WHAT YOUR MIND NEEDS FOR ANXIOUS MOMENTS

A 60-day Guide to Take Control of Your Thoughts

HOLLEY GERTH

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Gerth, Holley, author.
Title: What your mind needs for anxious moments : a 60-day guide to take control of your thoughts / Holley Gerth.
Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022]
Identifiers: LCCN 2021058173 | ISBN 9780800738549 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493438808 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Thought and thinking—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Anxiety—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Bible—Meditations. | Devotional literature.
Classification: LCC BV4598.4 .G48 2022 | DDC 152.4/6—dc23/eng/20220128
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021058173

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22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

We all have anxious thoughts. Maybe yours happen when you watch the news, worry about a loved one, get ready for a big meeting, or stare at the ceiling in the night worrying about the future. Your heart might pound, your mind may race, or your sleep could get interrupted.

Your anxiety might even make you wonder if your faith is weak or something is wrong with you. But neither of those are true. Anxiety is an inevitable part of being human, but it doesn't have to control your mind. You really can live with more contentment and less worry, more inner peace and less fear, more joy and less stress.

How do I know? Because one in every five Americans has anxiety significant enough to be diagnosed with a disorder, and I'm among them. A recent poll showed

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62 percent of people feel more anxious than they did a year ago.[1] We've had a lot to deal with in recent history, including global issues like the pandemic, divisive politics, and personal obstacles we never expected.

While we're facing new challenges, anxiety itself is as old as humanity. Adam and Eve hid in the garden because they were anxious. Peter experienced anxiety when he tried to walk on water but found himself sinking. Paul encouraged the Philippians not to be anxious but to take every detail of their lives to God. This book will guide you on a journey from Genesis to Revelation, focusing on times when biblical characters experienced anxiety. We'll explore what God wants to show us through those stories so you can apply these lessons to your life.

As a counselor and life coach, as well as someone who has personally struggled with anxiety, I understand its challenges and what actually helps. *What Your Mind Needs for the Anxious Moments* shares what I've learned, along with brain science, psychological insights, and practical steps. If you've ever been frustrated because you felt anxious and someone told you, "Just pray about it," then this little book is especially for you. God created us as beings with a mind, heart, body, and soul. To overcome our anxiety, we need support in *all* those areas.

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You don't have to keep putting up with your anxiety.

You don't have to stay stuck in the same old worries.

You don't have to continue surrendering your joy to stress.

This is the divine invitation offered to you: "Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:7 CEB). God alone is big enough to carry your burdens, work out all your worries, and take your anxious moments and transform them into soul-deep peace. His love for you is endless, his grace complete, and his plan for your life full of hope. He alone can set you free from anxiety one moment, one thought, one step at a time—starting right now.

For more tools and resources to help with your anxiety as you go through this guide, visit www.holleygerth.com/anxiety.

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ONE

God Will Meet You Where You Are Today

> Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"
>
> He replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."
>
> Genesis 3:9–10

Imagine the most beautiful place you've ever visited. Maybe you watched the sunset at a beach and recall the sky aflame with orange and red, the rhythm of the waves, the smell of salt. Perhaps you stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon or on the peak of a mountain, the rugged landscape reminding you that God is big and you are small. Whatever comes to mind, it cannot even compare to Eden.

There God gives Adam and Eve everything they need, all they want. But the serpent's question, "Did God really say . . . ?" (Gen. 3:1) introduces a seed of

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doubt. It grows until Eve takes a bite of the forbidden fruit and Adam, who is with her, follows suit.

In an instant, everything changes. Innocence turns to shame, peace gives way to fear, joy is distorted into despair. For the first time, humanity feels *anxious*. Anxiety is defined as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome."[1] Here, the unknown event is what will happen next, what God will do.

In his great tenderness, what God does is go looking for Adam and Eve. He asks a question, "Where are you?" Adam responds, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked" (vv. 9–10).

We've been responding in similar ways ever since. Anxiety still tells us we have to hide. We may not do so physically, but we hide emotionally. We pretend we're okay. We're fine, just fine. We hold it together on the outside while on the inside we're falling apart.

Adam and Eve experienced anxiety because of a rebellious choice. But most of us don't *choose* to have anxiety. When, at age eight, I started having stomachaches and visiting the nurse's office almost every day at school, I didn't invite anxiety into my life. It simply showed up, an unwanted visitor who refused to leave. Maybe anxiety has been with you for years, like it has for me. The tendency to be anxious is wired into our

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human biology as surely as the color of our eyes. Maybe anxiety is new for you. You've recently been through a challenge or a trauma. Or the news headlines have just become too much to handle.

Whatever the source of our anxiety, if we've been told it's bad or wrong to be anxious, then it can lead to another uncomfortable feeling that makes us want to hide—shame. Shame tells us that something must be wrong with us if we're struggling with anxiety or that we're the only ones who do. But neither are true (we'll talk a lot more about this as we go forward).

Author and researcher Brené Brown says, "Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it—it can't survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is hide or bury our story."[2] God goes looking for us because he doesn't want us to stay in our shame. He wants to not only hear about our anxiety but also be in it with us because he's relentlessly for us.

In my life, God has used many forms of healing to help with my anxiety, including prayer, counseling, working with my doctor, changing habits in my daily life, talking to supportive people, and even understanding the brain science behind my anxiety. On our journey in this book, I'll share more about all those with

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you. But they all began when I found the courage to admit my struggle.

God is asking you today, "Where are you?" No matter the answer, he already knows. What he's really asking is, "Are you ready to let me meet you where you are today?" God wants to free you from shame, deliver you from fear, and bring you to a new place of overcoming your anxiety. He's calling to your heart, even now. He loves you even in your most anxious moments. It's time to come out of hiding.

God, thank you for your great tenderness toward me. I'm so grateful you want to meet me where I am today. I need your help with my anxiety. Amen.

What's one way you'd like God to help you with your anxiety?

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TWO

God Sees Everything in Your Life

> But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid!"
>
> Genesis 21:17

What if something bad happens to someone I love? It's an anxiety-provoking question, and one Hagar faces in the desert. The Egyptian servant of Abraham, she bore him a son when his wife, Sarah, couldn't conceive. Thankfully, this isn't a practice we continue today, nor is it one God approves of, but it was common in the ancient world.

All goes well for Hagar until years later, when Sarah has a son of her own. Like so many siblings, Ishmael makes fun of his little brother. The consequences are worse than being grounded or sent to his room. Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael leave.

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Hagar wanders in the desert, not knowing where to go or how she'll take care of her son. When her water is gone, she places Ishmael in the only bit of shade she can find. She sits down a short distance away and cries. As she likely did in so many other moments of her life, Hagar feels powerless. "But God *heard the boy crying*, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, 'Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid!'" (Gen. 21:17, emphasis added). It's interesting this verse doesn't say, "God heard Hagar crying." He knows Hagar's tears aren't her greatest concern; instead, it's the pain of her son.

When we're anxious about those we love, it feels as if their well-being depends on us. We have to keep them safe. We have to ensure they make the right choices. We need to control what happens. But the story of Hagar and Ishmael reminds us that God is ultimately in charge of those we love. He is their Protector. He is their Provider. He is the one who will meet them in the dry, desert places where there seems to be no hope.

God reassures Hagar that he has a plan for Ishmael's life. Then he tells her, "Go to him and comfort him" (v. 18). We can't determine the future of those we love. We can't make every problem go away. We can't prevent them from ever experiencing pain. But we can be a loving, supportive presence in their lives.

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As Hagar listens to God, her perspective shifts. Then God opens Hagar's eyes. She sees a well full of water, quickly fills her water container, and gives the boy a drink. From a human viewpoint, there is no way out of this situation. But when Hagar sees circumstances as God does, everything changes.

When we find ourselves anxious about someone we love, we can take our concerns to God. Then we can comfort, encourage, and be there for that person. We can't control the results of the situation, but we can choose how we will be present in the relationship. Worrying can't change what will happen, but prayerfully walking with someone through whatever comes their way can make all the difference.

God, thank you for loving the people in my life even more than I do. I'm especially concerned about _____. Please take care of this person today in ways only you can. Amen.

When have you seen God take care of someone you love?

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THREE

God's Love and Promises Are Real

> Live here as a foreigner in this land, and I will be with you and bless you.
>
> Genesis 26:3

Isaac thinks of when he first met his wife, Rebekah, how her beauty took his breath away, and her comforting companionship took his grief for his mother away too. What would he do without her?

To survive a famine, they'd recently moved to the Philistine territory of Gerar. At first Isaac felt uneasy in this foreign land, but the Lord appeared to him and said he would be blessed and prosperous there, that this land would one day belong to Isaac and his descendants. The covenant God made with his father, Abraham, would continue with him.

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Then this morning in the market a group of Philistine men asked about Rebekah. "Who is that beautiful woman we see with you?" A scene flashed through Isaac's mind—these men kicking in the door of his home, the feel of a knife in his side as he watched his beloved Rebekah dragged into the night. "She is my sister," he said (Gen. 26:7).

Remembering that conversation, Isaac reaches protectively for his wife. "Isaac, what's gotten into you?" Rebekah asks as she hugs him. It feels like a private moment, but King Abimelech sees the two of them embrace, calls for Isaac, and exclaims, "She is obviously your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" (v. 9). Isaac answers, "Because I was afraid someone would kill me to get her from me" (v. 9).

When God told Isaac he would bless him in this land, Isaac believed and obeyed. But in this one area of his life, fear still has a stronghold. So Isaac creates an image that doesn't align with truth.

Isaac isn't the first in his family to do so. His father, Abraham, did the exact same thing. "While living there as a foreigner, Abraham introduced his wife, Sarah, by saying, 'She is my sister.' So King Abimelech of Gerar sent for Sarah and had her brought to him at his palace" (20:1–2). God intervened before Abimelech touched Sarah, but it was almost a disaster, and surely Isaac knew this story.

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Sometimes the image we take on is passed from one generation to another. Anxiety whispered to Abraham, then Isaac, "If people really knew who your 'sister' is . . ." But for us today, what we're more likely to hear from anxiety is, "If people really knew who *you* are . . ."

You wouldn't be loved.

You'd never be accepted.

You'd be alone and rejected.

So we act like everything is fine, overachieve to prove our worth, overspend to keep up with our neighbors, or simply never dare to let ourselves be deeply known.

How do we stop repeating these patterns? *We return to the truth.* Abraham and Isaac did so because they were forced. But we can choose to do so as an act of faith. In our everyday lives, that might look like showing up as we are, not as the person we sometimes pretend to be; asking for help even though it makes us feel vulnerable; and remembering we don't have to cultivate an image to impress people, because we were created in the image of God.

God spoke promises to Isaac, and he speaks promises to you too.

You are already loved.

You are already accepted.

He will never leave or forsake you.

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Anxiety says we have to pretend, but God invites us to entrust our real, imperfect, in-progress selves to him.

God, when anxiety tempts me to portray an image to the world, remind me that I'm loved, I'm accepted, and you are with me always. You get the final word in my life, and what you speak is always true. Amen.

What's one area of your life in which you feel pressure to create an image? What helps you return to the truth of who God made you?

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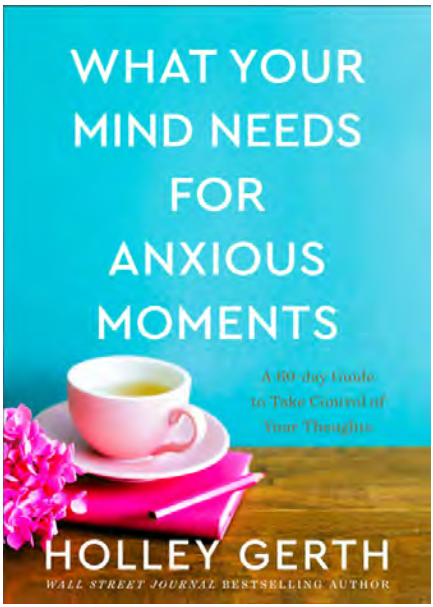
I HOPE YOU'VE ENJOYED THE DEVOTIONAL!



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