

WHY AM I FEELING LIKE THIS?

*A Teen's
Guide to Freedom
from Anxiety & Depression*

DAVID MURRAY



“As a parent of three daughters, I know teenagers fear talking to their parents about difficult subject matters like anxiety and depression. But this no longer has to be the case. My friend David Murray wrote a tool for teenagers to not only help them understand anxiety and depression but also give them guidance on how they can have tough conversations with their parents or other responsible adults.”

Ed Stetzer, Executive Director, Billy Graham Center for Evangelism,
Wheaton College

“David Murray’s book and words have been a huge help in my walk with anxiety and depression. As a teenager, a student, and an athlete, the stresses of this world can easily become too much. I’d recommend this book to family, friends, or any teen who is struggling.”

Isaac, age 17

“Parenting is good for our prayer lives, we find, especially when sons and daughters are navigating the many anxieties that seem to coincide with the teenage years. David Murray has the practical experience and spiritual wisdom to help. Based in biblical truth and at the same time sensitive to the psychological and physiological complexities of human emotions, Murray’s companion guides tell real-life stories that empower teens and their parents to understand their feelings, care well for one another, and take concrete steps toward healing together.”

Phil and Lisa Ryken, President, Wheaton College, and his wife, Lisa

“For years, I have been scouring shelves for solid and practical teen resources that blend Christian faith and mental health. My search is over! In *Why Am I Feeling Like This?*, David Murray offers engaging wisdom that addresses common teenage thought hurdles that perpetuate anxiety and depression, all in a voice that resonates with a teen reader. I am thrilled to add this book to my professional library.”

Emilie DeYoung, Supervisor for Child and Adolescent Counseling,
Family Wellness Center, Zeeland, Michigan

“There are plenty of resources for adults struggling with stress, anxiety, and depression, but few for teens—even though we know that more teens than ever are facing these issues. A resource was desperately needed to address their unique challenges and circumstances, and this book is the best thing I could have imagined. It’s the most practical, compassionate, and biblical resource I have ever seen for teenagers struggling with anxiety and depression. I will be quickly recommending this to any struggling teen I know.”

Jaquelle Crowe Ferris, Founder and COO, The Young Writer; author,
This Changes Everything

“With anxiety and depression at an all-time high in today’s teens, this book could not come at a more crucial time. *Why Am I Feeling Like This?* is an extremely practical, helpful, biblical, and hopeful book that will help open the pathways of communication between teens and their parents. Rather than giving spiritually cliché answers to a complex and multilayered issue, David Murray compassionately walks alongside anxious and hurting teenagers in a disarming way, offering clarity, hope, and wise counsel in how to better understand their unique struggle with anxiety and depression, as well as practical and spiritual tools to take steps toward physical and spiritual healing.”

Sarah Walton, coauthor, *Hope When It Hurts* and *Together through the Storms*

“All teenagers who experience anxiety or depression long for a silver bullet to magically solve the way they feel. Unfortunately, such a silver bullet does not exist. Fortunately, teens now have a toolbox full of manageable, practical approaches to help them heal in the face of anxiety or depression. In *Why Am I Feeling Like This?*, David Murray demonstrates his understanding of teens’ struggles and his grasp of practical, biblical paths toward healing. This book will be an immensely helpful guide to any teen who wants to find healing and is willing to take small but significant action steps to achieve it.”

Christopher Walker, Associate Pastor for Youth Ministry, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

“Teens, if you are struggling with anxiety, depression, or a combination of the two, you need to read *Why Am I Feeling Like This?* David Murray will help you—he is insightful, biblical, wise, and practical. Heed his words and counsel, and mostly, heed God’s word as you seek to battle anxiety and pursue healing through Christ’s help and the hope of his gospel.”

Kristen Wetherell, author, *Fight Your Fears*; coauthor, *Hope When It Hurts*

“In these days of rising anxiety and depression, parents of teenagers need an accessible, empathetic, and wise guide. David Murray’s books team up to provide parents and teens with a way to communicate hope and give grace to one another in these perplexing struggles. Pastors and youth workers will find in Murray a patient and seasoned coach in their efforts to care for anxious and depressed teens and their parents.”

David Sunday, Lead Pastor, New Covenant Bible Church, St. Charles, Illinois

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FEELING
LIKE THIS?**

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Why Is My Teenager Feeling Like This? A Guide for Helping Teens through Anxiety and Depression

WHY AM I FEELING LIKE THIS?

A Teen's Guide to Freedom from
Anxiety and Depression

David Murray

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To Joni and Amy,
my beautiful teen daughters

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Introduction

WHY AM I FEELING LIKE THIS?

Freedom! We long for it and love it. At last, free to be and do what we want. That's the teen years, right?

Our first car, our first job, our first date, our first road trip. These are wonderful moments of increasing independence that we experience in our teen years as our parents gradually release us from their supervision. Freedom is so amazing, isn't it? We can't get enough of it, and we can't get it early enough.

But for some of us, our teen years are the opposite of freedom. They are years of increasing bondage. It's not that an outside force like our parents or teachers imprisons us. No, it's an inside force that restricts us. Our own thoughts and feelings hold us captive, and we can't break free from them.

Anxiety and depression lock us up and cast us down. Darkness and panic stalk us and steal our joy and peace. Our teen years feel more like solitary confinement than newfound freedom. "Why am I feeling like this?" you ask. "How do I get out of this?"

This book answers these questions. It will not only explain why you feel like this; it will also equip you with keys to unlock the chains of anxiety and depression. These keys are God-given truths, tools, and tactics that will, with God's blessing and help, release new liberty, peace, and joy into your life.

I've seen this happen again and again in depressed and anxious teens, and therefore I have great hope for you too. I've also used these keys in my own life when I've been sad and anxious, so I know they work from personal experience.

Anxiety and Depression?

You might be wondering why one book would try to deal with both anxiety and depression. Aren't they different problems? While there are differences, many experts now view them as two sides of the same coin, or two faces of one basic problem.

Yes, someone can be depressed but not anxious, or anxious without being depressed, but about half of all teens who have one also have the other to some degree. As anxiety is more common than depression for teens, and it usually comes before depression, the primary focus of the book will be anxiety. However, many of the keys work for both anxiety and depression, as we will see.

Personal Stories

We'll meet a number of teens in the coming pages who have experienced different kinds of anxiety and depression. We'll listen to their stories, discover what helped them, and try to learn lessons from what they went through.

In most cases, I've highlighted the main key that helped each teen. However, it's rarely just one key that does the job. Usually a number of keys working together are the best approach. Also, just because the story might be about a guy doesn't mean the lessons from his story aren't for girls. Same goes the other way too. As you read the stories, think about who you most identify with. There may be more than one.

Normal Stories

One of the reasons I tell you these stories is to show how many teens have experiences similar to yours. About one in three teens experience distressing and even disabling anxiety. In fact, it's now

the most common issue for which teens seek counseling. Nearly a third of thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds will experience an anxiety disorder (38 percent of girls and 26 percent of boys).

When it comes to depression, 13 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds experience major depression in any one year, with depression affecting about 20 percent of adolescents by the time they become adults. That's every fifth person in your class! So you're quite normal. There's no need to hide in shame.¹

Homework

I wish I could tell you that just reading the chapters will release you from anxiety and depression. It won't. You have to pick up the keys and use them. That's why at the end of each chapter you'll find a Bible verse to memorize, a prayer, and some exercises. You don't need to do all the exercises, but pick the ones you think will be most useful to you.

Patient

I can't promise you immediate and complete freedom. Anxiety and depression are strong and stubborn forces. It usually takes some time for the keys to work. That means you need patience and perseverance, and you should pray for that. It's a process more than an event. For some of us, the best outcome will be reducing the intensity or duration of anxiety and depression by learning how to manage and respond to it better. And for most of us, if we use the keys God has provided, we can experience significant improvement and have peace and joy more often. If we aim at progress, we can celebrate every small victory.

Team Approach

You may feel that the adults in your life don't understand your pain. Others want to help but sometimes say or do things that

1. See "Anxiety Disorder Definitions," National Institute of Mental Health, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml>; and "Major Depression," National Institute of Mental Health, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml#part_155031.

make things worse rather than better. That's why I've written a companion book on the same subject for parents, pastors, and teachers: *Why Is My Teenager Feeling Like This? A Guide for Helping Teens through Anxiety and Depression*. Why not ask your mom or dad, or your pastor or a teacher, to read that book and join you on this journey? God has designed us to need others, and you will make much faster and better progress if you have someone walking together with you through this.

I also encourage you to check in with your doctor and a Christian or biblical counselor, or another mental health professional, as this book only covers the basics and the most common kinds of anxiety and depression. You may need the more specialized help a doctor or another specialist can provide or put you in touch with. They will help you build a support team and make a step-by-step plan.

If you are thinking about harming yourself, you must reach out to a trusted adult or call this toll-free number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, available twenty-four hours a day, every day: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

TURNING THE KEY

It's helpful to honestly identify your thoughts and feelings and put a label on them. Circle some of the words that describe your anxiety:

Stressed Afraid Edgy Panicky
Freaking Out Angsty Nervous Shaky
Nauseated Apprehensive Fidgety Desperate
Worried

Circle some words that describe your depression:

Sad Lonely Empty Hopeless
Failure Gloomy Suicidal Painful
Exhausted

Write out and memorize Psalm 94:19.

Prayer

God of truth, help me to be truthful as I start this book. Help me to be honest with myself and you about what I'm thinking and feeling. And help me to reach out for help. Amen.

1

CIRCULAR SARAH

My junior year started off great. I got into the varsity soccer team, and we had a great season. We even made the playoffs. That's when my troubles began. There were lots of extra practices, games, and pressure. I'm one of the younger players on the team, and my teammates criticize me when things go wrong. They don't really want me on the team.

It's taking me longer and longer to get to sleep because I can't stop thinking about what the other girls think about me. Exams are coming up, and I'm so behind. I go round and round the same things in my head. I'm just exhausted with it all. I feel horrible, like I'm going to be sick all the time. I don't know what's happening to me, and I don't know what to do. Am I going crazy?

—*Sarah*

The Key of Understanding

One of the reasons anxiety and depression are such horrible experiences is that they make us feel out of control. A force bigger than ourselves takes over, and we feel like helpless victims. We don't know what's happening or when it's going to strike next. Life becomes so confusing and terrifying.

Although depression and anxiety feel like a jumbled mess of stuff, there is usually an order to them. And if we can figure that out, we won't panic when we experience them again. We'll also be able to process these horrible feelings better the next time we

have them. We'll say, "It's okay. I know what's happening here, and I know how to respond."

Perhaps you can remember the first time you were standing in the ocean and saw a big wave coming. It was terrifying. You didn't know what was going to happen. Now, though, when you see a big wave, you know what's happening and so you don't panic. Instead you brace yourself, take a deep breath, feel the wave as it passes, and then relax. That's where we want to get with our waves of anxiety and depression. So let's try to understand the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle* that Sarah was experiencing.

WORRY

Worry can be a good thing—in short and small doses. Worry occurs when our minds anticipate a specific problem and spend a limited time thinking about how to avoid it or solve it. For example, when you have an important exam coming up, you worry about passing, which makes you set aside enough time to study.

This is “good” worry. You face a challenge, think about how to meet it, and take the right actions to succeed. It's “good” worry because it comes at the right time, for the right reason, to the right degree, and helps you pass. This kind of worry is nothing to worry about and is a normal part of growing up. You can actually view this kind of stress as your ally and friend. So say to yourself, “This is horrible, but I can handle it with God's help, and it will ultimately make me tougher and better.”

Worry is a bad thing when it becomes too big, it lasts too long, or it paralyzes you. It's when thinking about that exam overwhelms and terrifies you so much that you can't study or sleep, or when your mind goes into overdrive. “If I don't get an *A*, then my GPA will drop, and my parents will be mad because I won't get a scholarship, and they can't afford to pay my tuition, and I'll end up with massive debt, and no guy will want to marry me, and I'll be unhappy for the rest of my life.”

Out of breath yet? So is your mind—especially because you haven't thought this just once; you've thought it a hundred times today. All because you imagined you got an A— instead of an A on one exam.

Do you see how, based upon one little possibility, one “what-if,” you have rewritten your whole life story in your mind? That's bad worry, and if left unchecked, what usually happens next is anxiety.

ANXIETY

After worrying *thoughts* come horrible *feelings*. The emotions of fear, dread, and terror begin to grow. We feel on edge, fidgety, jittery, jumpy. We have a sense of impending doom. Worrying thoughts have produced anxious feelings.

But here's a strange thing. Some of us skip the worry step and go straight to anxiety. We are not thinking or worrying about anything specific, and yet we are plagued with a general sense of anxiety. It's come out of nowhere, it's not focused on anything, and it goes on and on. This is often called generalized anxiety.

Sometimes we experience slow-growing, low-grade, background anxiety. Other times it's sudden, in-your-face, and overwhelming. But generalized anxiety is just as painful as worry-caused anxiety. Perhaps it's even more painful, because we often can't identify a specific cause for it.

As we'll see in some of the following chapters, there are causes of this general feeling of anxiety, but they are not as easy to identify as the anxiety caused by specific worries. But whether the causes are specific or general, all this overactivity in our thoughts and feelings, all this worry and anxiety, usually impacts our bodies in the form of stress. That's the next step in the cycle.

STRESS

If worry takes place in our *thoughts*, and anxiety in our *feelings*, stress is what results in our *bodies*. Our worried thoughts

and anxious feelings multiply to produce frightening effects in our bodies: heart racing or pounding, breathlessness, headaches, trembling, tension, dizziness, twitching, stomach cramps, nausea, exhaustion, restlessness, insomnia, tightness in the chest or throat, and so on.

This all starts a never-ending loop because we start worrying about these physical symptoms: Am I seriously ill? Am I going to die? Am I going mad? This worry, of course, creates more anxiety and more stress, and so the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle* goes around again and again.

DEPRESSION

So where does depression come into this? For teens, depression often grows as the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle* grows bigger and faster. Depression is partly the result of the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion caused by anxiety. It's the dark sense of hopelessness that we'll never get out of this vicious cycle. We give up even trying and sink into deep darkness, which, in turn, actually adds fuel to the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle*.

However, depression can also come first. That's especially the case if we have experienced serious illness, bereavement, trauma, and other sad events. We have a disabling sadness where we're down all the time. We can't sleep, we can't eat (or we can't stop eating or sleeping). We have difficulty concentrating and making decisions, and we feel worthless and hopeless, so much so that we might want to harm ourselves. This often starts off the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle*.

Update from Sarah

It was a breakthrough for me when I heard about the *worry > anxiety > stress cycle*. It made so much sense of my experience. It was exactly what was happening to me. That cycle started in my thoughts, went to my feelings, then my body.

My counselor told me to try and look at my feelings as an outside observer of them. Instead of getting on the roller coaster of my feelings, I think of myself as watching the roller coaster and describing it to a friend.

Now, when I sense the cycle is beginning, I say to myself, "Get off the roller coaster and watch it instead." That's what I try to visualize in my mind. Sometimes it stops the roller coaster. Other times the roller coaster ride doesn't last as long or doesn't feel so bad. The ups and downs are not so scary.

When I find myself going over and over something someone said to me or about me, I visualize myself putting the words in a box, sealing it with tape, and putting it on a shelf with lots of other boxes. It's another trick my counselor taught me. When I'm tempted to start thinking about it again, I just say to myself, "No, that box is on the shelf, you're not taking it down again."

I've also learned about what my limitations are, and I cut back on the number of activities in my life. I was cramming too much into my days, putting myself under unnecessary pressure for too long.

TURNING THE KEY

The next time you feel anxious or depressed, use the key of understanding. Try to view your feelings as an outside observer and briefly describe what you experience in your thoughts, feelings, and body. Instead of getting on the roller coaster, try to think of yourself as a spectator watching it from the sidelines and you are calling your friend to describe it. This may not immediately change your feelings, but it changes the way you relate to them. Write down:

- What are my thoughts?
- What are my feelings?
- What is happening in my body?

What was the sequence? What came first, second, and third? Labeling and describing our thoughts and feelings like this reduces their power over us.

Write out Psalm 56:3 and memorize it.

Prayer

My Creator, I see how you have made me in a way that my thoughts, feelings, and body are all connected. Help me to observe this calmly and understand this better. Also, teach me to trust you when I am afraid or down. Amen.

“David Murray’s book and words
have been a huge help in my walk
with anxiety and depression.”

Isaac, age 17

If you have experienced anxiety or depression, you may have asked yourself, *Why am I feeling like this?* You are not alone.

Pastor and counselor David Murray introduces you to the personal accounts of eighteen teens who have struggled with different types of anxiety or depression. This guide will help you discover not only the common causes but also the keys to unlock their chains. By utilizing God-given truths and tactics, you can experience new liberty, peace, and joy in your life.

“It’s the most practical, compassionate, and biblical resource I have ever seen for teenagers struggling with anxiety and depression.”

JAUELLE CROWE FERRIS, Founder and COO, The Young Writer;
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PHIL AND LISA RYKEN, President, Wheaton College, and his wife, Lisa

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