

# Praying through Anxiety

## Lesson 3: Healing the Mind

### Vocabulary:

intentional	to discern	mind map	clarity
analogy	stable	disgusted	annoyed
destination	dependable	responsible (ant. irresponsible)	distracted
expected (ant. unexpected)	realization	disturbed	bitter
weapon	petition	motive	
to capture	to transcend	limitation	
to rescue	genuinely	root	

### Discussion:

In the first lesson, you learned what anxiety is and that we actually teach ourselves to be anxious. While this information is stored in our long-term memory, we can retrain the brain! But just as physical training takes a lot of effort and work, retraining the brain requires **intentional** exercises to teach the mind how to respond differently to situations. Remember that Dr. Amen recommends 20-30 minutes of rest, relaxation, and alone time with deep breathing every day. This doesn't mean we can't walk or run during our breathing time, but if we really want to relax our minds, then adding counting and spelling forwards and backwards, visualizing, listening, moving, and reciting can boost our experience!

Share how you used some of the tools from last week to relax your mind or strengthen your walk with the Lord.

Getting blood to our brains and making simple connections among regions across hemispheres are only the first steps in retraining the brain. Let's say you had a difficult conversation with a coworker. You may do physical exercise, rest, and do healthy relaxation exercises every day, but when you get to work, you still feel anxious knowing that you might see this person. Why is that? Did the exercises not work? Here is an **analogy** to help us understand the steps we need to take to deal with specific thoughts and situations that are causing anxiety.

Imagine you want to build a house in a forest where there are no roads, only dry rivers. You need get from one end of each river to another to get supplies for your house. First, you need water for the river, or blood to the brain. Once you fill the rivers with water, you can travel to your **destinations**. Likewise, once you have more blood flowing throughout your brain, you have a way of connecting regions of the brain. But to travel down these flowing rivers, you still need boats. In the brain, there are tasks that you can do to connect one area of your brain to another. These tasks are like boats that allow for connections among regions to exist. Now that you have water and boats, you still need supplies to build your house. In other words, you can cause the blood flow freely inside the brain through activities, and you can use tasks like boats to get from one area of the brain to the other, but this doesn't really solve the problem you were facing: the issues or thoughts that are causing your anxiety. You need specific tools to help you, and the place where the anxiety lives doesn't have the supplies to do the job. You need supplies from other areas of the brain to help you with your thoughts. The more areas that help,

the more supplies you will have. The more supplies you have, the stronger the house you will be able to build!

Perhaps this morning, you exercised and experienced a beautiful relaxation time. You walk into work, and immediately anxiety hits you. You remember the difficult conversation you had with a coworker. Based on the previous paragraph, explain why you aren't relaxed about *this* situation. What do you think you need?

If we have increased blood to our brains, and the pathways to other areas of the mind are open, then we are more prepared to deal with the anxious thoughts and problems. Yet, blood flow and connecting regions are just the first two steps. To change how we respond to anxiety, we must apply these brain strategies to the specific problem or thoughts we are trying to process.<sup>1</sup> In this way, we are bringing in a variety of supplies to support us in this difficult task. To better understand why this is true, try this analogy: Imagine that you need surgery on your heart. The doctor tells you to be confident in his abilities because he's been treating colds, flu, and broken bones for 20 years! This doesn't give you much confidence because you need heart surgery, not a general doctor.

In the same way, your brain needs to address the individual problems, thoughts, temptations, and memories that enter your mind every day. One day, you might feel anxious because you need to resolve a conflict or forgive someone. The next day, you feel anxious because you have a large project you need to do. Another day, you receive an **unexpected** email that needs a careful response. Yet, how do we manage all these feelings of anxiety? Paul gives us this advice:

<sup>3</sup> We do live in the world. But we do not fight in the same way that the world fights. <sup>4</sup> We fight with **weapons** that are different from those the world uses. Our weapons have power from God. These weapons can destroy the enemy's strong places.... <sup>5</sup>[And] we **capture** every thought and make it give up and obey Christ. (II Corinthians 10:3-5, ICB)

What is Paul's advice? Have you ever practiced this verse? Explain. If not, what are practical ways you can begin this process?

Paul challenges us to capture each one of our thoughts and make our thoughts obey Jesus's teachings. Have you ever tried to capture anxious thoughts? Anxiety can happen quickly, so we must pay attention to our bodies – our racing heart, our tight muscles, our quick breathing pace. These reactions tell us that something has caused us to feel anxiety. One thing we can do is keep a journal of those thoughts and events. When we have time to quiet our minds and relax, we can walk through the prayer exercise found in this lesson to help us change those negative thoughts into godly thoughts. If we write down what we pray, then we can keep the prayer with us throughout the day to read every time we need to remember how to think in the way that Lord teaches us. Over time, these prayers will help us to think differently about our situation and train our minds to react in a healthier way when we recall this situation in our memory. With much training, our minds can

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sternberg and Jean Pretz. Ed. *Cognition and Intelligence: Identifying the Mechanisms of the Mind*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 307-12.

learn new ways to respond to situations, and we can begin to experience lasting change from consistently retraining our brains.

What kind of prayer exercise invites multiple areas of the brain to come to our **rescue**? Below is an example of a prayer exercise that relaxes the mind and begins to address the problem or thought using a few areas of the brain and slowly inviting more areas to participate. The process begins with you speaking to the Lord in prayer and writing about your situation. You can also draw or map your thoughts, if needed. Simply imagining your situation and telling your problem to the Lord, while creating a picture in your mind that he is right there with you, patiently listening to every word, lights up many areas of the brain! In Philippians, Paul encourages us with these words: “<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (4:4). Do you remember from the first lesson when we learned that people who experience trust, honesty, and closeness with God have a greater ability to control their minds over people who experience fear when thinking about God? Therefore, quieting our minds and drawing near to God in a safe and healthy way, can have a powerful impact on our anxiety. But this is just the beginning!

Next, you’re going to name your negative feelings, a task that moves blood to another area of the brain. If helpful, you can start with naming your feelings *before* you pray over the details of the situation. After you identify your feelings, you’re going to speak physical and spiritual truths over your situation. **Discerning** truth from lies requires reasoning, a center that is shut down when you are anxious. Since you have already activated your centers for imagination, speaking and writing, naming, and expressing negative emotions, your ability to use your reasoning center may be much greater! When we speak and write healthy truths, especially Biblical truths, we train our minds to think in more positive and more accurate ways. God’s Word is also **stable** and **dependable**. His truths will never change and can faithfully guide our thoughts in consistent, righteous ways, if we are willing to accept his truths.

Once you have expressed what is true, you will take time to be thankful for something about the situation, God, the person or people involved, or a **realization** that you made during this process. Being thankful has power in both the physical and spiritual world! Paul says to the church in Philippi: “<sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and **petition**, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which **transcends** all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

According to Paul, what power does thanksgiving have in the physical and spiritual world? How is our mind being guarded in this process?

As you remember, our battle is not just in our minds, we are fighting a battle in the spirit world. When we pray with thanksgiving, the Lord not only protects our minds from a loop of negative thinking, but he also blesses us with his supernatural peace. As we’ve moved our minds into truth and gratitude, we can now invite our reasoning center to discern who and what is really to blame for our stress, fear, or problem. Paul directs our minds in this way:

<sup>12</sup> Our fight is not against people on earth. We are fighting against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world’s darkness. We are fighting against the spiritual powers of evil ... <sup>13</sup> That is why you need to get God’s full [protection]. Then on the day of evil, you will be able to stand strong. And when you have finished the whole fight, you will still be standing. (Ephesians 6:12-13, ERV)

According to Paul, who and what is our enemy when we have negative thoughts and feelings?

Paul teaches us that our spiritual enemies are *not* people or circumstances, but Satan and sin. We can then direct our negative thoughts away from the people that the Lord wants us to love toward the true enemy who wants to hurt us and other people in our lives.

As we continue in this spiritual battle, our minds are now free to pray blessing and forgiveness over the people God wants us to love, including ourselves. This action of expressing positive, emotional words is a powerful step in building new pathways toward a healthier view of our situation and the people involved. When we can genuinely take this step, our minds are beginning to heal! From there, we can pray with a purer and more healed heart for the ways we want to see God move in our situation. We then invite the visual part of our brains to see God answering our prayer and pray miracles over our problem beyond what is possible without God's help. In this way, we overcome fear and invite hope into the healing process.

On an fMRI scan, your brain at the end of this exercise would look like a Christmas tree! Can you imagine how healthy your brain would be if you practiced this prayer once a day? Every day we can face problems and anxious thoughts. Yet, every day we can love the Lord with all our mind to overcome these struggles. In this way, we not only experience real and practical healing in our lives, but also the power of God in ways we may have never experienced.

Grab a journal or some paper, choose a problem, bad memory, or anxious thought, and let's try it!

1. **Quiet your mind:** Take a minute just to calm your breathing. Breathe in through your nose for 5 counts or more and exhale through your mouth with the same number of counts. Repeat this for 10 sets. If you are feeling very anxious, then do the relaxation exercise from Lesson 2.
2. **Speak and write the situation:** Write about an anxious thought or situation you experienced this week. Try to visualize your situation and recall the details – what you saw, heard, or experienced. In your journal, write the physical details that you remember. Now, imagine that the Lord is sitting on his throne or even in a chair in your room. He wants to hear every detail of your story. He wants to hear what happened to you and help you. Share these details with the Lord in prayer.

NOTE: If you feel too anxious to write, then just create short points of details that you remember. If you are having too many thoughts, then create a mind map of the story. Include simple words to express who was involved, where it happened, when it happened, what happened, any words or phrases that have stayed in your mind, and details you remember. From those details, add more details until every thought is out of your head. Then, try to organize your thoughts into a list of what happened first, second, third, etc. From there, try to write your story in complete sentences. If this is also too difficult, then begin with drawing your thoughts and label your drawing with words from your story. Then move to mapping and writing your story until it is clearly written on paper.

3. **Name your feelings:** Make a list of negative feelings that you have about your situation. Try to explain *why* you have each feeling. Share your feelings and thoughts with the Lord in prayer. Here are a few negative feelings to consider:

angry	disgusted	annoyed	unloving
sad	irresponsible	distracted	hateful
guilty	bored	disappointed	unforgiving
ashamed	anxious	overwhelmed	disapproving
afraid	embarrassed	confused	bitter
hurt	disturbed	hopeless	tired

4. **Speak the truth:**
- Consider the **physical truths** about your situation. Look for the good. What was right and good about your situation or the person(s) involved? Were their **motives** pure but their actions were wrong? If you are overwhelmed, are there **limitations** in your schedule or emotional ability to handle the situation? Look at your list of feelings. Are your feelings true and accurate, or are there other truths you need to consider? Write what you discover and share these truths with the Lord in prayer.
  - Consider the **spiritual truths** about your situation. What is true about God, yourself in Christ, the other person, the situation according to God's Word, the Lord's promises to you and to the other person? Find scriptures to help you with those truths. You can use a Bible concordance, refer to the *100 Promises from God's Word* and *100 Identity Truths in Christ* handouts, or simply ask the Lord to reveal his truths as you open his Word. Write those truths and other scriptures that help you. Share these truths with the Lord in prayer.
5. **Be thankful:** In a meaningful way, find something to be genuinely thankful for in this situation and for the person(s) involved. Write what comes to your mind, and take a minute to be deeply thankful to the Lord in prayer.
6. **Silence the lies:** Look again at your description of your situation and your list of feelings. Are there any lies you are believing? If yes, write them down. Then write the physical and spiritual truths that you need to remember and share them with the Lord in prayer.
7. **Pray against the spiritual enemy:** Identify any ways that the spiritual enemy is working in your situation. Express this in writing and to the Lord in prayer. Pray against the spiritual enemy and against **root** sins, not against a person involved in the situation. Write how you see the spiritual enemy and sin at work. Pray against the enemy and against sin in prayer to the Lord.
8. **Pray blessing:** Write and pray a genuine blessing over the people involved, including yourself, and ask the Lord to forgive them and yourself as well.
9. **Think forward:** Tell the Lord what you deeply desire to happen in this situation. Express your hope for the future! Try to visualize that hope and describe it! Share your hope with the Lord in prayer.

10. **Go beyond:** Imagine a miracle over the situation and person(s) involved, and pray for that miracle. Be bold! Try to visualize this miracle happening. Describe it in writing and share your miracle with the Lord in prayer.

Once you have completed this prayer, keep it near you so you can read it next time you feel anxious about this situation. Over time, your thoughts will change to the truths that you wrote and the vision that reaches beyond what you see now. These strategies are designed to help you to think deeply about the various situations and thoughts that cause you to feel anxious. You might experience a stronger sense of **clarity** after you finish your prayer. Perhaps you need to have a conversation with someone to resolve the problem, apologize to someone, make a change, say “Yes” or “No” to a person, confess sin, or simply have peace over a situation or memory. Yet through this practice, you can have a more balanced and healthy way of thinking, understanding, behaving, communicating, or reacting, while holding on to a vision of hope for change and even miracles in the future.

### This Week:

Write in your journal:

1. Finish reading the book of Philippians. Write what you learn and any scriptures that encourage you. Write these verses on cards and read them during the day.
2. Practice the relaxation and prayer exercise several times this week as a part of your time with the Lord. Keep your prayers in a journal or in a place where you can refer to them as needed.