



# **FIRE** **IN MY MIND**

*Personal Insights &  
Practical Help  
for Severe Anxiety*

— *Paula J. Marolewski* —



# Fire in My Mind

Personal Insights & Practical Help for Severe Anxiety

Paula J. Marolewski

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## Dedication

To Carole Murphy

whose wise and insightful counseling guided me on my journey to wholeness.

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## Introduction

Anxiety is all too often a hidden cancer in our midst. Not the ordinary “Sure, I’m stressed, too” level of anxiety or worry or stress that everyone lives with – but the anxiety that destroys a person from the inside out, eating away at them, hollowing their lives, devastating their faith.

Anxiety that is so severe that the sufferer feels a tumult of emotions: shame and guilt for having such anxieties, fear that they are going crazy, terror that others will reject or condemn them if they knew the truth, anger at their seeming inability to conquer the worries that gnaw at them, doubt that God knows, cares, or can do anything to help.

Such anxiety can sometimes be a sign of, or lead to, true anxiety disorders. Medication may be necessary to reclaim mental and emotional balance. And there, resistance rises again: “Surely, Christians don’t have anxiety problems like this! I must not have enough faith! Medication ... for my mind? No!”

On the other side, those who do not suffer from this level of anxiety often cannot understand what is happening inside their friend’s or relative’s mind and body and soul. They make assumptions based upon their own experience, often minimizing the pain and serious nature of the problem because they simply cannot conceive of the upheaval the other is experiencing.

Naturally, therefore, they may not know how to effectively comfort, support, strengthen, and build up the one who is suffering. While completely well-meaning and spoken in love, their words can wound instead of heal; devastate rather than encourage.

*Fire in My Mind* is written to address both sides of this issue. Primarily, it is written for the sufferer. You are not alone. Other Christians suffer along with you – and have experienced grace to address their anxieties. You can experience that grace, too.

Secondarily, it is written for the sufferer’s friends and support group. You play a vital role in extending God’s grace to the sufferer. Your words and actions are of paramount importance and can make the difference between despair and hope, sickness and health.

In order to accomplish these two goals, each chapter of *Fire in My Mind* has four sections. First, there is a personal narrative called *Inside My Mind*. This section describes what it is like for the sufferer – it reveals the nature of their anxious thoughts and details what happens inside mind, emotions, body, and soul as anxiety takes hold.

The purpose of this section is three-fold:

1. to reassure the sufferer that they are not alone,
2. to give the sufferer words to explain what is going on inside of them, and
3. to give friends and family a glimpse inside the sufferer's mind so that they can better understand what it looks and feels like to be tormented by anxiety.

It should be understood that this section is intensely personal in nature and reflects the author's own experience. Others may have differing experiences, but this section can provide a basis for discussion and increased understanding.

The next section is called *Practical Matters*. This gives rubber-meets-the-road advice for the sufferer, and explains how the friends and family members who make up the support group can best reach out to and support the sufferer. It often addresses common mistakes and shows why they are harmful.

This section is, necessarily, limited in scope. It discusses key points the author has found particularly helpful or pertinent. It is not designed to be comprehensive in nature. Both the sufferer and the support group should engage in extensive reading and counseling to learn about anxiety and to gain the tools and techniques to overcome it in their specific circumstances. *Practical Matters* is a springboard to get you started in the right direction.

The third section, *Truth from the Word*, is a series of five biblical meditations designed to walk the sufferer through vital scriptural truths that address the topic of the chapter. These meditations can be read one-per-day as daily devotionals, or all together in a single sitting, as the reader prefers. They often build on one another, however, so they should be read in order.

It is important to understand the place of Scripture in an individual's struggle to overcome anxiety. Put simply, Scripture is only one part of a person's healing. Severe anxiety (whether or not the person has an actual "anxiety disorder") is a problem that impacts body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Healing must therefore address each and every one of those aspects. That may include counseling, medication, lifestyle changes, and more.

The biblical meditations in the *Truth from the Word* section are tools to help the spiritual aspect of anxiety. They were created to give the sufferer a solid spiritual framework in which healing can then take place. The author highly recommends that individuals suffering from severe anxiety seek professional help in order to address fully all the various aspects of anxiety.

The final section of each chapter, *Prayer from the Heart*, contains a written prayer that the sufferer can use as an aid in talking with God about their anxiety. Oftentimes, it is difficult while within the throes of anxiety to find the words to pray. It is hard to look up when there is so much pain within. It is hard to keep a true theological perspective.

These prayers were created to help the sufferer put their pain into words and to then move on from the pain to affirm the principles discussed in the *Truth from the Word* sections.

It is my earnest hope that *Fire in My Mind* will help individuals who suffer from anxiety to move into health and wholeness, and will help the Church to better love, support, and encourage them along the way.

**Important Disclaimer:** *Fire in My Mind* is a personal and biblical study of anxiety. It is not and does not claim to be a psychological or medical treatise on the topic, nor should it be used as such. The advice provided here reflects principles the author has personally found helpful. Depending on the level and type of anxiety a person suffers, other or additional techniques may be necessary. The author shall not be held liable for any damages or injury to any person resulting from access to this book. This book is not a substitute for medical or therapeutic intervention by qualified professionals. Individuals suffering from anxiety are advised to seek professional medical advice from an expert. The author does not diagnose or prescribe, or give out information regarding medication. Additionally, individuals who support a person with anxiety may benefit from seeking professional advice on how to address their particular circumstances.

## The Mind, the Body, and the Brain

Before proceeding to the first chapter, please read this important section. In my personal experience with severe anxiety and in my discussions with others who suffer from anxiety, I have become aware of a large area of general ignorance: that is, a lack of understanding regarding the interactions between the mind, the body, and the brain; and how those interactions produce and affect anxiety.

I am not an expert in either physiology or psychology, and therefore recommend strongly that those suffering from anxiety and those who support them read materials written by the professionals in this area. A good place to begin, and a book I highly recommend, is *The Anxiety Cure* by Dr. Archibald Hart, a noted Christian psychologist.

I will only touch on the most basic level of this topic here, as I understand it.

Imagine for a moment driving a car over and over and over the same dirt road. The car's tires make tracks, then deep ruts. After some time, it is very hard for the car to drive anywhere *except* in those ruts. Getting out of the rut requires skill, time, and effort.

That is what happens when a person is subject to stress. Stress produces certain chemical messengers in the body and in the brain. Those chemical messengers in turn produce their own effect on the body and the brain, and also on the mind and the emotions.

When someone does not have an anxiety problem and the stress is temporary, those chemical messengers do their job, then dissipate when the source of the stress goes away. The person then returns to their normal mindset and bodily balance.

But if someone suffers from an anxiety problem or from continual stress, the chemical messengers keep getting pumped into the body and brain, forming a "rut" of physical, mental, and emotional responses. Severe anxiety is one of these responses.

In order to get out of this "rut," the sufferer will have to take serious steps, which may include learning techniques to control anxiety, changing the circumstances that are causing the anxiety, and taking medication to mitigate the anxiety. In every case, such steps will require skill, time, and effort. In many cases, professional help may be beneficial and even essential.

It is vital that this relationship between the mind, body, and brain be understood so that the sufferer and the support group:

- ☞ Realize that there is a physiological component to anxiety. That means that the body itself is involved, not just the mind and the emotions.
- ☞ Identify what is inside and what is outside the sufferer's control. For instance, emotions themselves cannot be controlled, but a person's response to those emotions can be controlled.
- ☞ Accept the fact that medication may be necessary to break or control this dangerous chemical cycle.
- ☞ Recognize that the sufferer cannot simply "snap out of it." There are aspects that are under the sufferer's control, and there are aspects that are not. Only time, skill, and effort will effect a lasting change.
- ☞ Understand that that this is not simply a "spiritual" problem. As humans, our body, mind, and spirit are integrated. What affects one aspect affects all parts to some degree. So when the body's chemical balance is off, mental and emotional anxiety can result; and when mental and emotional anxiety is present, it has an effect on the body's responses.

For a complete understanding of this topic, I encourage you to read *The Anxiety Cure* by Dr. Archibald Hart.

## Fire in My Mind

### *Slowing Down Racing Thoughts*

#### *Inside My Mind*

It is an endless cycle. When I wake, it is as if I never slept. My thoughts pick up on the very sentence where I fell asleep the night before – as if there was no break, not even an ellipsis to denote a time of unconscious oblivion.

Fatigue overshadows me so that – for a few moments – my thoughts are sluggish. Dully staring at my fears. Feeling the weight of my worries. Then, as I recognize that these same enemies are still here with me, my heart begins to pound. Adrenaline rushes through me, and I curl up with a moan on my bed, unwilling to face the day, unable to cope with yet more hours of the ceaseless spinning of my thoughts.

My thoughts scream into a whirlwind, mounting with force as I go over and over and over and over and over the same ground again and again and again and again. My mind picks up such speed that it aches and hurts with the effort.

Then comes the fire.

The speed and intensity of my thoughts, my anxieties, bursts into flame inside me. My very brain feels as if it is physically burning. My vision darkens, contracts, and the world closes in around me as my veins catch the fire, rippling through my body, forcing my heart to race, my breath to come fast and shallow, my skin to burn with an internal heat I cannot control.

It is consuming and agonizing. A hell within my own mind complete with fire and brimstone and sulfur. And still, I cannot control the thoughts that race with flame through my mind, burning with a fury that cannot be contained, cannot be quenched, cannot be satisfied ...

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

Part of the terror of anxiety is the force and power of the racing thoughts that accompany it. Adrenaline reaches a fever pitch, sending the body into pure fight or flight mode.

Two things are essential at this point: to *slow down*, and to *focus on something outside of yourself*. To slow down, because your mind and body are running at breakneck speed; and to focus on something external, because the whole power of anxiety is that it wraps you up inside yourself and turns your mind into a prison cell.

Here are four practical steps to take to begin to slow down and shift focus:

**Reach out.** It is natural to retreat from others during the peak of anxiety: while you hate your racing thoughts, they are all-consuming. However, retreat is actually the worst thing you can do, because it makes it even easier to focus on your thoughts. This is the time you need to reach out to your support group. Call one of your friends or family members and tell them the substance of your racing thoughts. Be detailed. Get it all out on the table. Since you speak slower than you think, your mind will slow down as you verbalize your thoughts and fears.

**Change locations.** If possible, move to a different location: if you are in the house, get out. If you are at work, take a break and walk around. Physically changing location can assist you in mentally changing direction.

**Work out.** The problem with anxiety is that it tends to breed apathy: you want to sit and chew your fingernails, figuratively speaking. It will often take an act of will to physically get up and get moving, but it is worth it. Physical exercise releases endorphins into your body and brain, which can help you to feel better. Additionally, working out can distract you and therefore break the thought cycles in your mind. A competitive sport may be especially beneficial (i.e., racquetball rather than jogging), since it requires your mental attention in addition to your physical attention.

**Be creative.** Engage in an activity that will take up brain and thought space. You can't think about two things at once, so you want to try to shift your thoughts toward something positive and pleasant. As mentioned above, sports can fill that role. Hobbies are another primary source of creativity. Volunteer work may do the trick. Your job may draw upon your creativity. Whatever it is, try to give it 100% of your attention.

### **For the Support Group**

As the friend of the sufferer, you may never have experienced the terror of having your thoughts race out of control. Here are several points to be aware of as you reach out in love to help the person suffering from anxiety:

**Be ready to listen.** As stated in the previous section, the sufferer needs to talk out their thoughts – therefore, they need someone to be there to listen. That person is you. This is not, however, a five-minute conversation. It may take an hour or more for the person’s thoughts to even begin to slow down. It is vital that you do not short-circuit this process. Don’t rush it. Encourage the person to talk, and to get it all out on the table.

**Watch for mental circling.** The challenge with listening is to discern when talking becomes mental circling. The sufferer needs to talk out all their thoughts and fears. But *repeating* all those thoughts and fears multiple times is counterproductive. Therefore, be patient while they talk, but if you begin to hear the same things again and again, gently point out that now it is time to move forward. Recommend an activity, or change the focus of the conversation.

**Suggest an activity.** If at all possible, get together with the sufferer and do something active with them. Competitive sports, hobbies, etc., are very helpful. Be careful to avoid passive pastimes, i.e., TV or movies, because the sufferer can “tune out” whatever is on the screen and simply continue their previous thought cycles. If you can’t get together personally with the sufferer, recommend something they can do on their own that will be engaging.

**Take the initiative.** Because anxiety breeds apathy, the sufferer may resist engaging in an activity. Part of them really does want to sit and stare at their anxious thoughts. They may literally not have the energy or the willpower to get up out of the chair by themselves. You may need to supply the energy and willpower they need, either by insisting that you engage in an activity together, or by literally encouraging them verbally until they get up and take the first step toward action.

**Point the way to God.** It is important to remember that when a person’s thoughts are racing, they are essentially self-focused. Every sense is turned inward. Therefore, the sufferer cannot “see” God: they only see themselves and the things they fear. Draw their attention to God and away from themselves by directing them to verses that speak of God’s might and power, his holiness, his love, his grace.

## *Truth from the Word – You Are Not Alone*

*“Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, ‘Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, “A boy is conceived.” May that day be darkness; let not God above care for it, nor light shine on it.” Job 3:1-4*

Job’s thoughts must have raced, threatening to consume him, an ever-present fire in his mind. He had lost wealth, property, children, and health. God appeared to have abandoned him. His pain was perpetual, and his anguished cries went unanswered from the heavens.

It is this anxiety, this depression, this unfathomable stress that we hear in Job’s voice when – pushed to the breaking point – he curses the day of his birth: “Let the day perish on which I was born! ... May that day be darkness!”

This is a strange passage in which to look for hope, but it is here, nevertheless. And this is the hope that this despairing cry of Job brings: *You are not alone.*

It is easy to feel alone in this world full of rhetorical “Hi! How are you?” “I’m fine, thanks!” exchanges.

It is easy to feel alone when every TV station, movie, and magazine says life should be full of fun, pleasure, adventure, and prosperity.

It is easy to feel alone when perhaps those nearest and dearest to you really don’t comprehend what is happening inside your mind.

And you think ... “I am the only one who has ever felt this way. No one understands my suffering. It is too much for me. I will be crushed under it.”

But you are not alone. From Job’s experience at the dawn of history to today’s teeming billions, others have suffered and are suffering as you are now. And here is the reason this is a word of hope: Job did not end his days in despair. He finished them in blessing. Likewise, millions of people today who have struggled and suffered to the same depth as you are now have come through to a place of blessing.

☞ What does it mean to you to realize that others have suffered like you are suffering now – and have come through that suffering to a place of blessing?

☞ Take a deep breath. And as you exhale, say softly: *I am not alone!*

## *Truth from the Word – Remember Who God Is*

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth! Tell me, if you have understanding. Who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Job 38:4-7*

Into the midst of Job’s anxiety – his grief, his despair, his anger – God finally spoke. But what is at first baffling is this: God did not answer any of Job’s questions! Not one! In fact, Job *never* received an answer as to “Why?” and “What happened?”

Instead, in Job 38-41, God guides Job to consider the full extent of his power, his wisdom, his creativity, and his authority as it is demonstrated in the physical creation. Before Job’s wondering eyes are displayed the vast expanses of the sea, the brilliance of the dawn, the glory of the Milky Way, and the intricate interplay of the animal kingdom.

Why would God respond in this way? Quite simply, because Job needed to have his perspective renewed. He needed to *remember who God is*.

Anxiety causes us to turn our thoughts inward. Our perspective narrows until we see only ourselves, feel only our pain, and hear only our racing thoughts. If we want to slow our thoughts down, then it is important to turn our eyes outside of ourselves. One way to do that is to actively remember who God is.

Here are three exercises that can help:

- ☞ Read through Job 38-41. Imagine that you were Job, and God spoke in this way to you. What would you think? Feel? How would you react? What would you do?
- ☞ Pray a prayer using Job 38-41 as a guide. Using your own words, acknowledge specific examples of God’s power, creativity, wisdom, and authority. Be objective in this prayer – don’t use examples from your own life’s circumstances; keep your thoughts outside yourself.
- ☞ Choose something natural as a reminder of God’s creative power and authority: a rock, a shell, a nut, etc. Keep the object on your desk or kitchen counter. Whenever you look at it and handle it, remind yourself, “God is the Almighty Creator. He created the whole world, including this thing. He holds all the power in the Universe. I will worship him, because he alone is God.”

*Truth from the Word – God Knows What You Are Suffering*

*“O LORD, You have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
You understand my thought from afar.  
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,  
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before there is a word on my tongue,  
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.”  
Psalm 139:1-4*

Think of it: God himself knows the full scope and content and horror of your racing thoughts. Look at the words: God has:

... searched you  
... known you  
... understands your thoughts  
... scrutinizes your path  
... is intimately acquainted with all your ways

This is no detached or distant God. He is involved intimately with us every day, and every moment. When you suffer from anxiety, it is easy to feel that God has abandoned you: this psalm is your shield against those frantic thoughts that tell you that you are bereft of God’s assistance. And it starts with this reassuring promise: *God knows what you are suffering.*

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that God understands your thoughts – even your most anxious, racing ones?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to know that you can say whatever is in your heart and mind to God, since he knows it all before you even speak a word?
- ☞ Acknowledge each of your anxieties to God, naming them one by one. Don’t seek for answers at this time. Simply tell God where you are at, what you are thinking, and how much it hurts.
- ☞ Affirm that God has heard you and knows your every thought and the pain that you are experiencing.
- ☞ Thank God for hearing you, and for knowing you so intimately.

## *Truth from the Word – God Is Always With You*

*“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
Even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me.  
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night,’  
Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day  
Darkness and light are alike to You.”  
Psalm 139:6-12*

God not only sees and understands your racing thoughts – he cares. And because he cares, he is constantly on guard: protecting you, guiding you, watching over you.

When you are struck with anxiety, it is easy to think that you are beyond God’s reach. That God doesn’t know where you are, and perhaps doesn’t care. Or that God has withdrawn himself from you and abandoned you.

The above verses proclaim such thoughts a lie. The truth is that *God is always with you*: if your thoughts are great – he is with you. If your thoughts are terrible – he is by your side. If your racing thoughts take you far and wide – he is watching over you. If you are terrified that you are falling into the blackest darkness – he is guiding you through.

No matter how fast and how far your thoughts race, you cannot race faster or farther than God’s hand, and you are never outside of the love of his heart.

- ☞ What does it mean to you to know that God is all around you, protecting you on every side, even when you cannot “sense” his presence?
- ☞ The psalmist affirms that no matter where he goes, God is with him: leading him, guiding him, and laying hold of him. Think about the worst your thoughts and anxieties have ever been – and then realize that God was there with you at that very moment, leading you through. How does this change your perception of those dark times?
- ☞ Anxiety is suffocating and dark. In these verses, the psalmist affirms that though we cry out in fear that we are drowning in the darkness, our deepest darkness is not dark to God. He sees clearly all the time. What hope does this give you?

## *Truth from the Word – God’s Grace is Sufficient*

*“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

In the throes of anxiety, when your thoughts are racing out of control, it is natural to pray desperately that God would “take this problem away.” We want it gone. Out. Finished. Over.

Sometimes, God grants that prayer in a miraculous fashion. Much more typically, however, he calls us to a longer, harder road: the road of grace. The road where we learn to work through the problem by studying the causes of our anxiety, developing coping skills, seeing specialists, setting up a support group, etc. The road where the problem never really “goes away,” but where we learn to live a full life that includes our weaknesses because *God’s grace is sufficient*.

Now, when we hear that God’s grace is “sufficient,” we may feel that that means we will eke out an existence, struggling every day, having just enough energy to make it through to tomorrow. Not so: “sufficient” means “all we need to live to the fullest the life God has planned for us.” A life that will be characterized by God’s power flowing through us and through our weaknesses as we rely on his grace to meet our every need.

- ☞ Read Psalm 139:13-16 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. How might these passages together affect how you view your anxiety?
- ☞ Affirm to God that you will trust him with your anxiety problem: to resolve your anxieties, help you through them, walk beside you as you struggle with them, comfort you as you suffer with them, or give you victory over them, just as he deems best.
- ☞ Thank God that he works everything for the good in your life as you trust him and seek to do his will (Romans 8:28). Affirm that this includes your struggle with your anxieties. Ask him to redeem your struggle and use it for good: to strengthen your character, help others, and bring glory to his Name.

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

I cannot begin to describe to others  
the spinning blackness of my thoughts.  
The pain as the fire in my mind rages out of control.  
But you, O Lord, already know.

I am comforted by the intimacy of my relationship with you -  
That you enclose me behind and before.  
That you know my anxious thoughts.  
That my darkest imaginings are not dark to you.  
That my farthest flung anxieties are well within the bounds of your care.

I can rest in your power.  
I can rest in your love.  
I can rest in your grace.  
I can rest in your presence.

Help me now to lift my eyes away from myself  
and up to you.

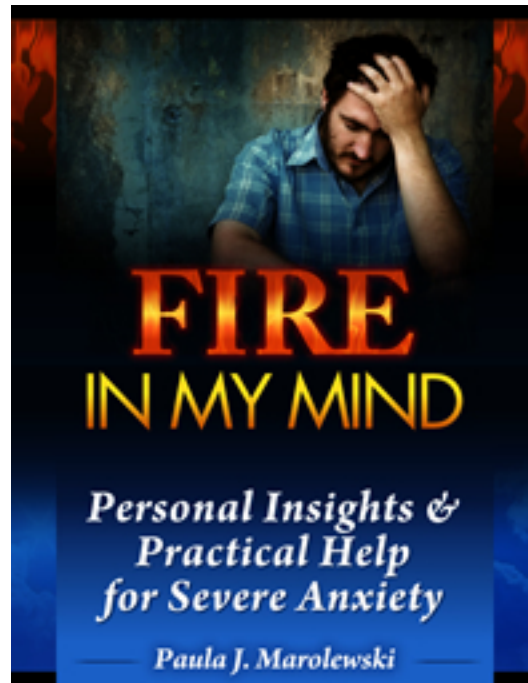
I affirm the splendor of your magnificent creation:  
whether I look at the aurora borealis  
lighting the sky with cosmic brilliance,  
or I cup a ladybug in my palm  
and feel the tickle of her tiny feet.  
In everything, I see your hand at work.  
Your creativity.  
Your care.  
Your control.

You created me, and I worship you.  
You care for me, and I love you.  
You are in control of my life, and I trust you.

In the name of Christ, whose grace is all-sufficient for me,

Amen.

You've just completed the first chapter  
from the book:



To read the full book,  
download ***Fire in My Mind*** now at:  
[http://www.sinkyourroots.com/bs\\_FireInMyMind.html](http://www.sinkyourroots.com/bs_FireInMyMind.html)