief who tried to rob me of the joy of that beautiful day with my daughter. And I imagine you never wanted anxiety either.

Join me on this journey as I share some of my stories of anxiety. A journey of mountain roads, public speaking, dogs, surgeries, parenting, and writing. I will share how my anxiety, although unwanted, can be a tool for self-reflection, growth, and deepening of my relationship with God.

As we go on this journey together, remember: It's a journey, and you need not rush. Take your time reading, thinking, and applying what you are learning about anxiety and yourself. Like a good road trip, I recommend you prepare a few things in advance to have while you read.

I recommend you gather the following:

- Bible.
- Journal or notebook. Your journal doesn't have to be anything fancy unless you want it to be. It can be a simple spiral-bound notebook.
- Pen and highlighter. Get some pens you enjoy using. I like having a few different colors. Also, you'll need a highlighter

to mark places in the book or your journal that you want to remember.

You'll run into some road hazards if you're on a road trip long enough. We will review eight possible hazards on your journey with anxiety. In these sections, I will describe a belief or situation that might impede your journey toward improving your anxiety symptoms. If you recognize any (or all) of these, please be kind to yourself. They are common and understandable responses. Yet, they aren't helpful, so we will address them.

My approach in writing this book comes from both a clinical perspective of anxiety and a personal experience of anxiety. It is not a comprehensive textbook of all the possible ways to deal with anxiety, but rather a journey I want to share with you. The early chapters will focus on the experience of anxiety. Please don't skip these. So much of addressing anxiety is changing how we view the experience.

I will invite you to consider how anxiety shows up in your life. We will look at your unique experience. Please personalize this book. Make it your own as you get to know your anxiety. I know you are weary of this struggle. I pray you find hope, encouragement, information, and practical strategies to help you.

As we journey, lean into the one who gives us rest.

Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

MATTHEW 11:28-30

PART 1

What Is
Anxiety?

Defining Anxiety



If you are holding this book, you are likely seeking relief from your anxiety symptoms. You may feel exhausted from restless nights and worry-filled days. Perhaps you are feeling relentless tension in your body. Maybe you are suffering from fear or panic that is making your world smaller and smaller. Let me assure you.

You are *not* alone.

Anxiety is a universal experience. At some point in life, all of us find ourselves experiencing some form of anxiety, whether we recognize it or not. A student recently told me that he'd experienced anxiety for years and didn't realize it because it didn't look like what he thought anxiety was supposed to look like. You might be surprised to discover that it's possible to have anxiety and not realize that is what you are experiencing. When anxiety manifests as physical symptoms, you might not make the connection that the tension, chest tightness, stomach issues, or constant headaches are anxiety. You might look for a medical explanation at the doctor's office or emergency room.

Anxiety can hide in our perfectionism or busyness. In *Unwinding Anxiety*, Dr. Judson Brewer calls anxiety a “shapeshifter.”¹ What an appropriate description for something sometimes so hard to recognize. Many people have told me that it took them years to realize that what they’d been experiencing was anxiety because it didn’t present itself in what they’d imagined anxiety would look like.

Some who are experiencing anxiety have a diagnosable anxiety disorder. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in America, affecting over 19 percent of adults annually.² Anxiety disorders often develop in childhood, with girls experiencing anxiety disorders at a rate of two to one compared to boys.³

And this probably won’t surprise you, but Americans may be more anxious than we were just a few years ago. The American Psychological Association’s Annual Stress in America mental health poll indicates Americans are experiencing an increase in anxiety. According to the 2024 poll, 43 percent of adults reported feeling more anxious than the previous year. This number increased from reports of 37 percent in 2023 and 32 percent in 2022.⁴

One of the most frustrating aspects of anxiety is that just when we are doing better in one area, another source of anxiety and worry can pop up. When my children were young, I enjoyed taking them to a local restaurant to spend an afternoon eating pizza and playing games. There was a game called whack-a-mole. To play, you had to keep hitting these little moles as they popped up from various holes all over the game board. Whenever you slammed one back into the hole, others would pop back up from different holes. It was a never-ending cycle until the game ended. We never successfully smacked down all the moles. Anxiety can be like playing whack-a-mole. When we think we’ve knocked out one area, another anxious thought, worry, or fear pops up. It is exhausting.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

So what exactly is anxiety? How do we define it? Defining anxiety is challenging because it can present itself in so many different ways.

Let's begin by thinking about how it presents for you. Pause for a minute before you continue reading. Think about how you would define anxiety.

Do you have your definition in mind? How did you describe it? What words and phrases came to mind when I asked you this question? Do you describe anxiety as an emotion? Thoughts? Physical sensations? Is it a response to stress in your life?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines anxiety as "apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill: a state of being anxious; mentally distressing concern or interest." The medical definition follows and describes anxiety as "an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it."⁵

Notice the medical definition describes the physical impact and includes the vital aspect that when experiencing anxiety, *we often doubt our ability to cope with the distress* we are experiencing. We doubt our ability to cope with a worst-case scenario we predict. This concept is a key part of understanding anxiety. *We don't think we can cope with whatever comes our way.*

When describing anxiety in this book, I invite you to consider the following ideas.

Anxiety is information. We will discuss this more as we move through this book. But I want you to begin taking the approach that anxiety is an invitation to become curious and consider what the anxiety is communicating.

Anxiety is an individual experience. Each person's experience with anxiety is unique. That is why I've asked you to personalize this book. I'm going to ask you questions throughout your reading. I encourage you to take the time to think about your answers and, if time allows, write your answers down in a journal or notebook. When we review practical ways to help with anxiety, I invite you to personalize that too. See what works best for you and your situation.

Anxiety is a whole-person (or holistic) experience.

- » We experience anxiety *physically*. We feel anxiety in our bodies. Anxiety comes with a variety of unwanted, uncomfortable, and often downright miserable bodily symptoms and sensations.
- » We experience anxiety *cognitively* (in our thoughts). We worry. We might experience scary and unwanted thoughts, such as predicting that something terrible will happen. We might doubt our ability to cope with scary scenarios that invade our minds.
- » We experience anxiety *emotionally*. Anxiety is not just one emotion. It's many emotions swirling together.
- » We experience anxiety *behaviorally*. Anxiety may prompt a variety of behaviors. We might avoid what we fear. We might do things to try to control the situation. We might try to numb what we are feeling. We might get irritable or angry. Or we might panic.

Anxiety may be mild to severe. For some, your experience with anxiety is mild. For those with mild anxiety, symptoms are uncomfortable but manageable most of the time.

For others, anxiety can be debilitating, interfering with daily functioning, such as your job or relationships. You may struggle to get through the day. Or, you may be somewhere in the middle, more than mild but not debilitating. Functioning, but not exactly thriving either.

Anxiety may be constant or situational. At times, anxiety is just hanging around, a constant unwanted companion. It might be hard to imagine life without it. Sometimes, anxiety can pop up at the most inopportune moments, gripping our bodies entirely out of the blue while we are simply walking through the grocery store. Or we might notice anxiety symptoms only in specific circumstances, such as right before speaking in front of a group or flying on a plane. Or you may experience both, a constant dull roar of anxiety that peaks under certain circumstances.

Anxiety may be temporary or long term. You may experience anxiety in childhood, adulthood, or both. It may be a lifelong issue or more situational. Some may go decades with minimal symptoms and, at 50 years old, develop severe, debilitating anxiety.

Anxiety is an unwelcome, unwanted experience. In all my years working with people, *no one*, not even once, has ever come to me and requested that I teach them how to feel more anxious, worry more, have more distressing thoughts, or feel more impending doom. That would be absurd. No one wants to feel anxiety. It is not enjoyable. There is no pleasure in it. Most people want relief.

It can be challenging to pinpoint the cause of our anxiety. Anxiety is a whole body and mind experience that seldom has one easily identifiable cause. Anxiety is a complex

interaction of many possible causes. (We will explore these in chapter 4.) Often, people do not know what brought on a sudden season of anxiety.

If I were to sum up the experience of anxiety in one sentence, I'd say, "It's a complex experience that impacts your whole body."

YOUR UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

One of my favorite things about being a professional counselor is getting to know each unique client. No two clients have ever been or ever will be the same. Every single person that I've had the honor to work with is unique. Their life history is unique. The families they grew up in are different. They have distinct personalities.

Despite our uniqueness, we have similarities in what can help us grow and thrive. For example, I enjoy the aesthetic of having plants scattered throughout my home. I purchase these plants with good intentions to care for them, but then I get busy. I forget to water them. So I have struggling, brown, crispy plants instead of lush greenery. Each type of plant has some unique needs, but every one of the plants that I own needs water. We humans are similar. We have unique needs. But we also have basic, common needs such as nourishment, safety, and connection with others. In this book, I'll introduce you to shared needs and guide you to explore how to apply this information to your life. I'll also ask you self-exploration questions so you can begin considering your unique situation and needs.

As you consider your needs and what areas you may need to address in reducing your anxiety symptoms, you'll need to do a lot of self-reflection. That will likely be uncomfortable and maybe even painful as you examine your life and consider areas where you may want to make changes or work toward healing.

I invite you to engage with God in this place of examination, in this place of unrest, and of being human. Even when we cannot

express our experiences in words, God knows our thoughts, emotions, and concerns. Invite him to give you insight, comfort, and wisdom.

Recognize God's presence in the midst of concerns, anxieties, worries, worst fears, and sleepless nights. He will be your constant companion as you curiously explore your unique and complex experience.

OUR VOCABULARY FOR ANXIETY

Think about your anxiety, and how you defined it earlier. What is it like for you? When you describe something, the more specific words you use, the better you understand it. Imagine I asked you to write a description of the sky in your journal for three days this week. You show me your journal entries, and they read:

Sunday: Blue

Monday: Blue

Tuesday: Blue

Does that tell me what the sky looked like on those days? Yes. Well, sort of. But it's vague. I can't really envision the sky because I don't have enough information. It could be more descriptive.

Consider these descriptions instead:

Sunday: The sky was brilliant, sapphire blue with no clouds.

Monday: The sky was pale blue, with rays of sunshine peeking out from behind white fluffy cotton-ball clouds.

Tuesday: The sky was a dark, grayish blue with storm clouds rolling overhead and hiding the sun.

You can see which descriptions gave you more information. All the skies were blue, but they were different. And we could understand that difference in the second set of descriptions.

I invite you to expand your vocabulary of words you use to describe anxiety. For example, when I experienced anxiety while driving through Zion National Park, I identified feeling the emotions of panic, nervousness, and a sense of feeling unsafe. I felt this in the tightness of my chest and my heart thumping in my ears. My hands and feet were clammy and tingly. And my stomach was trying to escape through my throat. That tells you much more than saying I was feeling anxious.

When you describe your experience, I encourage you to be specific. Below is a list of words that describe anxiety in a more nuanced way. I invite you to think back to the last time you were experiencing anxiety (maybe it's right now) and use the list below to name your emotions. Also, I encourage you to name where you feel those emotions in your body. We want to connect your emotions with your bodily experience.

Agitation	Dread	Overwhelmed	Suspense
Alarm	Fear	Panic	Tense
Anguish	Frantic	Preoccupied	Trepidation
Apprehension	Fretful	Pressured	Troubled
Butterflies	Hesitant	Restless	Uncertain
Concern	Jittery	Scared	Uneasy
Desperation	Jumpy	Shaky	Unrest
Distress	Nervous	Skittish	Upset
Disturbed	On edge	Stressed	Worried

Why am I asking you to describe your experience with specific vocabulary? Wouldn't it seem more logical to find ways to pretend the anxiety doesn't exist? Wouldn't it seem more intuitive to ignore it?

Anxiety is odd in that way. With anxiety, our first impulse in dealing with it, to avoid it or ignore it, is the most counterproductive. That brings us to the first hazard on our journey together.

HAZARD 1: AVOIDANCE

I live near the city of New Orleans. The food is impressive, but the roads are most certainly not. What's wrong with the roads, you might ask?

Potholes. Actually, that word is not quite descriptive enough.

Craters of destruction. Alignment annihilators. Rim ravagers. Tire trappers.

You get the picture. Road hazards can derail a perfectly good day in the city of New Orleans. While driving, we are on high alert for these hazards and quickly swerve around them to avoid the toll they take on our cars.

Unlike those potholes that we try to avoid, we will do the opposite with anxiety. With anxiety, our primary goal is to *avoid avoiding!*

Have you ever tried to hold a beach ball underwater? It requires a lot of force, and if you lose focus or stop applying pressure, it will pop right back up to the surface with a lot of force, maybe even hitting you right in the nose. The same goes for anxiety. Despite our attempts to push it down, it will pop back up with even more force.

Avoiding anxiety does not work. Even though it might seem like it's working in the short-term, it's not in your long-term best interest. Avoidance does not eliminate anxiety. It does not weaken anxiety. Avoidance *worsens* anxiety.

When you notice anxiety rising in your body, what is your initial response? Are you able to sit with your anxiety and observe what is happening? Or do you try to avoid the feelings? The desire to avoid feeling uncomfortable sensations makes sense. We want relief. For example, because of this, we may naturally attempt to avoid places and situations where our anxiety spikes. This avoidance can become a big problem.

Recall the anxiety I experienced on the mountain road in Zion. Based on what I just told you, to *avoid avoiding*, what would you advise me to do about my anxiety? I could avoid mountain roads altogether. I live where it's flat. We have no mountain roads in south Louisiana. Potholes, yes. Mountains, no. But this would make my world smaller. I love to travel. I grew up in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, so going back home means visiting the mountains. My daughter lives near the mountains, and of course, I love to visit her. Imagine how difficult and limiting this avoidance would be.

To make matters worse, avoiding my fear will teach my brain that avoiding was successful, even when it wasn't. It will teach my brain that I can't handle feeling anxious, that I won't be able to cope with the challenging emotions, and that they'll consume me in a never-ending avalanche, which is not true. Emotions peak and then lessen in intensity. They eventually go away. The result of my avoidance? If I try to avoid mountains, the next time I am on a mountain road, the fear will be even worse.

Avoidance is only a temporary fix. It is counterproductive in the long run.

The most intense experience of anxiety is panic. Many people experience their first panic attack while in a public place, for example, in a supercenter-type store. Perhaps it's the lighting, the number of people, the noise, or the overwhelming display of items, but large stores are a common place where people report experiencing panic attacks. Imagine you had a panic attack in a store, so you begin to avoid that store. Then, a panic attack occurs in another store. So you avoid it too. And another, and another. You begin fearing the panic itself, so you avoid more and more places. Eventually, you order all your things online to avoid going to stores. But then, a panic attack occurs at your daughter's basketball game. That's harder to avoid because you don't want to miss her games.

Like many other people, you have begun to *fear your fear*. Many people fear having another panic attack to the point that they avoid leaving their house entirely.

It makes sense that you would want to avoid feeling anxious. It makes sense that you want to prevent panic. After all, a panic attack usually feels like impending death. But when we avoid, we unintentionally teach our brains that we can't cope with these big emotions in our bodies. Instead, we want to teach our brains that we *can cope* with whatever comes our way. How do we do this? By *not* avoiding.

Avoidance doesn't just come in the form of avoiding a place. We might avoid certain people or situations. If we attempt to avoid all things that raise our anxiety, our world becomes smaller and smaller. Like a thief, anxiety robs us of so much potential for connections with others and experiences in our world.

Another form of avoidance is trying to "figure things out" and attempting to control the future by worrying instead of acknowledging our emotions and physical experiences of anxiety. Once again, we teach our brains, "I can't handle this."

Some Christians have a spiritualized type of avoidance where we ignore our emotions and disregard acknowledging our pain under the guise of spiritual language. We might use Scripture or religious practices to avoid or deny issues such as anxiety, grief, depression, basically all the hard stuff of life. Instead, we can use our faith to *engage* curiously with our experiences rather than ignoring or avoiding them.

When we use these practices to avoid our experience of anxiety, it has the opposite of the intended effect. Instead of drawing us toward God, we are closing the door on an opportunity to sit with God in our distress, an opportunity for self-reflection and spiritual growth. *Instead of an avoidance response, we need a curious, faith-engaged response.*

What does this look like in practice?

Situation: I notice that I'm feeling some symptoms of anxiety while waiting for the results of medical testing. When I think about it, I have thoughts like, *What if it's cancer? How will I manage? Am I going to die?*

Avoidance response: I will ignore my thoughts and feelings because God says not to worry. I follow this response with unhelpful coping, such as binging on a pack of Oreos and zoning out on social media. Or the tension could build within me and later come out when I snap at my family. That anxiety is still there, simmering and growing below the surface. I'm just ignoring it.

A curious faith-engaged response: I can tell myself that I'm noticing some physical symptoms of anxiety and some really scary thoughts. I can name what I'm feeling using descriptive language. *I'm nervous about the phone call and apprehensive about the unknown. I'm feeling out of control.* Then I can tell myself, *You know, it's pretty normal to feel some anxiety about this situation. Waiting for medical test results can be nerve-racking.* I need to remind myself that my feelings are valid and can provide information, but they are not facts. Also, just because I have a thought doesn't mean it's true. I can ask: *What do I need right now to help calm myself? How does my faith connect here?*

As we learn to avoid avoidance ourselves, we need to be careful of pushing this kind of avoidance on others when they come to us with a concern they've been struggling with, and we say, "Don't even think that. Don't put that out into the world." Or "God's got this" and quote a small phrase of Scripture that says, "Don't worry" or "Don't be anxious." God is indeed sovereign. We are indeed encouraged to avoid worry. (We will get to that later in the book.) It is also true that we suffer in this world, and one of the best salves for our suffering is someone to listen and join us in our pain. We need someone to hear our story before throwing out solutions or dismissing our struggle.

Name It to Tame It

We've touched on finding words to describe our anxiety. "Name it to tame it" is a phrase used by neuropsychiatrist Dr. Dan Siegel to emphasize the importance of naming our emotions. The simple action of naming what we are feeling "literally calms down" the part of the brain that is activated.⁶ When our brain begins to calm down, the intensity of our feelings also reduces. The choke hold of emotion decreases, and we can think about what those emotions are communicating. Rather than avoiding our emotions, we can name them.

To avoid the hazard of avoidance: *Replace avoidance with acknowledgment.*

YOUR GOAL

What is your goal for reading this book? You understandably want to feel better.

Consider these questions: What do you hope to learn? How do you want to change? Is it your goal to never again experience anxiety?

I wish that I could offer you a quick fix, but anxiety is more complex than a one-size-fits-all, quick-fix guide to eliminating your anxiety. Time and again, I've heard the teaching that anxiety must be eradicated, that we, as Christians, shouldn't experience anxiety. Please imagine me saying this as gently as possible:

Dear reader, completely eliminating anxiety from your life is not a realistic goal. We will experience difficulties, loss, concerns, and some devastatingly painful seasons in this life. We will experience crisis and stress. We will travel on roads where we prefer an alternate route, yet the detour is unavailable no matter how desperately we search and cry out to God. As a result of these challenges, you will experience some really hard emotions, including those of anxiety. Instead of setting the goal never to feel challenging emotions,

which wouldn't be realistic, let's set the goal that we will take a different approach to these struggles when they arise.

We can have faith and still experience difficult emotions and anxiety symptoms. Even more, anxiety can draw us more deeply into our relationship with God and others if we acknowledge it and address it rather than avoid it and ignore it.

Please carefully consider the following questions:

- How might life be different if I acknowledge that experiencing anxiety is part of life rather than seeking to avoid it or ignore it?
- What if I were to embrace the experience of anxiety as a reflection of my humanity, of living in a world that has pain and suffering?
- What if I use my anxiety as an opportunity to face my weaknesses and acknowledge my limitations?
- What if I acknowledge anxiety as pointing to my dependence on God?
- What if I use my anxiety as an opportunity to engage with the all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God?

I invite you to slowly and patiently work through the following goals as you read this book:

- Be curious about your experience of anxiety instead of avoiding it.
- Be able to describe your unique experience.
- Understand what contributes to your anxiety while being okay with not knowing everything that may be contributing.

- Identify healthy habits and practical tools for coping with your anxious thoughts and emotions.
- Understand how your experience with anxiety relates to your faith.
- Know when you need to ask for help.

Let's replace unrealistic expectations with realistic expectations and goals.

In your journal, reflect on the following: What is your goal for reading this book?

TAKEAWAYS

1. Your experience of anxiety is unique. Learn how to name and describe what you are feeling with specific language.
2. Avoid avoiding!
3. Go easy on yourself. The goal isn't to never feel anxiety again but to change your relationship with anxiety.