

# Curing the Miseries of the Mind: Anxiety and Depression

By Dr. Patrick Johnston and Elizabeth Johnston

As a physician, my day is packed with counseling and treating the emotional and mental disturbances of many of my patients. Most of my therapy and counseling deals with making the proper diagnosis and relieving symptoms – I rarely have time to identify and address the root causes of psychological problems and provide the appropriate counseling. If you have to wait longer than an hour in the waiting room, it is probably because I have spent an extensive amount of time trying to counsel a troubled patient. This tract was birthed out of a desire to treat my patients who suffer from emotional disturbances with more than just medication and in a manner that respects the patients who are waiting patiently in the waiting room.

First, let me give you some encouragement. If you are suffering from severe depression or anxiety, I want to let you know that there is light at the end of your dark tunnel – and **it's not found in a pill!** The God who created you loves you, and does not want you to be miserable. I believe that God's Word – the Holy Bible - holds the key that, if not cures, greatly alleviates psychological symptoms.



## Getting to the Root of Our Mental Problems

Human beings are more than combinations of chemicals and hormones – we are made in God's image. Medication may improve our feelings, but pills are limited in their ability to bring true healing of the mind. A common method of dealing with depression and anxiety is by improving self-esteem and confidence. Even if this improves psychological symptoms, it may worsen the spiritual problems at the root of many psychological illnesses. Cultivating pride may improve your self-image, but it is humility that brings grace, liberty from debilitating thoughts and feelings, and strength to manage life's challenges.

I certainly prescribe a lot of medication for anxiety and depression because they help alleviate symptoms, but I am convinced that many of these problems can only be fully resolved through spiritual remedies. Many physical and psychological ailments have spiritual roots. Identifying the roots of our mental problems is the most difficult hurdle in

our pursuit of mental health.

## **Depression and Anxiety are Normal Emotions**

First of all, let it be established that sadness, grief, and anxiety are normal emotions. God created us with the potential to experience these emotions because He experiences them. In Genesis 6:5-7, God experienced tremendous grief because of the sins of mankind as well as joy because of Noah's obedience. Jesus wept at the death of a friend (John 11). Jesus was angry when He beheld the hardened, stubborn hearts of the religious leaders (Mark 3). In the Garden of Gethsemane before Jesus' death, Jesus said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" (Luke 3). However you feel, Jesus probably felt it!



These emotions are normal under these circumstances. We are designed to feel depressed when we focus upon depressing things, or when we go through a tragedy or loss. We are designed to be anxious when we are in stressful circumstances. What we focus our attention upon brings corresponding feelings.

However, these normal emotions become pathological when they cripple our ability to meet life's challenges, when they lead us to make sinful choices, when they affect our ability to enjoy life and maintain loving relationships.

## **"Why Am I So Miserable?"**

"Why am I depressed?" "Why am I so anxious?" "Why is my mind so tormented with troubling thoughts?" In answering these questions, there are certainly many factors to consider.



## **Genetic and Social Influences**

I have one extended family for whom I care and I am amazed at how the grandkids are having the same severe emotional problems as their parents and grandparents. The genes with which you were born can be a very strong influence upon your psychological state.

The social circumstances in which you were raised may also be a strong factor in your psychological well-being; adapting unhealthy habits, practicing damaging thinking patterns, or following unwise advice can be a tremendous negative influence upon our psychological states. However, genetics and social conditioning are *influences* upon our emotional state, not causes. The choices you make can drastically effect whether or not

the genetic or social predisposition you have to a certain psychological malady manifests.

## Suffering Strengthens Our Faith

One of the reasons that we may go through emotional suffering is that God wills it. But how could a loving God possibly want his creatures to endure suffering?

The Biblical character, Job, is a perfect example of how God can get glory out of our suffering. Job 1, verse 1, says that Job was “perfect and upright, one that feared God and avoided evil.” How many of us can boast that we are as worthy of God’s blessing as this “perfect and upright” man? Job was the wealthiest “and greatest of all the men of the east” because of his habitual obedience to God.



We read in the first chapter that God was so proud of Job that he boasted to the angels of Job’s character. He was proud of Job! The devil spoke to God and told him that Job was only following God for selfish gain. He told God that if He removed Job’s blessings, then Job would curse God.

God accepted the challenge because He believed in Job. God allowed Job to be tested. In one day, all ten of Job’s children were killed and all of his wealth was destroyed or stolen. The next day, Job’s body broke out in terrible boils. If that wasn’t enough, his wife told him to curse God and commit suicide. To add insult to injury, Job’s friends visited to comfort him and all they did was accuse him of sin, telling him that he must have committed some great evil to bring such tremendous calamity upon himself. (And you thought you were having a bad week!)

What was Job’s response to this tragic turn of events in his life? The Bible says he “fell down upon the ground, and worshipped.” He said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged



God foolishly.” In his depression, he cursed the day that he was born, but Job did not curse God. It is overwhelming to realize the great faith this man Job must have had to continue to trust in God through such tragedy and heartache. Job passed the test, was ultimately healed, and his wealth and family restored.

Could you pass such a test? Only if you held loosely to the things of this world. Only if your primary aim in life was to

please God, not self. Only if you trusted in God and not in your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6). Only if you lived for heaven, not for the here and now. Sure, many of us might find it easy to serve God if we had everything we wanted and our lives were perfect, but the true test of our love is how we react in times of suffering.

Just as the fire causes the impurities in the gold to rise to the surface, so the fires of suffering cause what is in our hearts to rise to the surface. What is revealed by the suffering you endure? Do you charge God foolishly, do you turn to alcohol abuse or addictive drugs, do you mistreat our family and friends, do you get angry and bitter, do you wallow in self-pity, or do you pursue worldly pleasures to soothe your tormented mind and body?

God allows His children to be tested in the fires of tribulation. He wants to prove us, to mature us, to perfect us, and suffering is one tool whereby He can do that. He is preparing us for eternity in heaven, training us for reigning with Him, strengthening us for future obstacles. Our suffering on earth is like a single drop of water in an endless ocean when considered in light of all eternity. All that we have, all of our dreams and emotions – all of these are at God’s disposal in His attempt to prepare us for heaven, and how we respond to the tests of our faith here will determine our position in eternity.

We may never know exactly why God allows us to go through suffering in this life, but faith in God is our strength and hope of eternity with Him is our solace. We can take comfort in the promises found in God’s Word if we meet the conditions, for “it is through faith and patience (we) inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12). If we abandon faith in God in the trials of life, we condemn our souls to torment.

## **Suffering May Be Punishment For Sin**

After God gave His law to Moses and the nation of Israel, He pronounced many blessings for obedience. However, He also pronounced many curses for disobedience! In Deuteronomy 28, God promises:

- ◆ “Vexation, madness, astonishment of heart”
- ◆ “Thou shalt be mad (crazy) for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see”
- ◆ “Thou shalt find no ease”
- ◆ “The Lord shall give thee a trembling heart, and sorrow of mind...”
- ◆ “The Lord shall give thee fear of thine heart...”

In short, God *promises* psychological misery to those who disobey Him.

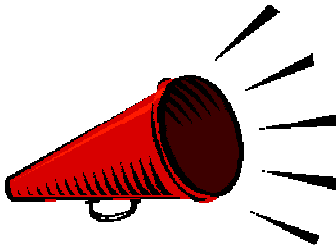
Harm is an inevitable result when something is used contrary to its design. If I eat pudding with a shovel and dig a ditch with a spoon, harm results – these objects are not designed to be used in such ways. Well, human beings are made in God’s image – we were not designed to sin. For example, lie detectors work by measuring abnormal vital signs of the body. Lying wreaks havoc with our systems.

God created us with a conscience – *con* means “with” and *science* means “knowledge” –

God created us with an inward knowledge of right and wrong, that not only informs us but punishes us with guilt for disobedience to God's commandments. We were designed to obey God. We were designed "for Thy (God's) pleasure" (Revelation 4:11). Misery is the inevitable consequence of living contrary to our design and rebelling against God. Sin may bring temporary pleasure, but it is candy-coated poison. We cannot completely avoid the negative consequences of sinful choices any more than we can redesign our DNA. God designed us to be miserable when we are living in sin alienated from Him.

Hebrews 12 says that the Lord spans us because He loves us and wants us to "be partakers of His holiness." Suffering teaches us to cling loosely to the things of this world and anticipate heaven when we will see Him face to face (I John 3:3). Hoping for heaven makes us like Jesus!

### **Pain Is God's Megaphone**



It was C.S. Lewis who said that pain can be God's megaphone. God is willing to resort to a megaphone when we will not hearken to the whispers of our conscience. Pain may be our spiritual alarm clock, so to speak, to awaken us out of a spiritual stupor to hear the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

There are many examples in the Bible of suffering as a consequence of sin: King Nebuchadnezzar was smitten with madness by God as a result of his sin. King David suffered much in his mind as a direct result of his adultery with Bathsheba and his unwillingness to restrain the sins of his children. Several of the Psalms are filled with verses of mourning, and at times, depressing self-pity, as he ponders the judgments of the Lord upon him for his sinful choices. Fortunately, King David responded appropriately to the Lord's chastening and discovered God's mercy when he repented of his sin and trusted in God for salvation (Psalm 51).



*"Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."*  
*James 1:19-20*



## Unforgiveness

Unforgiveness may bring about much mental misery. Jesus tells the story of a man who owed a powerful leader a great debt. He asked for leniency and the leader was moved to have compassion on the man and forgave him the entire debt. But the pardoned man went out and found a poor man who owed him a small amount of money, and had him thrown into debtor's prison until he could pay what he owed. The powerful leader discovered the cruelty of the man whose debt he had forgiven, and he brought the man before him, revoked his pardon, and had him cast into prison.



How many people live in a prison of their minds because of their unwillingness to forgive others? Rather than extend to others the same mercy that our God has extended to us through the death of Jesus on the cross, we hold our grudge, seek to punish them for their sins, and relish their demise. The Lord may just revoke our pardon and sentence us to a mental cell of despair! Jesus said that if we forgive others of their sins, we will be forgiven, but if we do not forgive others their sins, we will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15).

## Ingratitude

Ingratitude also leads to much misery. There's a story of a little girl who held two ice cream cones, one in each hand. She stumbled and dropped one of her cones onto the grass, and she began to cry. She cried so hard that she could not even enjoy the remaining ice cream cone that she held in her hand, which began to melt and drip onto the grass alongside her tears. Her father walks up to her and asks, "Why are you crying?"

"I've dropped my ice cream," she wailed.

The father reached down and took the remaining ice cream cone out of her hand.

"Oh, daddy, please give it back!" the girl reached for the cone that the father raised to his own lips.

"Okay, honey," the father replied. "I'll give it back to you only if you enjoy it."



“Thank you, Daddy,” the smiling girl said, forgetting why the tears were dripping down her cheeks.

So many of us are so busy crying over our dropped ice creams cone that we can't enjoy the ice cream that we have. We are ungrateful for what we have been given, and ingratitude makes us miserable. Romans 1:18-32 informs us that ingratitude is a sin that will lead to all kinds of depraved evils: disobedience to parents, theft, adultery, homosexuality, even murder. It is a door that opens to many rooms of despair. We must be thankful for what God has given you. Rest content with your lot.

I have a male patient who expressed to me that he was finally fed up with his wife's nagging and he was leaving her. I counseled him to try to be faithful to his vow “till death do us part” because God was going to hold him accountable to it, but he resisted my counsel. He didn't want to try to work things out with his wife because, as he put it, “I've found another woman.” I told him that the grass always appears greener on the other side of the fence - until you get there. Then, you find that there's another fence and greener grass. Happiness doesn't come from getting the greenest grass, but from contentment with what God has given you. Before long, this patient found himself discontent with his new fling and was moving on to another unfortunate woman. The man leaves a graveyard full of broken relationships in his wake because he is ungrateful for what God is given him, and he lusts for more, more, more.

When things are not going well, gratitude takes work. Sometimes, we have to look hard for things for which to be thankful. But whatever hardships our short time on this earth holds for us, we can be thankful that the road on which we travel need not end in hell. Gratitude is a matter of perspective. Don't love the things of the world, and you will not lose your thankfulness when you lose your things (I John 2:15-17). Let your dream be to hear on the Day of Judgment, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord!” and you will not be disappointed, whatever your lot on this earth.

## **Unbelief**

Unbelief is not simply a lack of faith in God, but is an active resisting of God. Romans 1 tells us that God has shown all men, through conscience and through nature, all they need to know to believe in Him and live right. Unbelief is not simply failing to be convinced of truth, but it is resisting the truth that God has shown us. Unbelief is calling God a liar. It is making war with God.

Anxiety, panic, and worry – these feelings may simply be the fruits of not believing in God. If we do not trust in God, our attitude will wax and wane depending on our circumstances. Our mood will fluctuate like a toy boat on the waves of the sea. But if our hope is not in favorable circumstances but in God and in His Word, then we can be secure even if the ground beneath our feet shakes and trembles. Romans 8:28 says, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.” His purpose for us is to know Him and walk in loving obedience to Him. Whatever trials we face in this life, we can know that all of it will work out for our good

if we love and trust Him. Peace through the storms of life comes through trusting God.

Matthew 6:25-34 tells us not to worry about the things of this world, but to trust in God's provision. We have a Father who cares for us and promises to meet our needs. The Bible says to not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer with thanksgiving, we should make our requests known to God, "and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). Isaiah 26:3 says that God keeps him in "perfect peace," whose mind focuses on Him and trusts in Him. Wouldn't you like to have perfect peace?



### **Excessive Worry Is an Insult to God**

I can't tell you how often I find an elderly woman in my office, wringing her trembling hands and telling me everything she worries about. She frets about her husband, her children, her grandchildren, her medicine, her insurance, her health, her aches, her sleep, her finances, the weather, her leaky faucet... She can't enjoy life because she's always worrying about this and that. Her heart beats fast, she breaks out in a sweat, she paces the floor, she can't stop thinking bad thoughts... Worry, worry, worry...

When we let worry rob us of our joy and minimize our potential for God, we insult God. That's right! We spit in His face. We doubt His love, we reject His provision, we disbelieve His promises, and we despise the strength He offers us and think that we can rely on our own strength. In order to get delivered from the bondage of worry, you first need to repent and confess the sin of unbelief and commit to trust in God for everything.

In Galatians 5:22, some of the fruits of God's Spirit are "love," "joy," and "peace." These are the fruits of the Holy Spirit if He is allowed to move freely in our lives, unhindered by our sin and selfishness. Do you lack love, joy, and peace in your lives? It may be because you do not trust in God, and you are resisting the Holy Spirit's influence upon you. Turn your heart to Him in humility, confessing your sins to Him and to those you have sinned against, seeking and receiving forgiveness, and He will bring peace to your troubled heart.



*"I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh to the Father but by Me." Jesus, in John 14:6*

### **J. C. Penney's Deliverance From Worry**

A famous American businessman named James Cash Penney illustrates the fruit that

comes from surrendering fear and doubt to trust whole-heartedly in God. J.C. Penney had set up his retail store, but problems with his workers, enormous debt, and a troubling lack of customers were causing him terrible anxiety. His nervousness brought on a terrible case of shingles. One night he was so overcome with fear and trembling that he felt he would not live to the morning and he checked himself into a hospital. He spent his sleepless night writing farewell letters to his wife, his son, and his friends.



As the sun rose, he heard singing from the hospital chapel. The words of the hymn were, “No matter what may be the test, God will take care of you...” He realized the depths of his own sin and selfishness, and he pictured in own mind the Lord Jesus crucified on the cross because of his sins, because He loved him. He walked into the chapel and surrendered his fears and worries to the Lord. He committed himself to God’s care and love. He felt like he had been let out of dungeon into the sunlight!

### **An Invitation To You**

Have you ever surrendered your life to God like J.C. Penney? Do you have the fruits of God’s Spirit in your life—love, joy, and peace? Is your conscience cleansed of guilt and pure before God? Have you released your fears, your anger, your doubts, and all your sins and clung to Him with all your strength? Have you given Him your heart?

Whatever pain or sorrow our life holds for us, faith in God’s Word will lead us to rejoice in our short time on earth. Through the midst of the storm, we can have peace knowing the everlasting blessings that awaits those who trust in Him. Compared to eternity, this life is just a speck of black in an ocean of white.

But if we reject Christ, if we resist His Holy Spirit to continue in our sin and selfishness, chronic depression and anxiety will be the least of our worries. Jesus warned about an eternal hell that was made for the devil and his angels, and this place of terror, pain, and darkness is just punishment for every sinner. Turn from your sin to Christ today, and forgiveness and peace will be yours.



*“Be anxious for nothing; but in every thing by prayer... with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7*

I certainly do not mean to imply that trusting in Jesus will immediately relieve all of your depression and anxiety. Thought patterns and feelings may not instantly depart – they might need to be fought off! There is a devil that wars for our soul, but we can fight him with the weapons that God gives us in His Word (Ephesians 6:10-20.) You may never be rid of involuntary feelings of depression and anxiety in this life. But if you are willing to trust in Him through whatever trials, heartaches, and tribulations that life brings your way, God promises you the victory (I John 5:4). He promises you peace and joy in the midst of the raging storm. You must keep your eyes on Jesus, who suffered in your stead when He died on the cross for you. Trust in the risen Savior, not in your circumstances. Peace and joy does not come from a pill, but only from knowing and trusting Jesus with all your heart. You've got God's Word on it!

**“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. His mercy endures forever!”**

### **Practical Tips to Overcome the Daily Onslaught of Anxiety and Depression**

\*Write out encouraging Bible verses, quotes, or thoughts, and tape them up at your house or work, or carry them in your purse or wallet. Refer to them and memorize them whenever you are struggling with unhealthy thoughts.

\*Turn on uplifting Christian music. Sing and meditate on the principles of God's Word. Praise and worship the Lord. Try dancing to praise music! By all means, turn OFF any music or television that saddens you or causes you to focus on your troubles.

\*Make a list of ten things to think about when you are tempted to think things you shouldn't. Make your list very practical. For instance: “What will I buy at the store?”, “Where will we go on our next vacation?”, “What will I say to my friend/neighbor/family member next time we speak?”, etc. Always have this list on hand to refer to when tempted to be anxious, depressed, or angry.

\*Occupy yourself with a big project or many projects that direct your mind off of yourself and onto others. There is no end to the number of nursing home residents, hospitalized patients, struggling families, volunteer organizations, and ministries who need a letter or a helping hand. Do not sit around and wait for your problems to disappear. Busy yourself with projects and invest your time in caring for others.

\*Always fight the tendency to pity yourself. You will find one hundred reasons to believe that self-pity will make you feel better but it never solves anything. When tempted to pity yourself, think of others you know who are in much worse circumstances (i.e. the paralyzed teenager, the young husband who just lost his wife, Christians who are persecuted for their faith in China, Cuba, or Indonesia, etc.). Make a list of such people and remind yourself of how blessed you are. Stop and take a moment to pray for those who are less fortunate than yourself.

\*Journal!! Write out your thoughts, regardless of how troubling or embarrassing they may be. Often, when you see on paper what is going on in your head, you will be surprised by how manageable your problem is through changing your way of thinking!

\*A few good Scriptures on topics of importance are listed below for your edification.

**Suffering:** 1 Pet. 4:12-16, Rom. 8:17-18, 2 Cor. 4:17, James 1:2-4

**Forgiveness/Mercy:** Matt. 6:14-15, Matt. 18:21-22, Heb. 8:12, Prov. 11:19, James 5:9

**Thankfulness:** Phil. 4:11, Heb. 13:5, Rom. 1:21

**Fear/Worry/Doubt:** Matt. 6:25-34, Phil. 4:6-7, 2 Tim. 1:7, I Cor. 10:13