JO JOHNSON



Taming your **thoughts** and **feelings** to live **freely** for **Jesus**

"This welcome book blends sound biblical truth and solid psychology to tackle those problems of troublesome emotions and unhelpful thoughts. Clear and practical, this is a book to be read, re-read and acted on."

CANON J.JOHN

Author, broadcaster and evangelist

"Jo's faith, honesty and expertise have come together powerfully in *Disentangled*. She shows us a way to stop avoiding feelings and thoughts in the safety of God's grace and sovereignty, and follows this with practical steps. If you don't know where to start with spiritual formation because your thoughts and feelings seem too scary, then I would highly recommend starting here!"

KRIS DEFRIEND

Retired child and adolescent psychiatrist

"Our personal thoughts and feelings hold more currency today than perhaps at any other time in history. While these internal narratives form an important part of the way God made us, Jo Johnson helpfully and expertly shows us that there is more to this story. She exhorts us to remember the truths of Scripture and of who we are in Christ rather than reverting to quick, automatic conclusions about ourselves and others. This book deftly and carefully brings together the best of what we know of psychological theory with the unchanging truths of God's word—equipping every follower of Jesus with an opportunity to pursue a path of increased consciousness, measure and ultimately Christ-likeness."

CHRIS CIPOLLONE

Founding Director, Life to the Full

Disentangled

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This book is dedicated to my almighty God of grace, peace and compassion.

To Jesus, who saved me when psychology couldn't, and to his Spirit, who changed me from the inside out.

Last and least, to Lyndon Johnson, who continues to show me what my Servant King's heart looks like on a camera.

CONTENTS

Dear Reader	7
Part One: Running the Race	
1. An Inner World	15
2. Humanity's Sweet Spot	27
3. The Grace Race	37
4. Our Code of Conduct	49
Part Two: Thorns That Entangle	
5. Paying Attention	67
6. Subconscious Saboteurs	77
7. Feeling Saboteurs	91
8. Thought Saboteurs	107
9. Racing with Others	123
The Home Straight	139
Acknowledgements	143

DEAR READER...

his morning almost started well. When I opened my eyes, I offered a prayer of gratitude for a new day and a warm house. "At last, I'm learning to be content," I thought. But immediately, my husband ruined it. I had to get up, but he was still asleep and wasn't breathing quietly! I deliberately yanked the duvet as I got up.

"How is this fair?" I seethed.

"All right for you," I grumbled.

Struggling in the dimly lit hall, I tripped over my daughter's bag. "Clear up after yourself!" I ranted inwardly.

Before long, even the cheap kettle had got a rant for its slow boiling.

"Maybe I'd be happier living alone," I thought.

The kitchen clock chimed 6 a.m. The day had barely begun and already a monster was on the loose. I slumped into a heap, feeling utterly despondent. This is not who I want to be. Surely this isn't who I am?

As a clinical neuropsychologist, I'm supposed to be the expert, but despite five decades of life, you can see I remain a deeply flawed, moderately messed-up muddle of a human. Like most of us, I hope others won't see my true nature if I paste on a smile, wear clean clothes and work hard at church. Sadly, that isn't true. In the face of the smallest struggle, the truth is shown by my actions.

But it's not how we want to be, is it? I desperately want to be a supportive wife. I want to be a loving mum, a kind colleague and the most grateful friend. I want to be seen as joyful, sunny and easy to please. I want to be remembered as someone who exemplifies the love of Jesus.

So, why am I grumpy and irritable at the smallest problem? Why do I withdraw when I want to have fun? Why am I mean when I want to be kind?

Why am I such a mess?

Two Kinds of Answer

When I'm asked this question at work, I explain that whether we're aware of it or not, we are frequently controlled by what's going on inside of us. Our negative thoughts and painful feelings act as internal saboteurs, which is why we so often behave like the person we least want to be.

My clinical answer explains what we experience as part of the normal human condition. But the Bible explains why this is the default human condition. We all struggle in much the same way because we've inherited Adam's weak and sinful DNA. By nature, we are unable to be good because we are not good. We are sinners.

Sometimes, of course, we do better. We help out even though we'd rather watch Netflix. We take criticism with humility and respond well when we envy. In these moments, we feel like the rational, spiritual people we were created to be. We experience the sweet spot we've been designed to enjoy.

But our best moments are less frequent than we'd like. So, how do we manage our inner turmoil and enjoy more time in the sweet spot?

Should we lie about our thoughts and feelings?

Should we try harder?

Should we use our tricky thoughts and painful feelings as an excuse to behave badly?

The reality is that there is only one true solution. Jesus lived a perfect life and gave it up for me so that I can be transformed to become like him. I am still a mess, but in Jesus, I am a *holy* mess. One day, I'll leave my mess and enjoy being forever holy.

My job as a clinical psychologist is to help people spend more time in the "sweet spot". I teach them the skills to manage their thoughts, feelings and desires so that their behaviour starts to match up with how they want to be, and they can live the lives they want.

As a Christian, I also know that in order to see the deepest change, we need God to be at work in our lives. We need to be transformed from within. Then our outer behaviour will not just reflect who we want to be but who God wants us to be.

But this transformation we need from God doesn't mean that the skills I teach as a psychologist are not relevant for believers. They are! Even as Christians, we get distracted. We forget what Jesus has done for us, or we stop following in his ways, and consequently we end up burnt out, or withdrawing from people because we can't cope.

The Bible urges us "to put off your old self"—which you might call the messy self—"to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). *Put off* and *put on*. As Christians, we have been given a new self by the work of Jesus—but we still have to put it on every day. And here is where the tools of psychology can help.

A Book for You

I don't know what attracted you to this title; maybe you struggle with your inner mess or someone you love needs help. Maybe you enjoy a calm mind, or maybe, like me, you're an overthinker. Maybe you feel fine, or maybe you feel frazzled. Whatever your reasons or situation, this book is for all of us.

I am a Christian writing for Christians, but if you are a non-believer, please don't go. Within this book, I make theological assumptions that you may not agree with, but I invite you to read on, asking yourself, "Does this match what I observe in the world around me? Could this be true?" In the first line of John's Gospel in the Bible, Jesus is described as the word of God—or in the original Greek, the *logos* of God. This is where we get the word "logic". I'm convinced that Jesus is the logic: with him everything else makes sense. He offers the inner peace we all crave.

I trust you will find something useful in these pages.

How to Use This Book

I have a friend who always reads the last chapter of a book before starting it. As for me, I sometimes read non-fiction like a recipe book. I just read the pages I like the look of. With this book, though, both of those reading strategies will sadly fail you.

Each chapter builds on the previous one, and most chapters will include a reflection theme or a skill to practise. The tools promoted in Part 1 build upon the ideas described in Part 2. Go at your own pace, making sure you've grasped the ideas in each chapter before running to the next.

While I hope this book will help you as an individual, you might enjoy reading it with others. Consider working through it with a prayer partner, in a small group or with a church leader you trust.

PART ONE

RUNNING THE RACE

CHAPTER 1

AN INNER WORLD

You're probably wondering, "Who is this Jo Johnson?" and "Can a psychologist be trusted?" Perhaps you fear this book will be psychobabble with a smattering of Bible verses. I hope you'll soon feel reassured.

Years ago, when I started my psychology degree, a number of Christians expressed concern. They felt it was misguided to study psychology. They felt it was anti-faith. They were concerned I would lose my way, believing that self-help or therapy can resolve my inner mess when only Jesus can do that.

When I started my clinical psychology training, many of my colleagues thought that Christians were stupid, that God was a fairy tale and that psychology could resolve everyone's problems.

Sadly, for years I was scared to talk of psychology in church and scared to talk of Jesus at work! But after 30 years of being a psychologist, I'm more convinced than ever that I can be a Christian psychologist. I've read hundreds of books describing the human disposition, and I can confidently assert that the Bible narrative is the best

explanation of what I've read—and what I see and hear in my clinical practice.

An Inner World

Yesterday, I bumped into a lady who introduced herself as Claire. We were in a bookshop chatting about novels. When she found out I was a psychologist, she opened up, as many people do. She said, "I am an overthinker. I'm needy. I feel anxious a lot. I don't think people like me. I can be really spiteful. Do you think I have mental issues?"

Claire is not alone. Many people feel so overwhelmed by their inner world that they worry they're somehow abnormal. They're wrong. In a given day, the average brain produces 60,000 thoughts, a roller coaster of emotions and a vast array of desires. All of this is a gift from God! Our complex inner life is one of the things that makes us human and differentiates us from all other creatures. But sometimes this can get tricky.

I was able to reassure Claire that she is much the same as me. She is much the same as my friends. She is much the same as most of us.

Or maybe you're not quite like Claire and me. You're not having endless conversations in your head, you're unaware of any painful emotions, and you just get on with things. Let me assure you, everyone has an inner world. Sadly, being less aware of your inner content doesn't reduce your chances of being thrown off course by it.

Pause for a moment.
What can you hear? Where are you?
What are you thinking?

How are you feeling physically? Are you tired, restless, hungry or uncomfortable?

Can you notice any emotions? Maybe you're feeling anxious or sad? Maybe today is a good day, and you are full of joy. Maybe you're irritated, frustrated or fed up.

Right now, are you longing for a coffee and cake, or do you fancy a run?

For now, what you're thinking, feeling or craving doesn't matter very much. But whatever is going on, you're glimpsing your inner world: the non-physical or psychological part of you. Our inner world allows us to taste, see, smell, focus, remember the past, imagine, problem-solve, plan for the future and connect with others. It's amazing!

Our inner worlds are all different. I have fast access to thoughts and words, whereas my husband is a slow, clear thinker who finds it hard to express himself. Some people experience frequent ups and downs, whereas others are mostly on an even keel. Some are prone to stress and anxiety, whereas others are often frustrated and quick-tempered. These are *all* variations of a normal post-Fall disposition.

As part of our physical experience, we have aches and pains, coughs, colds and headaches. Something similar is true of our psychological experience. There will be days when we feel tearful, low or anxious, and other times when we find it hard to concentrate. These are normal psychological aches, pains and sniffles.

As with physical illness, Christians are as vulnerable to mental illness as non-Christians; but most people reading this book will have an inner life that is well within the normal range. Our inner struggles are a part of our shared human experience—they are mostly not symptoms of mental illness.

A Biblical Self-Image

Sadly, many Christians feel the same as Claire—they must be abnormal—but with the added fear that their messy inner lives indicate a lack of salvation. But we should resist this. When writing in the New Testament, Paul felt comfortable revealing his inner struggles and the impact it had on his behaviour. He felt no need to cover up or lie. Here's what he says in Romans 7:15-19:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

Paul expresses what we so often feel. I want to be a good mum, but I shout at my kids. I want to be a loyal friend, but I get irritated and frustrated. I want to be in church, but I long for the protection of home. However, Paul doesn't question his sanity or his salvation. He doesn't fear what others might think or feel the need to pretend that he's perfect. Why? Because the way he sees himself is determined by the Bible.

What we believe about our inner mess is vitally important. The secular view is that we are mostly good but occasionally slip up. The Bible says the opposite! A biblical self-image means knowing that we are made in the image of God and

are thus capable of great good, but that our default is to do wrong. Until we are comfortable with this uncomfortable truth, we won't submit to the Holy Spirit's transforming power. We will keep trying to do better but fail and end up in self-defeating cycles. If even Paul, a Bible writer, couldn't perfect his behaviour, there's not much hope for us!

Having a biblical self-image enabled Paul to be emotionally honest with God and others. If we are unable to be honest about our messy inner lives, we will live in fear of being exposed; we will lie to ourselves and hide from God. Our resulting behaviour will be self-protective, defensive and withdrawn. Or self-promoting, critical and boastful.

Where does that leave us—should we just give up? Absolutely not. If we are followers of Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit as our truthful coach and biblical counsellor. He is always on our side and endlessly willing and patient. He longs for us to reflect God to a world in despair. In order for our actions to be fruitful, we have to submit our inner lives to the Spirit and then learn the skills that will help us relate differently to our unruly internal teenagers.

Parenting Your Inner Self

I sometimes work with teenagers who are behaving badly. Often, these are children who have too much control within their family. They are unruly because they're feeling overwhelmed, tired and anxious. When their exhausted parents learn to relate differently to their child, the behaviour often resolves.

Our thoughts, feelings and desires are similar to children. They are gifts that can bless us. But they create carnage and exhaust us when they are allowed to rule the roost! So, our inner lives need to be effectively parented—listened to but not given too much control.

Imagine you are babysitting a little girl. First you need to notice that she's present. Then you have to pay her careful attention. When she cries or throws a tantrum, you have to stop what you're doing and investigate. Perhaps she's hurt or tired, and you can calm her with an obvious solution. When you realise she's making a big fuss because she desires the bright red chilli in the fridge, you can safely tell her no and get on with something more important.

Thoughts and feelings are just the same: they need to be first noticed, then given attention and then intentionally managed.

Feelings on Camera

This really matters, as what goes on inside of us—our beliefs, our thoughts, our memories, our feelings and our desires—impacts everything we do and how well we do it. Our inner lives determine how we show up in a given moment and whether we'll behave as we'd like or not.

Have a read of the scenarios on the next page. They are all based on stories people have shared with me.

It's not even big things that trigger our inner struggles, is it? All through each day, we experience thoughts which trigger feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, jealousy or rejection, which in turn trigger difficult thoughts and feelings about God, ourselves and others. And this in turn

Disentangled

	Situation	Thoughts
Simon	A helper at church has reordered the chairs.	Who does he think he is? I'm the only one who can do this right.
Leon	His moody teen has a tantrum.	What's the point? I need me time! I've failed as a dad!
Emily	Her husband asks her for help.	How dare he? What about me?
Tim	He watches the collection bag circulate.	Why should I give? He's rich—he should put in more!
Kelly	The preacher says we should practise hospitality.	But I'm busy. It's my life, and the football is on. I deserve a rest.
Aidan	Traffic is slow.	That old man is driving slowly on purpose. What an idiot! Everything goes wrong for me.
Sofia	She sits on her own at church.	I'm left out. No one likes me. I might as well go home.

leads to actions that are unhelpful or even sinful. You can see that if not well parented, our thoughts and feelings have great potential to lead us into trouble. I sometimes ask people what they might see if their behaviour was being recorded on CCTV. What do your thoughts and feelings look like on a camera? In other words, what actions do they lead to?

If you observed me on a camera, you'd notice that when I'm tired, anxious or bored, I reach for chocolate. When I feel insecure or left out, I withdraw to my iPad. When my body feels restless and anxious, I talk too much or berate my husband. When I feel a failure, I am quiet.

Think about the scenarios above—what do they look like on camera? Aidan is winding himself up into an angry frenzy. Emily is getting irritable. Sofia will go home and miss out on fellowship at church. How might Leon or Simon feel if they believe their thoughts, and how will they respond? What about Tim—will he give generously? Will Kelly obey the biblical command to be hospitable?

Our thoughts and feelings are inside, but they show on the outside. Sometimes the way they show is simply unhelpful to us (like being quiet and withdrawn when it would be better for me to engage with people). Sometimes it's sinful (like berating my husband when he doesn't deserve it). Unhelpful or sinful behaviours are symptoms of an inner life that needs work—thoughts and feelings that need to be parented. This is why, ultimately, a change of behaviour is not what's needed. It's a change of heart.

In Matthew 15, as usual, Jesus' critics are resentful, bitter and desperate for power. Their inner lives show in their camera behaviour: they are complaining. They are judging the disciples for breaking religious rules about cleanliness and food (v 1-2).

Jesus declares that our problem isn't what goes *into* the mouth but what comes *out* of it (v 11)!

The disciples ask him to explain. I love his response.

"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them ... "The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (v 16, 18-19)

Jesus is saying that sin starts inside.

Change is Possible

So often, our inner lives lead us into unhappiness and away from right living. This process is so automatic that we are often unaware that our inner lives are the strings and we are the helpless puppets! But this doesn't *have* to happen. We *can* parent our inner lives better than this.

As Paul writes about the frustration of not doing the good he wants to do, he finishes with a cry for help: "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:24). It sounds hopeless. But immediately Paul reveals that he does have a saviour—someone who is helping him to live in the way he wants to live.

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (v 25)

Just like Paul, those of us who trust in Christ have been gifted the Holy Spirit: God's presence living in us. The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6). Because of what Jesus has achieved, we *can*

live in a way that is pleasing to God! It's the Spirit's job to transform our inner lives—we just have to be willing to partner with him.

The psychological ideas I use to help people manage their unruly thoughts, feelings and desires are from a model of therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT is a good abbreviation, as this therapy is about taking action. ACT gives people the tools to move towards their values (the commitment component) by noticing and relating differently to their thoughts, feelings and desires (the acceptance component).

I started using ACT-informed tools over a decade ago. The tools made me aware of unhelpful thoughts and feelings, so that I wasn't puppeted into sinful behaviours. I have since shared these tools with many Christians who have enjoyed the same benefit.

Does this mean my own inner life exemplifies perfection? Does this mean all my thoughts are positive and what I feel is righteous and proportionate? Does this mean I always behave in a God-honouring way? Definitely not! I have a long-standing struggle with anxiety and jealousy, and a tendency towards self-doubt. I struggle in groups, am over-sensitive when criticised, feel vulnerable to rejection and am more self-righteous than a Pharisee.

I write this book not as an expert but as a messy disciple who longs to be more like Jesus.

It's him we're going to think about in our next chapter.

Time to Reflect

At the end of each chapter, this book will invite you to pause.

Each morning, most of us look in the mirror. We look intently to ensure we haven't got toast in our hair or egg on our face. If we took only a brief glimpse, we'd be in danger of looking foolish—going out as if we had a clean face when we didn't.

The Bible is intended to be a soul mirror.

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. (James 1:23)

We are not supposed to skim-read a few verses, forget what we've read and consequently remain unchanged. The word of God is intended to produce heart change that shows in our actions.

So, at the end of each chapter, I'll offer a biblical truth to embed in your mind. A challenge for your heart.

I'll also recommend a song to sing. While it might at first seem strange, singing aloud has many benefits, especially when it's intended as an act of worship. Singing regulates our breathing, thus calming bodily anxiety, and is an easy way to memorise biblical truth, making it accessible in times of trouble. Even if, like me, your singing talent is minimal, you can still make a joyful noise to the Lord!

So, here goes your first pause for a look in God's mirror.

Pause for a Look in God's Mirror

First, still yourself before God. Take notice of a few breaths. Listen to what you can hear. Notice what you can smell and see.

Prayerfully read Psalm 139. Praise God for the inner life you've been gifted.

Reflect on the last few weeks. Remember a few highlights, with a grateful heart for the ways in which your inner life enables you to enjoy God, life and relationships.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

(Psalm 139:14)

God knows you better than you know yourself and yet loves and accepts you. He doesn't want you to hide anything from him. He knows it all anyway!

Thank God that because he knows you inside and out, you can be honest. Tell God any thoughts and feelings you've had about yourself while reading this chapter.

Invite the Spirit to give you the courage to be honest about your inner struggles and the resulting behaviours. Being emotionally honest with God will help you to be honest with yourself and others. Emotional honesty is the first step to a transformed inner life that produces fruitful behaviour.

Song to sing: *Lead Us in Your Truth* by EMU Music

Use the QR code to find a playlist of all the songs mentioned in the book, plus a discussion guide for every chapter.

