



*Obtaining Peace:*

*Conquering Anxiety,  
Worry and Fear*

*by Paul Meier MD*

## Obtaining Peace

(Conquering Anxiety, Worry and Fear)

By Paul Meier, MD

### Part One: Overview

You have picked up this book for one reason, and one reason only: you want peace. Perhaps you're in the midst of a great storm. Maybe the words "anxiety" and "worry" and "fear" pretty well sum up your life these days. Or maybe there is no storm. Perhaps you are in a relatively calm period of your life. Maybe you've opened this book because you have come to grips with the fact that the absence of fear does not necessarily bring peace.

- How does one get peace in the midst of life's storms?
- How does one find peace during the monotony of everyday life?

If these are your questions, you have come to the right place! Together, we're going to look at some destructive patterns that prevent us from obtaining peace, as well as some habits that will promote peace in our lives. We will do this in four "parts."

- First, we will briefly overview the topic of peace and anxiety.
- Second, we will consider two contributing factors to our anxiety and fear.
- Third, we will look at five practical skills which, if properly practiced, will bring us peace!
- The final part will be a word to the friends of those struggling with anxiety.

Through the whole book, we will sprinkle in Scripture and stories. We want to consider Scripture because it is God's word, it offers us our best and only hope of finding peace. We want to look at stories because they help us see how problems and solutions are lived out in real life, by people like us. By the end, it is my desire that you not only know about peace, but that you come to know peace for yourself. Let's begin the conversation by considering the things that take away our peace.

In order to obtain peace in our lives, we must first figure out what are the hosts of "peace robbers" that take away from whatever peace we already have. America is in a long-term, ongoing war against international terrorism. To fight that war successfully the first thing we must continue to do is to gather intelligence about the

nature and thinking and habits of our enemies. The same principle applies in each one of us as we wage a personal war against psychological and spiritual “terrorists” who try to rob our joy and peace of mind. Sometimes that list of terrorists even includes ourselves—especially our unconscious selves—the parts of our thoughts, feelings and motives that we do not even currently comprehend.

There are different levels of anxiety, including angst, fear, worry, true anxiety and panic attacks, the most severe form of anxiety. “Angst” is an existential anxiety that comes from living in such an uncertain and dangerous world. We see acts of terrorism throughout the world, for example, even in the cities and towns we live in ourselves. The world and national economies, as well as our own personal economy, are all uncertain and unpredictable. Retirement funds that took a lifetime to accumulate were often lost or greatly reduced, for example, from 2008 to the present. As life goes on, we see loved ones dying, sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly. Relationships we trusted have sometimes been broken. Our existence itself produces an ongoing level of angst that eats away at our overall peace.

- Problem: we experience unexpected betrayals and rejections.
- Problem: life is uncertain and it is impossible to always be prepared for the negative uncertainties of life.
- Definition: angst is that lingering general, non-specific feeling of anxiety about the uncertainties of life around us.
- Solution: trust in God to be in ultimate control, and the belief that we will live forever in Heaven with perfect peace, with life on earth being a brief, temporary journey, helps significantly reduce our angst.
- Summary: the primary way to deal with angst is to get our lives in perspective, especially in a spiritual sense.

Fear is more specific. You have a test you have to take, or an IRS audit, a speech you have to make, or a meeting tomorrow with your boss. You fear the potential negative consequences. Some degree of fear is reasonable and even helpful. If you accidentally touch something hot, you have immediate fear that danger is present and the heat could get much worse, so you immediately move your hand away from the source of heat in time to avoid getting burned. That is a healthy fear.

A college student has a desire to go to graduate school and realizes that to do so in the field of choice, she must maintain a B+ average. She has a fear of not achieving her goal of graduate school necessary to pursue the career of her choice, so she studies longer and harder to guarantee that her goals will be accomplished. But as a psychiatrist, I know—both from research and from my own decades of experiences with clients—that about 90% of the things we fear never come true, and that the 10% that do come true usually produce a wonderful growth spurt in our emotional and spiritual development.

President Roosevelt was almost correct when he said that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.) Obsessive-compulsive perfectionists fear way too much—anything less than perfection. Paranoid individuals fear way too much—loss of excessive control over others, the rejection of people who actually love them, and that people are out to get them who don’t even know they exist in the first place. Fear and worry are basically the same thing, but I define worry more as excessive fear.

A reasonable, mature person will have reasonable fears. Other individuals have unreasonable fears so are robbed by unreasonable worry. It has been said that people in their 20’s worry about what everyone thinks about them. By thirty, they decide to be more mature and do whatever they think is right and not fear what people think about them. By forty they realize nobody was thinking about them in the first place, and that is the most difficult to accept!

True anxiety is more severe. It results in physical and emotional symptoms. It comes when you have the unpleasant and sometimes painful experience of feeling very anxious and fearful without understanding what you are actually feeling anxious about. It may get worse during times of stress, but often comes out of the blue as well. I define “true anxiety” as “a fear of finding out the truth about your own thoughts, feelings, and motives.”

Extreme anxiety results in panic attacks. There is a reason for every panic attack. Some people inherit lower than normal levels of certain brain chemicals, like serotonin, GABA or dopamine, and have social phobias or severe anxiety or panic attacks for purely genetic reasons, which are easily corrected with modern medications, which I will explain later in this book. But the vast majority of people who have panic attacks are having them because of an excessive fear of finding out the truth about their own thoughts, feelings and motives.

Typically, it is the very kind people who have more panic attacks. If an unthoughtful person gets angry, he will probably lose his temper and yell at someone, which is immature but he won’t get a panic attack. A really nice person does not give himself or herself permission to even be angry, even when the anger is very appropriate, so he will have a fear of being aware of the anger or rage within him, developing a panic attack as a result of that extreme fear.

A panic attack is having so much anxiety that you have physical symptoms or more severe emotional symptoms. The most common symptoms of a panic attack are:

- Heart palpitations
- Sharp chest pains
- Shakiness
- Sweating
- Choking sensation

- Dizziness
- Fainting
- Upset stomach
- Sudden headaches
- Fear of going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Excessive fear of being out of control

Do any of these symptoms look familiar to you? Does your anxiety ever cause you to have nausea? Are you often dizzy when experiencing anxiety? It may well be that you are having a panic attack. By recognizing and naming the episode, you are given power. To be sure, a panic attack is still frightening. But knowing what it is allows you to take control of the situation.

Many of my clients come for the first time to see me after having their first panic attack with severe heart palpitations with severe, sharp chest pains. They think they are having a heart attack, so they go to an emergency room, where they get an EKG and a blood test that show there is nothing wrong with their heart. They are almost disappointed to find out it is a panic attack rather than a heart attack because they are needlessly embarrassed. There is no reason to be embarrassed, of course. Anyone can potentially have panic attacks.

When a person has a heart attack, the pain is usually a dull pain, like a heavy rock sitting on the chest and usually radiating to the left arm. The chest pain from a panic attack is caused by a “Charlie horse” (severe cramping) of the muscles between the ribs, so it is a sharp pain. If they take a deep breath with a panic attack, the pain will get worse because it is stretching those muscles between the ribs causing the pain. Occasionally people with a heart attack will have a sharp pain, however, so it is still a good idea to get it checked out the first time it happens.

Of course, you should consult your doctor if you are experiencing such an episode. For one thing, you want to rule out a heart attack. Additionally, the doctor will also be able to prescribe medication that will give immediate relief. Whenever I get a new client with panic attacks, they don’t even believe me when I tell them they can get medication that will eliminate panic attacks that very day and they don’t ever have to have another one. The medication is an immediate relief, but is not the long-term solution. Insight into what is causing the panic attacks and dealing with those root problems will eliminate the panic attacks for good without requiring future medications.

Does this sound familiar? Are you experiencing similar anxiety? Have you experienced an anxiety attack in the past? The good news is there is hope for anxious people like me and you! The hope is discovered by discovering ourselves.

In Psalm 139:23-24, David prays for God to reveal to him his own innermost anxious thoughts (unconscious thoughts). David knew he would grow from these insights and live his life more maturely. People who grow up suffering from emotional, physical, sexual, and/or religious abuse tend to have significantly more depression, anxiety, and panic attacks, as well as low self-esteem. They often feel inferior and are afraid to be assertive or to speak up for themselves. Does this describe you? Do you find it difficult to express the pain, frustration, or anger inside yourself? Let me offer you're a technique that you can use right now.

Picture your abuser in your mind. Place him in a chair directly in front of you. Now, speak to him. Try to articulate the ways, specifically, that he has hurt you. Recount the actions which have led to the damaging of your person. Now, tell them how it has made you feel. Try to put words the pain and anger inside your soul. Express yourself.

Well, did you do it? Did you speak for yourself? Did you give words to your feelings? Did you direct those words to the one responsible for the pain? If you did the exercise, it is likely that the words that came out of your mouth were surprising. This is not uncommon. Often, we remain frustrated and angry because we're repressing the emotions just below the surface of our psyche. Our "innermost anxious thoughts" remain unrevealed. Like David, we have to long for these thoughts to be made known to us. Peace, we will discover, does not come by suppressing the anxiety, but by giving voice to it, thus resolving it.

## **Part Two: The Problem**

### **Contributing Factor 1: Our "Unconscious"**

- Conscious thoughts, feelings, and motives are those of which we are aware.
- Subconscious thoughts, feelings and motives are those that are below the surface, but that we can pull up to our awareness with a little mental effort.

80% of our thoughts, feelings and motives are unconscious—totally out of our awareness. The decisions we make every day seem to us to be under our control. We think we know what we are doing. But our unconscious heavily influences every decision we make—even what you are wearing right now.

When you decided what to wear this morning there were more unconscious reasons why you chose those clothes than there were conscious reasons. Why do you have that particular picture hanging in your living room, or bedroom or office? You think you know why. There were some conscious reasons why you chose them. But there were more symbolic and unconscious reasons why you chose them than there were conscious reasons. For instance, some unconscious motivators in life might be:

- A desire to make our mom happy.

- A desire to make our dad proud.
- A desire to make our siblings jealous.
- A desire to be found attractive.
- A desire to be thought of as smart.

I will probably upset you by going so far as to say that, if you are married, there were more unconscious reasons why you married whoever you did than there were conscious reasons. Most people marry someone similar to their own parent of the opposite sex. The daughter of an alcoholic father will have a much greater chance of marrying an alcoholic or drug abuser. The son of a wonderful mother has a greater chance of finding a wonderful wife, more for unconscious (but fortunate) reasons than conscious reasons. The daughter of a rejecting father will be surprised in her teens and twenties by how many young men they “fall in love with” who end up surprisingly rejecting her or fearing intimacy with her.

If she dates a young man who is unconditionally loving and treats her like a queen, she will tend to feel very anxious because her unconscious needs to repeat her childhood or to “fix her father-substitute” are not being met by him, so she will tend to break up with the good guy and end up with someone who she can try to fix but who will probably ultimately reject her.

Let me tell you a story about my friend Rebecca. Rebecca was in her thirties, was married, had three young children, and took her children to church with her every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night for prayer meeting (where the children would be in another room with other children their age getting taught Bible stories). It was a good and reasonable church.

Rebecca, however, was married to an alcoholic who never came to church with her. In fact, he didn't even work. She worked full time to support the family, giving him part of her earnings, which he wasted on alcohol. She was an enabler. She stayed with him even though he regularly beat her up and ran around on her. She came to prayer meeting every Wednesday night, and when the audience was asked for prayer requests, she would raise her hand most weeks, bruises on her body and face, requesting prayer for her alcoholic husband who beat her and ran around on her. She seemed to many to be a saint, but in my opinion she should have separated from him and not been a masochist who put up with physical abuse and unfaithfulness and subjected her children to that kind of environment. I would have suggested that to her if I had known her, but had not met her yet. Her pastor felt the same way, but had not confronted her with those urgings.

Finally, one Wednesday night, she came with her arm in a sling and asked for prayer and the pastor had heard enough. He told her he was going to her house that very evening after the service to confront her husband. She tried to persuade him not to, but finally gave him permission. The pastor went and confronted her husband, and he genuinely repented and became a believer. He followed the pastor's advice by

getting professional Christian counseling and attending A.A. He quit drinking, quit womanizing, quit beating his wife, and within a few weeks he even got a job. He excelled at work and worked his way up rapidly to the top. He then went into business for himself. Three years after his conversion, he was a millionaire and a deacon in the church, and a sincerely wonderful and loving husband to his wife.

Rebecca now was no longer the martyr and suffering saint she had been before he changed. She got lots of attention when suffering, but it seemed to her like her husband was getting more attention than her now, and she was jealous. She became clinically depressed with severe anxiety, daily panic attacks, and suicidal ideation. She overdosed but survived by getting her stomach pumped in the hospital.

She was referred to my practice where she received psychological testing, an evaluation by me, and daily intense therapy to dig up her root problems. It turned out (to no surprise) that her father had been an abusive alcoholic who abused her all through childhood. Her mother worked to support the family and enabled Rebecca's father, who did not, and was also unfaithful regularly.

I pointed out to Rebecca that she grew up with a need to get her father's attention, which she never had gotten in a positive way, as well as a need to fix her father, and also to get even with her father for harming her and her mother. Even though she thought her husband was a nice man on her wedding day, her unconscious mind could tell he would emerge into a repeat of her father, and that she unconsciously desired that. And even though she did, in a sense, "fix her father substitute," she was having panic attacks because she was afraid to see all these buried truths. She was upset with us initially and disagreed that she had these unconscious conflicts. She insisted she just had bad luck, and she had no clue why she was depressed. However, after she finally realized that her anxiety was connected with her father, she had a flood of emotions and awareness. She wept and grieved and confessed the flaws she had never known were there in the first place. And she recovered, finally enjoying a happy and anxiety-free life with her husband and children.

So as I implied earlier, the primary way that I, as a psychiatrist, can help my clients overcome their anxiety is to use a variety of techniques that help them get in touch with their unconscious thoughts, feelings and motives. Then their anxiety will go away. Even panic attacks go away with enough insight and dealing with those insights. After getting good insight-oriented therapy, people are nearly always quite astounded about all the things they have learned about themselves that they never knew before.

One of the greatest and most worthwhile goals you could possibly have is the goal to thoroughly get to know your own innermost unconscious self. We all fear that. We are afraid of what we will discover. We are all human, so what we discover are lots of good things we never knew were there, but also areas of selfishness we all have. We discover repressed anger or bitterness. We discover things like possibly a fear of rejection, a fear of intimacy, or other such things.

## **Contributing Factor 2: Self-Deceit**

So far we have learned that peace has a lot to do with relationships. The absence of healthy relationships deprives of peace. However, so too will the presence of unhealthy relationships rob us of peace. Now, I want us to consider our role in relationships. Often, we find ways of pushing those who would love to be in a relationship with us away. I'm betting you have heard the term "defense mechanisms" before. But I want us to consider the effects defense mechanisms have on our relationships, and the way in which it truly robs us of peace.

We all have a current image of ourselves, and we go to extreme means to avoid having reality destroy our false image. But in the long run, seeing ourselves as we really are is a tremendous gift that enables us to make some hard decisions to grieve our losses and obtain forgiveness for our failures and protect ourselves in areas where our own codependency issues set us up to be taken advantage of by selfish others. 2700 years ago, Jeremiah the Prophet understood this when he wrote (in Jeremiah 17:9) that our hearts (meaning our minds, emotions and will) are more deceitful than anything else, and contaminated by selfish desires. Then he asked his readers to ask themselves if they are capable of comprehending this. Are you willing and able?

When people wanted to stone to death a woman caught in adultery in biblical days, why weren't they trying to stone the man too? Chauvinism is one example of selfish and faulty thinking throughout human history and remains a big one today. Jesus said to them, "Let him ... without sin ... throw a stone at her ... and they went away ... beginning with the older (John 8:3-9)." The older I get, the more I realize how little I know. Are you mature, objective, and searching for truth? Then the wiser you become, the less certain and dogmatic you'll be.

One of the most used defense mechanisms is known as projection. A hand on a projector appears to be on the screen, but it is not. Likewise, our faults appear to be projected onto others. We see them in others (the "screen"), but not in ourselves (the "projector"). The Apostle Matthew had a deep understanding of projection and described an example of it in Matthew 7:3-5:

3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (NIV)."

Paranoid personalities use projection as their primary form of self-deceit, but we all use projection to some extent. Learning the truth about ourselves and

others is a path to success. After describing our deceitful nature, the Prophet Jeremiah reassured us (Jeremiah 29:11) that God has good plans for us and plans to prosper us and not to harm us. He plans to give us hope and a good future, in spite of our self-deceiving nature. But growth takes insight and the humility to accept it and learn from it. Wise King Solomon said 3000 years ago, "Don't try to figure out everything on your own...Don't assume that you know it all (Proverbs 3:5-7)."

In medical school there was a certain student I could not stand to be around. His personality almost nauseated me. But when I learned about projection in my psychiatry rotation, I made a list of the things I did not like about him, and I realized for the first time that he was a lot like me. He reminded me of the negative things in myself that I did not want to admit to. I showed him my list and he told me those were the same reasons he did not like me. But when we both saw reality, we were able to have a good laugh about it and accept each other as we learned to accept those aspects of ourselves. We even shared a small office later on and got along just fine, becoming good friends.

Most fathers project unto their oldest son and are toughest on him. Most mothers project and are toughest on their oldest daughter. The oldest son and oldest daughter of most families tend to be more successful, trying to please their critical parent, but also less happy because they feel that no matter how much they achieve, it is never quite good enough. How our parents see us and behave toward us greatly prejudices our opinions of ourselves falsely. These things influence our daily "self-talk."

If you lock your keys in your car today, what will be the very first thing you will say to yourself, either verbally or subconsciously? If your view of your own inner self is overly critical, you will say something like, "You stupid idiot! How could you do something so careless?" But ask yourself the question now, "What would I say to my very best friend if my best friend was driving us and we just discovered that my best friend locked his or her keys in the car?" If you are a decent and honest human being, you would say something like "Welcome to the human race! We all make mistakes. Don't feel bad. We will figure something out or call AAA." You would tell your best friend the truth to comfort him or her, but you would tell yourself a negative lie. There are enough terrorists in the world these days without allowing one (yourself, often mimicking a critical parent) to follow you everywhere you go making your life more miserable for no good reason.

Can you think of lies you often tell yourself? Here are some ones I hear often:

- "I'm good for nothing."
- "No one could love me if they knew really knew me."
- "I deserve for this to happen."
- "My friend's lives would be better if I were not in it."
- "Life will always feel like this."
- "Everything I touch falls apart."

You can make a decision this very moment that could improve the quality of your life by 50% or more. Find a safe place to write down a pledge, like the back of your Bible or a journal or a document on your computer you can save. Then write down in your own words the following pledge: “From today on I promise to be my own best friend, and will make a real effort to not say anything negative to myself that I would not say to my own best friend under the same circumstances.” Then date it and sign it and remind yourself of it from time to time. This one simple choice can change your life for the better. There are many more simple choices that can change the quality of your life by becoming more aware of and working on the positive and negative aspects of yourselves as you discover more and more of your inner self.

Of course, another way in which we lie to ourselves is through “denial.” We sometimes do selfish things to others or say harmful things to put down others, but use denial to justify our actions. We convince ourselves we are entitled to do so and are rightfully doing so. When we become aware of the truth about our selfish motives, we would be wise to pray for forgiveness, forgive ourselves and learn from the error we made, deciding to make an effort to do so less often in the future. We will never be perfect. In some cases, it would be good to confess our error to the person we erred against. In other cases, that would do more harm than good and it is better to just move on and make an effort not to repeat the same type of errors in the future.

Someone who has an affair and potentially may cause great harm to the family life of the other person rationalizes that the affair cannot be avoided because it is driven by intense love. But in reality, intense love for that other person is exactly what would prevent you from having an affair with that person and risking his or her family’s demise or the demise of her own self esteem.

I want the “secret me” and the “real me” to become the same person. The “secret me” is my persona—the way I portray myself in public. I try not to be phony, but I still put my best foot forward. The “real me” is the me who is thinking things I would not say to the people around me I am thinking those things about. I don’t want to offend people, and I don’t want to be rejected by those around me either.

I have seen a couple of very funny movies where a person had to say everything he was thinking and the results were quite chaotic. But according to psychiatry research and my own empirical findings from decades of seeing my clients, about 80% of our thoughts, feelings and motives are unconscious—totally out of our own awareness. So there is a much deeper level of a “secret me” that I am not even aware of. We make the majority of our decisions in life without being aware of a significant portion of our own unconscious reasons, which dominate our lives and remove us from as much control as we think we have over our own lives.

I want to share with you a true story of a movie star I treated. She gave me permission to do so if I don’t reveal who she is and if I use a different name. I will

call her Jane. Jane was suicidal and extremely depressed and unable to function while going through her sixth divorce while still in her mid 30's. Her husband was a drug addict who was physically abusive with her and also ran around on her repeatedly and beat her up whenever she would complain about it.

She kept putting up with his behavior because of her own codependency issues—she was addicted to jerks. When I do my initial examination of a new client, I ask them many things, including important facts about her childhood. But when I found out from Jane that all six of her husbands were either alcoholics or drug addicts, and all six were physically abusive, and all six were unfaithful to her, this was more than could be reasonably assumed to be just an extreme coincidence. She thought all men must be that way or that she had extremely bad luck. She thought all of them were good men—at least better men than they were—when she married them. She had blind spots. Her unconscious knew what they would be like or she would not have married them, but her conscious mind was blind to the truth.

Instead of asking her about her childhood, I took a chance by asking her if I could guess what her childhood was like. She gave me permission, thinking there could not possibly be any way I could guess and that I was probably wasting their time by doing so. I guessed that her father was an alcoholic, and that he was physically abusive, and that he had sexually abused her growing up. Her mouth fell open and she asked me if I had talked to her mother to find out about her childhood. All those things were true. I told her I was purely guessing based on her bringing on so much pain to her own life by repeatedly being addicted to jerks who would abuse her.

In Jane's unconscious, she craved her father's genuine affection, which she had never received. Her unconscious was bitter toward him for abusing her and her mother, so she wanted to get vengeance on him or on men like him. Her unconscious felt like she must deserve to be abused, because nearly all children who are abused come to feel erroneously that it is because they deserve it, which they don't.

If repeated enough, they come to believe that abuse is inevitable and so passively put up with it and even seek it out to punish themselves. Jane's unconscious also wanted to fix her childhood, so by tricking herself into marrying jerks like her father, she unconsciously hoped to fix one of them to feel some relief from "fixing" her childhood. So for all these reasons her emotionally sick unconscious was running her life and ruining her life. She was beautiful, rich, famous and absolutely miserable and suicidal.

When I told her all these things, her initial reaction was to use massive denial and to think her misery was still all due to extremely bad luck or all men being alike and that I was just very lucky to guess her childhood correctly. She got angry at me for pointing out the obvious truth that she was still not ready to see. So she quit our Day Program and left.

People make dramatic recoveries by finding out the truth about themselves as we dig up their root problems. Mark Twain once said that it is not what you eat that gives you indigestion, but rather what is eating you. We find out what is eating away at our clients on an unconscious level and get them to grieve and deal with those things and make “re-decisions” different from the ones they erroneously made in childhood or later.

A day later, Jane came to her senses and realized that I had to be correct and that, as scary as that was, she was not in control of her own life. By the end of three weeks of intensive therapy, Jane was in control of her own life and had recovered from her depression. I have followed her for years and she has never again married another jerk or even chosen jerks to date. She has discovered that there are as many good men in the world as there are good women—well, almost as many!

There are a variety of ways we can become aware of our own inner selves—our unconscious selves. Being married in an honest relationship between two people who share gut level feelings with each other can be extremely helpful in discovering the truth about ourselves. Our mate sees things in us that others miss—even those we have worked beside for decades. Men who remain single have 300% more heart attacks, strokes and suicides and men who get married, with all other socioeconomic factors being equal.

Women do quite well either single or married, probably because they are more likely to share their feelings with others in our current culture. This is becoming less true in the younger generations, however, who are more likely to have Facebook friends than true intimate friends to share all their secrets with. To enjoy life and have peace and a meaningful life, we must all have one or more individuals in our lives who know all our secrets and love us anyway.

Friend, allow me to ask you a question: do you have someone in your life who can tell you the truth, even when it hurts? Trust me, if left to ourselves, you and I would almost always chose to lie to ourselves rather than face the ugly truth. Thus, we need those around us who won't let us lie! Those who can point out when we are in denial, and give us a wakeup call. Being honest with yourself is the first step on the journey to peace. So pack a bag, grab a friend's hand, and take the first step!

### **Part Three: The Solution**

#### **Practical Coping Skill 1: Get to Know Yourself**

Whenever any two people get together there are actually six people present: the two people as they see themselves, the two people as they see each other and the two people as they really are. None of the six are alike. None of us sees ourselves or anyone else totally accurately. But the purpose of this book is to assist you to better understand who you really are in your inner self so you can gain more control over

your life to produce positive results, and to protect yourselves from negative influences.

Three things determine who your inner self really is:

- Your genes
- Your environment
- Your choices.

This means your true self is the result of your genetic makeup and predispositions, lifelong influences from your environment, but most importantly, your personal choices. If we learn to see others and ourselves more accurately, we'll grieve sometimes and rejoice other times, but the truth will set us free from the control of our own mistaken unconscious over us. The truth will also enable us to create better boundaries to protect us from being taken advantage of by others.

Just as Yorkies are usually more loving and friendly than Pit Bulls, people are also different from each other genetically. Some of our personality traits are inherited. Some people have a lower serotonin level and become more perfectionistic, self-critical, depressed and anxious as a result. Only a serotonin medication lifelong will correct this basic pattern.

Others are born with a dopamine abnormality resulting in them becoming more naturally paranoid. They tend to be more critical, controlling, condescending, arrogant, ascribing evil motives to others (projection) that they themselves are unconsciously guilty of, sensitive to criticism, and suspicious that others are against them. If the dopamine problem becomes severe, it can result in grandiose or paranoid delusions and auditory hallucinations (hearing negative voices away from their bodies, out loud, that do not really exist). Dopamine medications (atypical antipsychotics) can be taken lifelong to compensate for these paranoid traits.

People with a GABA abnormality can be born with social phobia, even if their siblings are extroverts. I have seen people in their forties or fifties who have been socially phobic their entire lives and put them on a GABA medication and watched them become totally normal and even extroverted within four or five days. All of us have some genetic factors influencing our basic personality to some extent or another, and most of us do not need medication to correct less dramatic influences. Here are some personality traits that are often inherited:

- Outgoing
- Shy
- Easily angered
- Humorous
- Timid
- Bold

- Meek

Our environmental lifelong experiences, especially the first six years of our lives, have an enormous impact on how we think and feel. We make decisions all along the way, but thank God for choices. As we become aware of faulty choices we made in the past due to genetic or environmental reasons, we can make re-decisions about what to do and how to feel the rest of our lives.

Addictions, whether to alcohol, drugs, overeating, spending or unhealthy sexual behaviors, are examples of being controlled by our own unconscious root problems. Heal those roots and the addictions become controllable or even gone altogether. Addictions are known as “dependences.”

Most humans have at least subtle addictive tendencies (dependencies) of one type or another. But nearly all humans also have what we psychiatrists call “codependencies.” Codependency refers to relationships in which we enable significant others around us to be addicted or immature or entitled. An alcoholic is dependent. But his mate who goes out and works hard to support the family and gives part of his or her income for the mate to purchase more alcohol is codependent. Church Lady, in our earlier case study, was severely codependent until she recovered in our Day Program.

Someone who is selfish and controlling is narcissistic and dependent on those behaviors to manipulate his environment. But someone who puts up with it rather than refusing to do so is codependent and is actually doing harm by rewarding the narcissistic person and by suffering needlessly by getting manipulated.

Psychiatry research shows that about 50% of our personality tendencies are formed by the third birthday and 85% by the sixth birthday. Don’t misunderstand this, because we can all change no matter how old we are. But the basic ways we see ourselves, authority figures, males, females, and human relationships are foundationally laid down by the sixth birthday in most cases. We can all form bad habits even late in adult life, but in most cases, these patterns were already developing early in life. Most people go through life being dominated by whatever they learned, correctly or incorrectly, in those early years, never thinking twice about the attitudes and behavioral patterns in their lives that are hindering them from having enough success and happiness.

Most of us tend to think God is a Heavenly version of our earthly father (or mother). There are numerous ways to build an intimate relationship with the true Creator-God, and my personal conviction is that daily meditation on Scripture, is by far the most productive way to better understand ourselves and to learn healthy ways to relate to one another. I have been doing that in my own life since the age of ten, when I made a conscious decision to do so.

When I read and re-read my Bible, new things stand out to me each time through it, pointing out things in my unconscious that I had never seen before. I also see God's understanding of our human frailties and his grace and forgiveness for our innermost flaws. He does not condemn us even for our most selfish behaviors, but wants us to "repent" and make re-decisions about them, with his help, so we can grow more loving and able to receive love the older we become.

So how can studying the Bible help us know more about our personality? How can it help us find peace amidst anxiety? Well, let's take an example. Say you have an issue with over relying on people. You find yourself absolutely dependent upon others for your identity, security, and peace. This is what is often called "codependency."

The use of the word "codependency" is relatively new, but the concept is as old as time itself. 2000 years ago the Apostle Paul described it in Galatians chapter six, but you have to understand the original Greek it was written in to comprehend it. In the English versions of the Bible there seems to be a contradiction in that chapter. Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens" to fulfill the desire of Christ. But in the same chapter Paul says to "let everyone bear his own burden." Sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? But it isn't. There are separate Greek words for "burden" in the two passages. Paul is actually saying everyone should carry his own normal emotional load. Carry your own burdens. But we should carry one another's "overburdens" to fulfill the law of Christ.

In other words, if you went on a camping trip with a group of friends, everyone should carry his own backpack. If you carry two backpacks enabling a lazy person to carry none, you are not doing him or yourself a favor. You are actually being unkind to him by spoiling him. But if one of the campers is designated to be the cook, and has brought heavy pots and pans and cooking utensils, you and the other campers should each help carry a portion of his "overburden"—his excessive load. That is the difference.

If you do things for your children, mate, co-workers, or anyone else that the other person should be doing for himself, you are codependent and hurting the other person and yourself by being masochistic. Getting to know the inner you better will help you discover areas in your life where you may be taking advantage of others or areas of codependency where you are allowing others to take advantage of you.

I have another story to tell you, this one about a man named Todd. Todd grew up with a passive father and a controlling, mean and very narcissistic mother. At the age of seven, his mother abandoned her family, leaving Todd to be passed around from relative to relative, none of whom really showed Todd much love. When his mother first left, Todd went to the corner near his house every day and sat on the corner, looking for his mother to come back.

After about a month of doing this, he finally gave up. But Todd was very smart and very athletic and excelled at both academics and athletics in school, even though he

continued to suffer from low self-esteem. He won a football scholarship to a major university, got great grades at the same time, and ended up going on to medical school and becoming an internal medicine specialist.

He was always attracted to girls like his mother who were very selfish and controlling and even rejecting, and each of them eventually rejected him. He was, like most humans, repeating the patterns of his early childhood because of being dominated by his sick unconscious thoughts, emotions and motives—his unresolved root conflicts. Finally, by pure luck or by God’s grace, he met and fell in love with a wonderful woman who loved him deeply and unconditionally.

They got married, had children, and lived a very happy life for almost two decades. But Todd’s unconscious conflicts were never brought to his awareness and continued to eat away at him. He worked every day with a very selfish, critical and controlling nurse, and he “fell in love” with her, had an affair, and decided to divorce his wife to marry the nurse.

His wife persuaded him to at least come to see me for a psychiatric evaluation. It was easy for me to see during our one-hour workup what was going on and I pointed it out to him. He looked stunned and it made sense to him. He broke up with the nurse and decided to go back to his family. But he did not continue to come see me to work on those conflicts.

A mere awareness is not usually enough to overcome a lifetime of those ingrained thinking patterns. So he convinced himself that for whatever reasons, he was in love with the nurse and ended up divorcing his wife and marrying her. Being a selfish and controlling wife, the nurse pitted Todd against even his own children, so she could maintain control of him.

One time Todd bought an expensive gift for one of his children. Todd was wealthy and could easily afford it. But his new wife went to the house of that teenage daughter and took the gift back and returned it to the store to get a refund. One time she got angry at Todd and burned many of his possessions. She abused him in various ways.

To add insult to injury, Todd’s mother found out her abandoned son was now well off financially and reappeared on the scene with her hands out, acting like she loved and missed him. Todd got his mom an apartment and spoiled her while she pretended to love him. I saw Todd’s wife for therapy for a year or so to help her recover, which she did quite well. The last I heard Todd was living his life “miserably ever after.” Their teenage daughters also received therapy to recover from the abandonment of their father—therapy that should also help them to not get married someday to an abandoning husband.

Can you see yourself in Todd? Are you drawn to unhealthy relationships, yet can’t explain why? Well, the good news is your story is still being written, and doesn’t

have to end like Todd's! Peaceful relationships are possible. The cycle can end with you! Peace is on the menu, will you order it?

## **Practical Coping Skills 2: Know what you want**

As you can tell, I really want you to “get to know yourself.” Getting to know the truth about our inner selves takes not only self-discovery by a variety of means but also self-determination to become who we want to become. Developing a relationship with our Creator God and Scripture meditation also brings about fantastic awarenesses into our unconscious thoughts, feelings and motives.

We can become aware of self-defeating behaviors and grow a great deal even if we never figure out the root problems that led to those behaviors. We can make better decisions about our lives even if we don't understand what went wrong in the first place. So don't ever allow your lack of insight into your own root problems to keep you from making healthy changes. A young woman came into my office crying, “Dr. Meier, I just can't figure out who I am!”

I replied, “It doesn't really matter who you are!”

“Why doesn't it matter who I am?” she asked me.

Then I replied to my client, “What really matters is who do you want to be? We have total freedom to grow into who we want to become, regardless of who you have been!”

Many humans think erroneously that they are trapped. Put grasshoppers in a jar with food and water supplies and holes in the lid so they can breathe, and they'll try to jump out for about a day. But after a day trying to jump out, grasshoppers give up and quit trying. Remove the lid and they won't ever leave even though they easily could. When we feel trapped we are just like those grasshoppers, deceived into thinking we are trapped when we are not trapped. Free yourself today! The lid is off your jar.

Most people go through life not questioning all the lies they learned about themselves and others, but thank God we all can change. Parents who are blind to their own flaws see those same flaws in an exaggerated fashion within their children (projection). This happens even moreso between a father and his oldest son and a mother with her oldest daughter, but any child in the family can become the scapegoat of a majority of this kind of projection. Our lives can become much healthier if we realize the source of our negative self-talk and kick those negative messages from our parents out of our brains!

Children also grow up blind to their own flaws, rejecting innocent parents, imagining their own flaws in their parents—scapegoating them! This is especially common in the early teens. Some 13 year olds think they know everything and their

parents know nothing worthwhile. As I said earlier, in my psychiatric training at Duke I studied 40 different ways that we lie to ourselves—defense mechanisms. Projection is just one of them. I love Paul Simon’s song, “Something So Right,” about how difficult it is for victims of child abuse to accept unconditional love as adults. In “Something So Right,” Paul Simon sings about the Great Wall of China, over 1,000 miles long, built strong to keep foreigners out. But Paul sings that, like the wall of China, “there’s a wall inside me, that no one can see. It takes a long time to get next to me.”

At age two we were all emotional geniuses, crying when sad, laughing, hugging, and even sharing the truth—“I’m mad at you Daddy (or Mommy).” If our parents encouraged us to share our emotions, we stay emotional geniuses, but if punished for it, we fear emotions and repress them. If sharing anger and other emotions is stifled in infancy, we feel falsely guilty for having them, with low self-esteem and shame. If we develop “toxic shame” from critical parents, we may become verbal terrorists to ourselves, even if we are very kind to others. Only insight and making new decisions (“re-decisions”) can remove the unconscious terrorist from our lives. Make that re-decision today. It will relieve much of your anxiety.

Assertiveness is the confidence to let people know how you feel and to ask for what you need. We need assertiveness and boundaries to resolve conflicts in constructive ways. There are polite and constructive ways to be assertive. For example, Dr. Henry Cloud suggests, “Think of one person you are in conflict with and ask him this question: What have I not been hearing that I need to hear?”

When you hear it, be open minded enough to accept your part, if any, in causing the problem. But don’t agree with what you feel is not accurate, and “speak the truth in love” about your own perspective, whether the other person agrees with you or not. Sometimes the other person will not see it your way the first time he hears it. But after a day or two of thinking about it, the truth dawns on him and he may change and see the truth about your assertions. You can practice being assertive! For instance, here are some “truth statements” which are often implemented:

- “You can be act selfishly.”
- “I feel as though you care more about X than me.”
- “You can be inconsiderate.”
- “I would respond better if you changed your tone of voice.”
- “You need to treat me with respect.”

If you don’t see beauty in the depths of your soul, get a “soul X-ray” because God sees many good character traits in you. He also sees your potential for personal growth if you tap into your own good traits. Dr. Henry Cloud also has said, “The worst thing you can die with is potential!” Reading this book is a positive striving to reach more of your positive human potential through personal insights.

None of us will ever reach our full potential prior to Heaven. The world has still never seen what God can do with someone who is 100 percent dedicated to him and reaches his or her full potential. But we can all reach a greater proportion of our potential than we have so far.

Abuse victims also suffer from the misperception that they somehow deserved the abuse and deserve continuing abuse. After enough repeated abuse, they consider it inevitable and tend to repeat the abuse patterns in adulthood by picking abusive mates or friends or employers or even pastors. With proper therapy, abuse victims become as healthy as anyone else—often even healthier. Their view of God may also change from seeing him as an abusive, mean-spirited God to a God of love and grace. They learn to see him “outside the box” of their own abuse-perspective. King David taught us 3000 years ago (Psalm 9) that God is a stronghold for the oppressed, and (Psalm 68) that God will smash the heads of our abusers, maybe not right away, but in his timing. King David also promises in Psalm 68 that God will take those who are lonely and abandoned and place them in a new “family.”

In your quest to know your inner self better, search within yourself to see if any part of you is waiting around for a parent (or anyone else for that matter) to change, and love you, and accept you the way you are. In reality, there are 7 billion people on planet earth and your father is just one of them. Your mother is just one of them. Since our parents are so important to us in our formative years from birth to six, we erroneously think as adults that our lives cannot be happy and normal without their approval. Nothing is further from the truth.

Your parents are your genetic donors. We all need to love and be loved to be happy, but it doesn't have to be by any one particular person. That is a myth that keeps many millions of people on earth unhappy if they continue to believe that myth. If your parents do love you the way you are, that is an awesome gift. That is wonderful. Keep a great relationship with them as much as it depends on you. But it is a bonus in life, not a necessity.

You do need to get “mothered and fathered and brothered and sistered” in this life to have a happy and meaningful life, but it does not have to be by your gene donors or your natural sibs. I have many clients whose relatives are so abusive that I encourage them to never see them again or communicate with them again. To have a happy and meaningful life, these clients have to give up on their relatives ever changing and grief their loss as though they died.

It may surprise you to find out that the death of an abusive parent who never showed love can be more painful in some cases than the death of a very loving parent. That happens when someone has been clinging to the hope that the abusive parent will come through and love him or her, and when the abusive parent dies, that fantasy dies with him. Thus, severe grief and even depression can follow because of the death of the hope of the parent coming through with love to someone

who thinks his life will never be normal without it. The same goes for the loss of a mate or any significant other.

We hear popular songs all the time that sing the words, "I can't live without you." There is no statement more ridiculous than that. Losing someone you love deeply does hurt badly. I am not downplaying that. We do need to grieve those losses. But you only need one or two people in your life you know all your secrets and love you anyway.

There are seven billion to pick from to develop a safe relationship with. Lots of those people are unsafe, so let's lower that to maybe three billion who are potentially safe future friends. Develop a couple over the years, so if you lose one you won't be friendless. King Solomon was so wise several thousand years ago when he taught us, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12)." Waiting around for the approval of any rejecting person is a big mistake. Love and be loved by the lovable who already love you unconditionally, as you already are. Here are some things to look for in a good friend:

- Caring
- Honest
- Compassionate
- Godly
- Vulnerable
- Trustworthy
- Patient
- Dependable

If you ever wonder who in the world has the most messed up unconscious inner self, imagine being able to read the unconscious thoughts of a radical Islamic terrorist who goes around beheading Christians, Jews and even moderate Muslims who do not think exactly the same way his particular sect thinks. They kill women and cut children in two. They enslave women and force them to marry them after beheading their husbands and children. Who would want to be married to a woman who dreaded to be with you? What kind of mentality must that take? But in that same terrorist's conscious brain, he thinks he is more moral and righteous than the people he is beheading. Does that show you the depths human depravity can sink down to?

Now come back to analyzing your own unconscious inner self? You may be nothing like that radical Islamic terrorist, but you still may have "religious" abusive thinking or emotions within you that are misleading you to make mistakes in your life. I believe having a relationship with God and a spiritual perspective on life is a must to really have meaning in life and true happiness, but much abuse in this world is done in the name of religion.

Religious abuse can be just as severe as emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Some religions or individual churches try to make you feel guilty for existing, or for even loving yourself in a healthy way. They manipulate through guilt and toxic shame. There are 365 commandments in the Bible, but Jesus said if you only practice the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30-31) you will automatically obey all of the others. The Great Commandment is to love God, others, and yourself—you are God's precious child so why not love yourself biblically?

You have to love yourself in a non-narcissistic way to have enough love in your love-tank to pour your love out on others. All sins hurt somebody, and your sins hurt you as well as those you might sin against. Even if there were no God, I would logically avoid sin as much as possible to enjoy life, and to love and be loved. Three thousand years ago Jabez prayed (I Chron. 4:10) for God's hand to be on him to help him expand his wealth, but also to avoid sin so he would not cause pain in himself and others. Contrary to some popular opinion—ironically by extreme political liberals and some legalistic Christians, wealth is not a sin, but a blessing.

Solomon advised us that if God does happen to bless you with wealth, enjoy it but don't live for it. He wrote in Ecclesiastes 5:19, "Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God." According to Mark 10:30, giving to God brings a 100-fold blessing in return. It may or may not be financially, but it will happen in one way or another. No other investment guarantees to pay you back 100 times more than you invest.

When I graduated from Duke as a psychiatrist, I turned down two lucrative jobs to teach seminary students for ten percent of the salary I would have gotten as a psychiatrist. Taking my "poverty vows" by teaching at a seminary for only ten percent of my offered pay turned from an enormous financial loss to a great gain not only financially but by being a blessing to millions of people around the world. I later gave up my savings to keep my clinics nonprofit, returning to a zero net worth, but God has continued to bless me in many ways. My wife and I live modestly, but God has blessed us.

Another thing you can do to better understand your inner unconscious self is to ask yourself what you do with your "I can't's?" When I was growing up, "can't" was considered the worst of all the "four-letter" words. I can do all things using Christ's strength (Philippians 4:13). We often fail because we are afraid to even try. Whenever you find yourself using the word "can't," change it to either "I will" or "I won't." Either of those two alternatives is fine.

We don't have to try anything. In fact, even the words "I'll try" often, on an unconscious level, means "I will make a half-hearted effort but not quite succeed." So if there is something good that you would like to accomplish, say, "I will" and pursue it until you either succeed or hit a brick wall that is beyond your control. You will at least feel good about yourself that you made the effort either way.

If you don't want to do something, there is nothing wrong with saying, "I won't do that." Just don't ever say, "I can't." There are lots of good things that we could do but we simply don't have the time to do and still keep our more important priorities. So there is nothing wrong with saying "no" to even very good requests from others if you don't have time or the desire to do that particular good thing. Have the courage to say, "I won't"—but don't lie to yourself or others by using that nasty "can't" word.

I have met many clients who grew up with a parent who repeatedly told them that they would never amount to anything. When these clients were children and did succeed at various things, the same negative parent would point out to them that they could have done even better and were still failures. Usually these negative parents feel deep down in their own inner selves as failures, and want their children to fail even more so the parent feels at least better than somebody. So these clients developed "failure scripts." In their conscious minds, they desire to succeed in life, but they find themselves repeatedly failing because deep on an unconscious level, they desire very much to gain the approval of the rejecting critical parent. They think they need it to fulfill their purpose in life. And in order to win the approval of the rejecting critical parent, they have to fail, because that is what the critical parent wanted them to do deep in his unconscious. So the cure for a person with a failure script involves several steps:

- Realize you have a failure script because there is no other possible explanation for repeated failures at things that would normally not be that difficult for you to achieve.
- With the help of a therapist if necessary, analyze how the failure script formed within you long ago.
- Give up on the approval of the critical parent.
- Give up on the fantasy that some day the critical parent will repent and change and become an approving and unconditionally loving parent.
- Don't spend any negative time with the critical parent now if he or she is still alive. Only spend time with that parent if that parent can refrain from being critical during the brief time you do spend with him.
- Whenever that critical parent becomes critical with you in the future, in person or on the phone, get up and leave or discontinue the phone call, explaining to the critical parent that you will not talk to him when he is being critical.
- Realize that by establishing boundaries with the critical parent, that parent may very well totally reject you and never speak to you again and even leave you out of the will if there is one. Be willing for that to happen and not surprised if it does happen. Be willing for that to happen if necessary.
- Realize that we all fail sometimes, and failure is good for you occasionally. We can learn more sometimes from failure than from success. But success is lots more fun and rewarding so enjoy your successes and learn from your future failures because you still will occasionally have some. You will fail

much less often if you do these steps, but will still never be perfect, and that is perfectly fine!

- Realize that problems and challenges will arise in everyone's life that seem to have no reasonable solution. Not every problem has to be solved. Some remain unsolved but life goes on.
- Ask yourself if God could think of a solution to that difficult problem or challenge. Of course he could. He could think of a host of solutions because he is God. So ask him to just show you at least one of them.

In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing"... ask God for solutions, even if we may not like the one he gives us at the time, and God promises peace. Never ask God to carry out your specific solution. Are you smarter than him? Ask him to show you his best solution, even if it is difficult.

In King David's era 3,000 years ago, a lamp tied to a person's lower leg would guide him (Psalm 119:115). Meditating on God's Word is that lamp to your feet. I've been meditating on God's Word almost daily since deciding to at age ten. I haven't always heeded it, regretfully, but it brings me back! God promises to always be close to us, intimately involved every moment, so if he doesn't feel as close to you as he once did, who moved? He's not like your abusers. God wants us to love and be loved, and also to have an abundant life. But remember, "In this life we will have many trials and sorrows (John 16:33)." They are part of life.

As we said in the beginning of our conversation, you picked up this book because you want peace. That may seem obvious, an inconsequential fact not even worth noting. However, it is actually something to celebrate! Already, you know what you want to become; peaceful. Imagine getting in your car, turning on the ignition, and just driving with no particular destination in mind. The whole process would be a pointless exercise which can only bring frustration. However, knowing where you want to go, even if the destination seems far away, is half the journey!

### **Practical Coping Skill 3: Confession**

I personally believe that all of us as humans, to some extent or another, deep on an unconscious level, feel like a nobody, and we tend to go through life trying to prove that we aren't a nobody! This is my definition of the ultimate rat race. The rat race means living to prove to others and ourselves that we are not a nobody—usually through sex, power, money, or prestige (fame).

If, in our past, we have suffered from one form or another of abuse, that results in us having lower self-esteem, so we can either join the rat race, which always fails, or we can quit the rat race and live for God instead, resulting in a life of loving and being loved. King Solomon admitted (in Ecclesiastes) to personally trying sex, power, money, and fame, but he found them all meaningless. Even the wise King Solomon went through a "Rat Race" time of his life. Only loving and serving God and

others worked, so that is what he recommended when he concluded the Book of Ecclesiastes.

All of us are selfish at times. My deep inner self has many good qualities, but is also selfish at times, bringing occasional pain to others and to myself. We have all failed at times. All of us have done things we regret. But Solomon calls people “righteous” who fail seven times in a row but keep trying. In Proverbs 24:16 (NIV), Solomon writes, “for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again.”

The Apostle Paul was a righteous man who admitted sometimes doing things he shouldn’t and sometimes not doing things he should, but concluded in Romans 8:1, “there is no condemnation.” We are not condemned for our failures, but rather encouraged to learn from them and turn from them. The Apostle James said that we all fail in many ways, but grace replaces condemnation.

The most evil people on this planet, according to Solomon (in Proverbs 6), are the arrogant religious legalists who condemn and look down on us and have “a proud look.” In his public ministry, Jesus hung out with sinners often, but condemned the religious rule makers (scribes and Pharisees) more than anyone else. For forty years now, I have had a “prayer partner” and we confess our sins to each other without condemnation—grace.

By confessing my sins to a trusted prayer partner, I have learned a great deal about my own unconscious deep inner self. We usually fail to see what is in our unconscious primarily because we are so afraid to see the truth about what is there. But confession makes us less afraid to admit all our failures and therefore less afraid to see what selfish things we may discover deep within ourselves.

Confession heals us. The Apostle James (5:16) says that continued confession to other humans (to “one another”) brings continued healing and growth. And the acceptance we get from those we have confessed to helps bring us into an attitude of grace toward ourselves. We develop an attitude of peace within ourselves. In I Peter 5:7, the Apostle Paul advises us to turn our worries over to Jesus. Instead of laying awake at night, unable to fall asleep because we are worrying about things, we can “give God the night shift” and fall asleep in peace with him and with ourselves.

Perfectionists have what psychiatrists call “obedience-defiance” conflicts. In the deepest parts of our inner selves, part of us wants to be perfectly good and obedient, but part of us wants to rebel and be disobedient. We will often be very good people but have small areas in our lives where sin sneaks in—holes in our consciences. Psychiatrists call these “superego lacunae.”

Because these are unconscious, we will not recognize our sins while we commit them in these “superego lacunae” areas of our lives. We will rationalize and justify our behaviors and thoughts. But part of us suspects there may be something wrong,

so we feel anxious because of our fear of finding out the truth about those thoughts, feelings and motives. This is true anxiety.

We also have every day worries about specific things—things to get done, bills to pay, problems our children may have, etc. When we worry during each day, we can't just turn it off in our own strength. Our obedience-defiance conflicts cause us to rebel against ourselves and worry even more when we try not to worry. But there is a trick we can use to avoid worry!

Instead of worrying all day long, whenever you start to worry about something, promise yourself that you will worry about it on purpose that night. During each day, jot down your worries without worrying about them, then, at a special time that evening, pull out your list and pray about them one at a time. Keeping a “worry list” throughout the day enables us to put off worrying all day. Your list might look like this:

- Engine light came on!
- Parent's nursing home bill.
- Daughter's volleyball injury.
- Big project at work.

It really works. Have a time each night to worry about them on purpose. When the time comes to worry about our “worry list” on purpose, we often realize how silly some are, pray about others, and then rely on God. It saves lots of time and hassle. Plus, when you try to worry on purpose, our brains rebel, and the worries tend to disappear. We decide that lots of our worries simply aren't worth worrying about!

Deep in our inner, unconscious selves, part of us thinks everything should go smoothly for us. We feel entitled. And when things do not go perfectly our way, part of us gets angry about it. But if we were aware of our anger, we would in turn feel guilty about having unrealistic expectations. And so the cycle goes on. Ninety percent of the things we worry about never come true. And the ten percent that do, we grow from, so why worry? Great crises bring about great growth. When I ask older and wiser people what was their time of greatest spiritual growth, it is nearly always after whatever their greatest tragedy in life was.

We often worry about material things or other desires. The Apostle Paul taught us (Romans 8:32) that God loves each of us so much that he not only gave us Jesus, but also loves to give us all things. The Apostle Paul also promised each of us who believe in Jesus (Philippians 4:19) that God loves to give us everything we need—not everything we want, but everything we need. The world can never bring us lasting peace—it never has and never will!

Years ago I was flying late at night from New York back to Dallas in a

dark plane with my little overhead light on while writing a book on anxiety. Then lightning struck the wing right outside my window. The lightning shook our plane and lit it up with a flash of light inside as I was writing the Jesus quote to fear not! The pilot's voice came on calmly and said, "Don't worry, folks—that's what the lightning rods are for!"

That lightning striking the wing right outside my window while writing "fear not" brought God's peace into perspective. He is my lightning rod. While writing about fear and anxiety, I decided to look up "fear" and "anxiety" in my Bible concordance and found it discussed in every book of the Bible. From the longest books of the Bible to the shortest book (one chapter), the word fear (or anxiety) is mentioned at least once in every single book. God's gift is peace.

We fear potential dangers we are aware of. But we also fear things we are not aware of on a deep, unconscious level. When anxious, pray for insight into whatever it is you are afraid to see within yourself that moment. God urges us to do that in many passages of Scripture. The main purpose of Bible meditation (Hebrews 4:12) is as a "sharp sword" to reveal our innermost thoughts to us—our unconscious thoughts. In Psalm 139, King David said that God thinks about us specifically all day every day, and then David prays for God to reveal to him his inner thoughts. David was a man who desired to understand and know his unconscious, deep inner self.

We gain insight into the truth about our innermost selves through Bible meditation, conviction of the Holy Spirit, and "a lot of counselors." God says that by using a multitude of counselors (including, I'm sure, both friends and professional therapists and pastors), there is safety. We pray (carrying on a conversation with God off and on throughout each day), listen to constructive criticism from various kinds of counselors, and meditate to discover truth.

The Holy Spirit sanctifies us by pushing up the truth from our unconscious to our conscious to deal with. We grow. We feel good about it. Our anxiety decreases for a time. And then the Holy Spirit "walks around" again in our deep inner unconscious mind and says to himself, "Hmm ... what awareness should I push up next?" Then he pushes up another insight for us to work on and life and growth continue.

We feel anxious right before we finally let an insight up to our conscious awareness, then we feel relieved again as we resolve it with God's help or the help of "counselors." And life goes on and sanctification goes on throughout our lives if we permit it to. God never runs out of things to work on, and I believe he shows us things if we are willing to look at them and usually doesn't if we are not willing.

We have a choice to grow or not to grow emotionally and spiritually. If I live to be 100, there will still be more unconscious areas of sin in my life for the Holy Spirit to push up or else I would be perfect, and nobody is perfect until we get to Heaven. God promises that this discovering and maturing process from the truths we discover about ourselves sets us more and more free.

Sanctification is the lifelong growth we experience from insights into the truth about our inner unconscious selves. I continue to be even shocked occasionally when seeing new sinful thoughts or motives within myself that I never knew were there before. I grow from repentance (turning) from my sins, feel good about the growth, but then the Holy Spirit roams my soul to decide which sin to show me next! When reflecting over my entire life, I regret (but with no condemnation—Romans 8:1) my host of sins, but am thankful for God to be using me anyway. God doesn't always take away our fears right away. Struggling with them awhile can also bring growth.

The Prophet Ezekiel (3:15-16) felt overwhelmed with stress one time, and seven days later God comforted him. Why did God wait? I don't know. But I'm sure there was a good reason and Ezekiel was better off waiting than getting his struggle resolved right away. My ultimate goal and prayer is that God will help me, over the years, to become more like him, especially in my ability to love and be loved, and also to serve him, to become better at resisting sin and to learn valuable lessons from the things I fear that do come true. So what is there to fear? Nothing but fear itself.

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

—Winston Churchill

#### **Practical Coping Skills 4: Life-Sharing**

The great irony of the “getting to know yourself” process is that it happens best not by yourself, but in community. When you are sharing your hopes, dreams, fears, and anxiety with others, you find that everyone else has similar things inside of them. The awareness you gain becomes less scary when you realize other people are in the same boat. One of my friends and colleagues, Keith Cobern, gives 7 ways in which we grow by sharing our experience in a group context:

- **Universality.** We are not alone in our misery. All humans have root problems that need resolution.
- **Instilling Hope.** It is likely that the people you are sharing your life with have “been there.” That is, they’ve experienced similar fear, and are on the other side of it. They have found peace, which gives you hope!
- **Digging up Family of Origin Issues:** In a group setting, it is easier to see similar family of origin patterns that seem to repeat themselves and make it easier to accept personally if accurate.
- **Imparting Information:** You learn from the group in which you are apart about positive and negative emotions (like shame) and other helpful topics and tools to use. You learn from one another!

- **Helping Each Other:** It feels really great to be a group member and to use what you are learning about yourself to help another members of your community!
- **Learning Socializing Skills:** Learning how to share positive and negative emotions in particular with others. You can't learn social skills in isolation. You have to find a group in which you can practice being "open" and "transparent."
- **Existential Factors.** Recognizing some of the basic features of existence through sharing with others, such as aloneness, death, eternal perspective, or our ultimate responsibility for our own actions.

Of course, the benefits of finding a group in which you can share your fears and hopes are far more than 7! Yet, I find this list to be a helpful starting point to see what you are missing if you are "going it alone." Perhaps, however, you don't need to be convinced of the benefits of "group sharing." Maybe you know the fruits of sharing life, you just don't know where to start! Perhaps your question is more like "how can I find a community in the first place?"

The truth is, finding a community in which this kind of deep sharing is possible is not easy! Indeed, we each will spend our lives in search of such a meaningful community. The problem is not just one of "limited supplies." That is, there just aren't enough people to form communities. No, sadly, the problem is deeper than that. We live in a society that values the individual. From John Wayne movies to popular detective novels, were told that being an adult, particularly a male adult, means being independent. So called "online communities" don't help either, as they trick us into thinking we have plenty of "friends" when in actual fact we only have a computer screen. The real problem is we live in an isolated world!

I know, I seem very pessimistic and bleak right now! But there is good news! In the context of our isolated society, there still is a community that values the type of "life sharing" I've articulated above. This community is to be found in a local church. Now, you might be thinking "has this guy ever been to a church? That's the last place I'd go to find a safe community!" I know, I too have been burned by experiences in church. To be sure, the church does not practice community perfectly! However, at her best, the church is a gathering of imperfect people, all of whom have been transformed by the message of the gospel. This gospel has called everyone in the church to go through this "transformation" together! We help one another. We cry with one another. We talk with one another. We pray with one another. We eat with one another. In short, we practice an "open door" policy with one another.

We are part of a new family, the family of God. If you are not a part of a church community, may I give you some advice? Find one! In order to have peace, you must be able to share your life and story with others. To be honest, I don't know of another society on earth that is more "communal" (in the best sense of the word!) than the church. To know yourself, you must know others. To know others, you

must have a safe community. To find a safe community, I suggest you find a church where the gospel is taught and lived and immerse yourself in your new family!

### **Practical Coping Skills 5: Developing an Eternal Perspective**

Dreams are very helpful, and as a psychiatrist, I take every dream seriously. When we feel like we are succeeding and growing in our lives, we may have flying dreams, whereas when we feel like we are failing, we are more likely to have falling dreams. If we dream about someone else getting hurt, we might have some repressed hostility deep down in our unconscious working its way into our dream.

If we dream we are getting hurt, it may be because of true guilt, false guilt, or merely be a fear we have. We can't ever be dogmatic about our dreams. We have to be open-minded. But listen to your dreams and ask yourself what their significance might be, because dreams are created by your unconscious, so they are windows into your soul. Some dreams are also from God. The Bible says God teaches us in our dreams and during the "night seasons." So I want to tell you now about an event and a dream I had that changed my life.

On November 15, 1989, I was driving my car home from work, listening to the Bible on tape. I was listening to Psalm 66, an unusual passage about men flying over my head and coming through the fire and water. I thought to myself wondering what it could possibly mean and got distracted and had a head on collision, causing my car to fly up into the air and turn completely upside down and land on the roof of my car. My car was totaled and the other car that I ran into was also totaled, but fortunately nobody was even scratched. I was hanging by my seatbelt, so I disconnected it and broke the window with my elbow so I could get out, worried that the car might catch fire. Smoke was spewing out from under the hood. While I was spinning in the air I was at total peace, thinking, "Oh, this is what God has in store for me today." And when I got out of the car, I ignorantly crawled back into it to get my Dallas Cowboy Weekly magazine and my cassette tape of the Psalms. Then after crawling out the window the second time, what just happened hit me and I got quite anxious but not overwhelmingly so. Someone who witnessed the accident called an ambulance and the police, and the ambulance got there first. Nobody was hurt, so the ambulance was pulling away when a policeman arrived. I was standing by the car, and the policeman assumed whoever was in my car must be dead, so he asked me, "Did the ambulance already carry away the body?" I told him, "I am the body. Nobody was hurt." He was pretty amazed.

That night I woke up with a dream in which Jesus told me, "Paul, go get that cassette tape and listen to the Psalms until you come to a verse that hits you between the eyes." So I got out of bed, got the cassette tape I had been listening to in my car during the accident, and listened to the Psalms waiting for a verse to "hit me between the eyes." It finally happened when I got to Psalm 90:12, where we are encouraged to count the days that we remain alive, so we can walk wisely on this

earth. I realized what God was trying to tell me and I prayed. I told God I would pretend like I died on November 15, 1989, and that every day I lived after that is a gift from God to try to become more like God, to serve God and help my fellow man, to try to stay out of trouble, and to learn from whatever trials and tribulations came my way day by day, a four-fold prayer:

- To become more like Jesus
- To serve Jesus and help people
- To stay out of trouble
- To learn from the troubles that came my way

The next day I called my godly mother-in-law to tell her about the accident I had. I did not tell her about the dream and nobody had. She surprised me by telling me she had been praying every night for a week that I would not get hurt in a car accident. I told her that was strange, and why would she pray that specific prayer. She told me she had been reading Psalm 90:12 the week earlier and that it made her think about life and death, and that she had a dream that night that one of her kids would have a car accident. So she prayed for her four children and their mates every night that week, that God would protect them if they had a car accident. That really reaffirmed to me in my mind that none of this was a coincidence. God was moving in my life and wanted to help me with my perspective to develop more of an eternal perspective. Almost every morning since then, when I wake up, I pray that four-fold prayer to get my day in perspective.

The reason I am telling you about this is because developing that perspective will relieve a lot of your worries and anxieties. We worry about the small stuff and get upset over little setbacks. When you think in terms of eternal life, with each day being a gift from God, it helps you to tell yourself, "What difference does that really make?" If my goal in life is to become more like Jesus, then when things go wrong in my life, they are actually benefitting me and helping me to become more like Jesus. I can be thankful in the middle of tribulations because they are helping me mature and accomplish my main goal in life. I don't want to be phony. I would prefer for every day to go smoothly and have things go my way. I am human. But when things don't go my way, and when I suffer losses and disappointments, I remind myself that I already died back in '89 and that each day is a gift and that my goal is to become like Jesus, so the setback is not that big a deal. It was worth my car accident to develop an eternal perspective.

What is your perspective on life? Is it so near-sighted that when you lose your keys or spill coffee on yourself, you think the world is ending? Or, when the small problems in life come up do you remind yourself of the "big picture." Peace, I believe, will only come through realizing that your story is part of a bigger story. God is on a mission to redeem his broken creation. This is the cosmic drama that is being unfolded before our very eyes! When peace feels distant and anxiety feels all too near, remind yourself of this story. Open your Bible and muse on the great

kindness of God in Christ. The world is big. The redemption is grand. Your life has purpose when it is spent in the service of this great mission. By developing this “eternal perspective” peace will be yours for the taking! Friend, I leave you with this blessing based on Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi: be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be with you now and forevermore, amen!

#### **Part Four: A Word to Friends of the Anxious**

I wrote this book for those struggling with anxiety themselves. However, I’m aware that you might be reading this for a friend. That is, you are trying to understand the issues facing a loved one, and learn ways in which you can “bring peace” to them. I hope you have learned some of the contributing factors, as well as some good practices that your friend can implement. Additionally, I want to give you three practical ways that you can bring peace to your friend who is lacking peace!

- First, be honest. Your friend knows that are anxious. They don’t need you to pretend otherwise. Rather, they need you to acknowledge their pain. By naming the problem, it allows your friend to be honest. They no longer have to feel that they need to put on a brave face for you. By acknowledging the situation, you are entering the pain, saying “I’m here, let’s do this together!”
- Second, be patient. As I hope you’ve gathered, the road to peace is long and winding. It has many valleys and just as many steep points. Be ready to spend a lifetime struggling and comforting your friend. Of course, that doesn’t mean that is all your relationship will be! To the contrary, your life together can still be joyous, meaningful, and even peaceful at times! It simply means that the problem might not be totally eradicated, baring a miracle, until the Lord returns.
- Third, speak God’s word. The best thing you can do for your friend is remind them of the love and kindness of God. This does not mean “throwing versus at the problem!” No, it means reminding your friend of the story of God. That we are all fallen, and that none of us should expect to have perfect peace this side of eternity. Remind them that Christ has come to bring restoration. Peace is possible through a right relationship with Christ. Remind them that one day all will be set right. That peace, peace in perfection without qualification, will be there’s finally!

I hope these three suggestions will help you in your calling to care for your friend. Remember, your calling is not from me, or your friend, or your pastor. No, this is a calling from King Jesus Himself! Each time you care for your friend do so as one commissioned by God, enabled by His Spirit! It is my prayer that the peace which

you have can be passed along to others, that you may be a blessing to those who are lacking peace!

15,904 Words