# TAKE CHARGE *of* YOUR EMOTIONS

## SEVEN STEPS *to* OVERCOMING DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, *and* ANGER

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BETHANY HOUSE
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Solie, Linda J.
Take charge of your emotions : seven steps to overcoming depression, anxiety, and anger / Dr. Linda J. Solie.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Summary: "Respected Christian psychologist provides practical ways for readers to improve their emotional health, focusing on depression, anxiety, and anger"—Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-0-7642-1113-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Emotions—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Depression, Mental—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Anxiety—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.
BV4597.3.S65 2013
152.4—dc23 2013016378



Cover design by Paul Higdon

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents, Bill and Judy Solie,
with gratitude and love

# Contents

# Acknowledgments

I want to thank a number of people for contributing to this book, beginning with my parents. They provided me incredible support throughout this entire journey. My mother, Judy, fixed me countless meals so that I could devote Fridays and Saturdays to writing with minimal interruption. She also carefully reviewed the manuscript, as did several people who generously shared their professional expertise, including my father, Bill, and my brother, John Solie, retired and current pastors, respectively; psychology professor Pat Frazier, author Nancy Nordenson, and entrepreneur Jim Carlson.

I am very grateful as well to Bethany House Publishers, and especially to acquisitions editor Tim Peterson for taking a risk on a first-time author and, with wisdom and kindness, guiding me through the publishing process. He, Christopher Soderstrom, and Nancy Renich have thoughtfully and skillfully refined this work at each editorial stage. I've been privileged and blessed to work with this talented team.

And I want to express thanks to others who contributed in a variety of ways to this final product, including Marilyn Anderson, Marti Anderson, Jim and Kris Bruckner, Erin Carlyle,

Griffin Clausen, Lynette Clausen, Brian and Nancy Cripe, Luke and Elvira Englund, Nancy Gustafson, Betty Hall, Don Holt, Jeff and Barb Johnson, Sherrill Nelson, Mark and Carol Rholl, Chris and Catherine Solie, Holly Solie, Lee and Asta Solie, Matt Solie, and Stephanie Wendt. Most of all, I thank God, who created our emotions, for his guidance on how to manage them, and for orchestrating this entire adventure.

# Introduction

Many people believe their genetics or brain chemistry doom them to a life of emotional pain. Moods descend on them like a dark cloud, and they are stuck with the miserable feelings until a wind stirs up to blow the gloom away. Thinking they are helpless, they passively suffer and simply live with the misery or look solely to medication for relief.

In *Take Charge of Your Emotions*, I will demonstrate another way.

Medication is a popular remedy for soothing emotional pain; antidepressants are some of the most commonly prescribed drugs in America. Yet taking medication as the only response to distress does not help sufferers develop competence in overcoming uncomfortable moods. And it's true that all people, at times—whether or not on antidepressants—face emotional challenges. Everyone can benefit from discovering or improving on how to take charge of their emotions. I aim to show how to do just this by capitalizing on three types of relationships:

- relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- relationship with Jesus Christ
- relationships with people

As we focus on managing emotions, I will use the terms *emotional health* and *mental health* interchangeably to refer to a state of emotional well-being involving relief from painful moods like depression, anxiety, and anger. Further, although this book teaches skills to overcome painful feelings, it does not argue against antidepressant or anti-anxiety medications. Nor does it endorse ignoring your physician's advice if such treatment has been prescribed for you.

*Take Charge of Your Emotions* is divided into four parts that build on one another. Parts I, II, and III examine how to capitalize on a particular type of relationship in order to find relief. Part IV puts the first three together.

## Part I: Empowered Through Thoughts and Behaviors

Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are physiologically connected. For instance, how we interpret life strongly affects how we feel, and our actions also regulate our emotions. Though many people fear having a faulty brain that consigns them to a life of depression or anxiety, scientists have discovered that our thoughts and behaviors influence brain chemistry and genetic expression, even impacting whether new cells develop and others die. Taking charge of thoughts and actions changes brain functioning, empowering us to improve our mental health.

For nearly thirty years I have been helping clients take control of their thoughts and behaviors. The method I developed enables people to identify the problem-thinking that creates painful feelings and undesirable conduct, and then turn it around. You can apply the Seven Steps to Changing Feelings and Behavior toward overcoming a single distressing mood, or you can practice this skill daily for a month or more to relieve intense and long-standing emotional pain.

The Seven Steps involve writing, requiring time and effort. Effort itself is essential to "rewiring our brains," according to the internationally renowned neuropsychologist John Arden.[1] Over time, new thoughts and behaviors become automatic.

Writing also facilitates analysis of problem-thinking to a level of detail beyond what we typically can do in our heads. The more detail, the more effective the technique. In addition, writing activates a different part of the brain than thinking, further increasing the potential impact on the mind. Investing time and energy to change our thinking offers emotional rewards.

Capitalizing on the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors includes taking charge not only of our thinking but also our actions. What we do affects what we feel, so changing problem behaviors offers another path to emotional relief. Helping to build a house with Habitat for Humanity, for example, is likely to provide more satisfaction and joy than sitting home alone day after day watching TV.

The Seven Steps are a psychological tool that appears throughout the rest of the book. *If you prefer to postpone learning this more technical skill, you could skip chapter 2 for now and jump ahead to part II,* which explores the impact of choosing a particular guide for our thoughts and behaviors.

## Part II: Empowered Through Jesus Christ

Who shapes your worldview? What guides your thinking as you encounter life each day? Selecting a guide for thinking and living is a very individual decision—it's up to every single person to decide.

The Christian faith asserts that God exists, that he created the universe, and that he came to earth in the person of Jesus, in part to offer himself as guide to everyone. *Take Charge of*

*Your Emotions* accepts these claims as truth, and part II explores how a relationship with Christ provides a solid foundation for emotional health. It enhances well-being by delivering comfort and confidence that penetrate and permeate the soul, guidance on avoiding traps that lead to misery, and hope in the face of life's many challenges.

### Part III: Empowered Through People

Humans are social beings who suffer emotionally when alienated from self or others. We can enhance our mental health by improving relationships with people, starting with the self. Strong friendships with others are high priorities for many, but how intentional are you about building a satisfying relationship with yourself? No matter how busy life may be, at times the pace slows and we must look in the mirror. If we don't like what we see, such feelings as insecurity and discontentment arise; as they impact thoughts and behaviors both toward ourselves and toward others, emotional health suffers. Part III presents practical ideas for building a satisfying relationship with self, then exposes barriers to building friendships and offers strategies to enrich connections with others.

### Part IV: Taking Charge of Your Emotions

The final section integrates all the relationships considered in the book's first three parts as a prescription for emotional health. Part IV, which includes chapters on depression, anxiety, and anger, shows how to utilize these relationships to overcome mental anguish and find relief, and closes by exploring how they bring us joy.

Who can benefit from reading this book and practicing its strategies? Nearly everyone. Whether you are challenged with severe depression and anxiety, with frequent temper flares, or merely with an occasional unwelcome mood—whatever your emotional makeup, you can become better equipped, and you can improve your mental health.

The groundwork is laid. Get ready to take charge!

PART I

# EMPOWERED THROUGH THOUGHTS *and* BEHAVIORS

# 1

# Connecting Self-Talk, Feelings, and Behaviors

Reed feels like a robot, merely going through life's motions. Nothing interests him. Nothing excites him. Nothing brings him joy. His wife is his only friend, but over their twenty-year marriage they have drifted apart and now invest little in their relationship. He hardly knows his two children; his usual conversation starter "How are your grades?" rarely elicits more than "Fine" in response.

For Reed, every task appears daunting. His job seems meaningless. He finds it difficult to muster enough energy to go to work each morning, and even more challenging to deal with his family when he gets home in the afternoon. What he most looks forward to each day is bedtime, for sleep is his only relief from the constant hovering gloom.

Reed simply exists, neither expecting nor receiving much from life. Depression dominates him.

Mattie lives in dread of making mistakes. She spends agonizing hours reliving blunders, beating herself up for yesterday's ill-timed or insensitive comment, regretting decisions that did not yield the desired results. When for a time she is done reviewing the past, she hones in on the future, stymied by the available choices, afraid to select an option for fear of missing the best one.

Mattie cannot risk failure, so she undertakes only what she knows she can do well, significantly limiting her experiences and opportunities for growth. And her primary goal of avoiding any misstep isolates her from other people. She never initiates a social gathering due to worries that the venue or activity she would suggest might disappoint. Unwilling to take responsibility for choices involving family or friends, Mattie waits for others to reach out and make the decisions.

Mattie is bound up with fear, the tyrannical emotion that dictates her life.

Nora wishes people around her would quit being so irritating. She is set off by the smallest annoyance. People regularly fail to meet her expectations, and this exasperates her no end.

Although she usually spouts off when mad, sometimes Nora simply shuts down and disengages. She feels used by her husband and three children, unappreciated for how hard she works at home and at her job in sales. It seems everyone not only places demands on her but also tries to control her.

Nora is wound tight with anger.

Reed, Mattie, and Nora[1] have something in common: they are at the mercy of their emotions. They have something else in common as well: none of them needs to stay there. Let's begin

by examining how to capitalize on the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Each of us constantly interprets life. We all observe what's happening and carry on an internal dialogue about what we see or, more broadly, what we sense and intuit. This continuous and often automatic inner conversation, or self-talk, is something like the play-by-play during a football game. When Nora encounters a traffic jam, she does not ask, "What should I tell myself about this traffic?" but rather, in her case, says or thinks, "I don't have time for this" or "I'm sick to death of gridlock!"

Through the years, Nora has developed habitual ways of interpreting situations. She seldom pays attention to her self-talk; she simply lives her life. But whether or not she tunes in to her auto-interpretations, what she tells herself about life around her creates her feelings and behaviors—if the self-talk is believable.

## The Problem With "Positive Thinking"

Not every thought impacts our feelings and behaviors. For instance, Nora has heard many people say, "Just think positively." However, when she has an appointment with a client in five minutes, yet is ten miles away and crawling along, wishfully but untruthfully saying "I'm sure I'll make it on time" is useless. She knows it's impossible to travel ten miles in five minutes when the traffic is standing still—it wouldn't even be possible if she drove the whole distance at ninety miles an hour. Interpreting her situation that way neither creates *feelings* of relief nor produces the *behavior* of careful driving.

Nora is by no means the only skeptic about "positive thinking." The issue with positive thinking is that often it's difficult to believe. When Craig sits for his final physics exam, merely telling himself "I know I'll get an A" will not boost his confidence if

up to this point he has done C work, for no evidence supports his contention.

Likewise, Brandon's anticipating a blind date with Michelle by saying "There's no way she won't like me" doesn't help much either. He's not a narcissist and, further, he knows from experience that not everyone will desire his company. Similarly, Susan, who spends each dollar she gets and is presently short on cash, will not find much relief from asserting "Payday is tomorrow" when she knows it is actually ten days away. Unless self-talk is fully believable, it has little or no impact on our feelings and behaviors.

## Helpful Self-Talk (Instead of "Positive Thinking")

Within the realm of believability are a number of options for how every situation can be interpreted. Nora, barely moving in traffic before her appointment, could tell herself, "If this stupid holdup makes me late I'll lose the contract!" Such *unhelpful self-talk* probably would create feelings of frustration and alarm likely to engender behaviors of tailgating, darting in and out of traffic, and white-knuckling the wheel.

Here's another possible option, just as believable to Nora but resulting in different and more desirable feelings and behaviors:

> It seems I'm going to be late. Getting all worked up won't bring me there any faster. I can call ahead to say I'm stuck in traffic and sincerely apologize. How quickly traffic moves and how my client reacts are out of my control. I might as well sit back and turn on the radio. I will learn from this and leave earlier next time.

This *helpful self-talk* acknowledges the truth ("I'm going to be late") but recognizes the futility of getting bent out of shape. Subsequently, Nora feels more relaxed and drives responsibly. It is unrealistic to think she would feel happy about arriving late, but it is very possible for her to compose herself.

I use the terms *unhelpful* and *helpful* instead of *negative* and *positive* to countermand the overly simplistic notion that thinking positively is all that is necessary to feel good (or feel better). Again, positive thinking that's unbelievable, or not credible, is useless. Conversely, interpreting life in a truthful and helpful way does lead to more desirable feelings and behaviors.

Most people would agree that Craig, taking his physics final, wouldn't foster good results with unhelpful self-talk like "I know I'm going to fail this—I can't do it!" (In fact, it would create feelings of being overwhelmed as well as behaviors like distraction and freezing up.) My point is that thinking and speaking with unrealistic positivity won't produce confidence or improve his focus either; this also is useless. In contrast is helpful self-talk, which will calm him and enhance his concentration: "What's in my control right now is to read one question at a time and do my best. Let go of the outcome."

In the same way, of the many different things Brandon can tell himself about meeting Michelle for the first time, what's sure is that his interpretation of the situation will cultivate his feelings and behaviors. If he tells himself, "She has to like me!" he probably will feel stressed and pressured and probably will try too hard to impress her. The *positive* thought of "There's no doubt she'll like me" is unconvincing when they haven't even met. Much better if he chooses *helpful* self-talk:

> I look forward to spending time with Michelle and getting to know her. She doesn't hold the key to my future happiness—I'm not handing out that kind of power. We're just going to spend a couple of hours together. No big deal.

Brandon's approach promotes feelings of confidence and assurance. Correspondingly, when out with her, he enjoys being himself—acts natural—and is able to focus on learning about her.

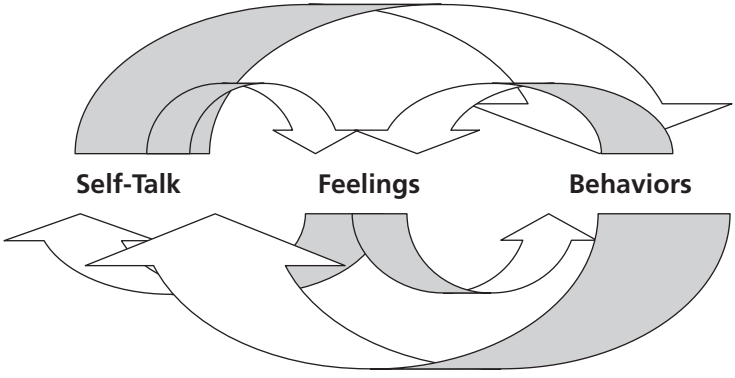
Spendthrift Susan, short on cash with a week and a half until her next check, also faces important decisions as to how she will construe her situation. Unhelpful self-talk could be, "I really might not survive till then!" This could generate feelings of fear and behaviors of wheel-spinning. Helpful self-talk, acknowledging the facts, might be,

> I must learn to budget better; I can, and I will. If need be, I'll go to a food shelf to tide me over. I won't starve on a couple weeks of beans and rice; plus, the diet can motivate me to plan ahead in the future and spend my money wisely.

This should spawn feelings of resolve and determination, and behaviors of making a plan, writing a budget, and, perhaps, going to the food shelf.

## The Power of Feelings

We have seen examples of how self-talk impacts feelings and behaviors. In addition, our feelings also shape our self-talk and our behaviors.




Each of these three factors powerfully affects the other two. Again, everyone develops automatic ways of interpreting life.

However, when people are struggling with a particular emotional challenge, their self-talk often is colored by their mood and becomes a habitual reflection of painful feelings.

For example, depressed people fall into the rut of interpreting life negatively. Reed, recently passed over for a promotion, said, "No surprise they chose someone else. I'm not good at anything." When considering his situation, he regularly tells himself, "Every day it's the same old routine. Life is so boring." And he sees no relief on the horizon, frequently lamenting, "I'll never feel better."

Cognitive psychiatrist Aaron Beck identified what he calls the "cognitive triad of depression,"[2] three beliefs that depressed people tend to hold. They have a negative view of themselves, a negative view of life around them, and a negative view of the future. In other words, they are down on themselves, they feel that little if anything brings them joy, and they don't believe things will improve. Having developed the habit of interpreting life pessimistically, they see themselves as inadequate, life as dull or meaningless, and the future as hopeless.

"Themes of danger" dominate the self-talk of anxious people, according to Beck,[3] who noted that when interpreting life they "maximize the likelihood of harm and minimize their ability to cope."[4] They tell themselves that terrible things are going to happen and that they will fall apart when the horrible events confront them. For instance, in response to her daughter wanting to play soccer, Mattie tells herself, "She's going to get hurt! She'll end up with a head injury from which she'll never recover." Mattie also has intended for years to replace her tattered living room furniture, but she will not decide which couch and chairs to buy: "They won't look right in our home, and we'll be stuck with this major purchase forever." Needing to fly cross-country to attend a conference for work, she insists, "I cannot handle flying. We might hit turbulence—the plane could crash."

Having worked with angry people for years, I've observed that among their ways of interpreting life, the theme of angry self-talk is "It's not fair!" They tend to focus their thinking on how they're getting a raw deal, and the feelings that most often result are victimization and resentment.

Nora's sister has a bigger, more expensive house than she does, and she constantly thinks *Why should* she *have more?* When she got a ticket for driving twenty miles over the speed limit, she told herself, "I haven't been pulled over in more than ten years—I deserve a warning first!" After she wasn't awarded a bonus this year despite working hard for her economically challenged company, she ruminated, "It's wrong that they demand so much from me but don't compensate my efforts."

As mentioned above, feelings don't only impact our self-talk, they also inform our behavior. Actions that follow from anger include blaming others, verbal tirades, emotional detachment (e.g., the silent treatment), sarcasm, and cynicism. Nora makes envious jabs at every turn about how her more affluent sibling gets all the breaks. She lost her cool and cursed at the highway patrolman as he was writing the ticket. She has stayed so mad about the bonus that she goes through the motions at work, barely acknowledging her boss.

Certain behaviors correspond to the feeling of depression as well, including passivity and withdrawal. Depressed people may want to retreat to their beds and pull the shades. When Reed learned he would not be promoted, he determined never again to bother with trying to advance his career. He also ignores his family whenever possible, choosing instead to channel-surf his evenings and weekends away. He does almost nothing to engage with life; lacking energy, he waits to feel better before putting forth any effort.

The characteristic behavior that accompanies anxiety is avoidance. Mattie, terrified her daughter would be injured, refuses to sign her up for a soccer team. She continually postpones purchasing furniture, despite having set aside money years ago for the new couch and chairs. In response to her boss's direction to fly to the conference, she made up an excuse and would not go. The longer she avoids her sources of fear, the more her anxiety grows.

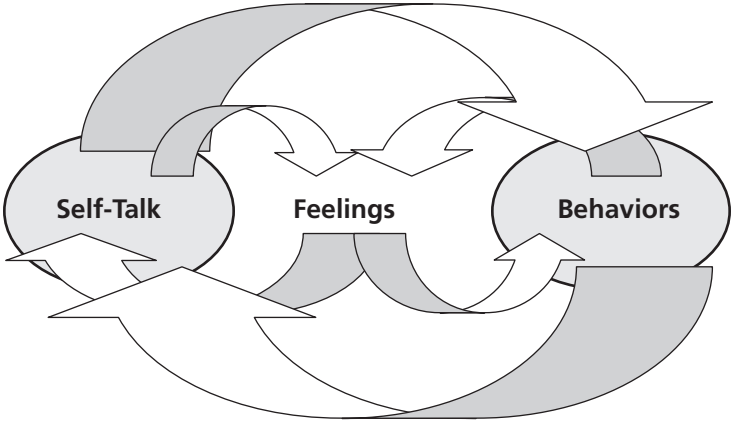
## The Behavior Effect

Behaviors influence self-talk and feelings. When Mattie changes course and signs up her daughter to play, her fear diminishes after witnessing her survive a few games. Further, the new behavior transforms self-talk from "She'll have a devastating injury" to "She's having so much fun!" Likewise, Reed engages to communicate with his wife and children and participates in a service project with them, then feels happier; his thoughts also shift from focusing almost entirely on himself to considering other people. When Nora opens up and talks with her boss, she learns more about their company's current fragility. Her self-talk switches to "We all must put forth full effort to help this place succeed. I'm thankful I still have a job." Her feelings subsequently shift from resentful and exploited to grateful and motivated.

### *Taking Charge of What We Can*

Here is a crucial distinction regarding these three facets: While all three affect the other two, only self-talk and behaviors are directly within our control. We can choose how we interpret life, and we can choose what we do.

In contrast, we do not have direct control over our emotions. Reed will not suddenly *feel* happy just because he wants relief.




Nor will Mattie's snapping her fingers instantly replace fear of flying with courage. By taking command of their self-talk and their behavior, though, both can indirectly yet powerfully change their feelings. When we make such choices, we begin taking charge of our emotional health. (We'll address engaging in helpful behaviors, so vital to emotional well-being, in parts III and IV.)

In the introduction, I mentioned a tool that has evolved as I've gained more and more insight into using self-talk to transform painful emotions. I call this skill the Seven Steps to Changing Feelings and Behavior, or simply the Seven Steps, and before we move on I want to comment on its practice. People experiencing emotional distress associated with a particular situation might solve the difficulty by addressing it once. (For an example, see chapter 2.) It's been my experience that those struggling with long-standing emotional pain need to spend around thirty minutes daily, or nearly daily, for a month or more with the Steps in order to change automatic unhelpful ways of thinking. This expenditure of time and effort resembles what might be regularly invested in workouts to promote physical health. (Be sure

to read appendix B if you decide to devote considerable time to writing the Steps. This section contains many tips that will provide you with more effective results.)

At the beginning of this process, helpful self-talk often remains in a person's mind briefly, maybe only minutes, before unhelpful thinking re-intrudes. As dedicated days and weeks pass, though, helpful thinking sticks longer and becomes more automatic.

Some issues and challenges are so complex, especially at the onset of addressing and tackling them, that writing the Seven Steps will require more than half an hour. In that event, you might consider completing lengthy writings in thirty-minute increments over several days. When utilizing this tool, a key to breaking bad habits in how you think is to exercise your brain nearly daily through writing until your automatic interpretations of life are helpful about 90 percent of the time.

In chapter 2, I will introduce you to the Seven Steps through Tom, a man who used them to turn the tables on difficult emotions. If you prefer to postpone learning this more technical skill, you could jump ahead for now to part II.

TABLE 1

**Examples of Relationship Between Feelings, Self-Talk, and Behavior**

| Feeling | Habitual Self-Talk | Habitual Behavior |
|---|---|---|
| Depression | • Focus on gloom<br>• Negative, pessimistic interpretations | Passivity, withdrawal from others, dependency on a few trusted people |
| Anxiety | • Focus on danger<br>• Frightening interpretations | Avoidance of threatening situations |
| Anger | • Focus on fairness<br>• Sense of being oft-victimized by injustice | Verbal tirades, emotional detachment, blaming others, sarcasm, cynicism |