

# GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD



Stopping  
the Spiral  
of Toxic  
Thoughts

## JENNIE ALLEN

Best-Selling Author of *Nothing to Prove*

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**Praise for**  
***Get Out of Your Head***

“This is a must-have resource for anyone looking to get control of thoughts that sometimes spin out of control. *Get Out of Your Head* is the book we all need to help us do this. It’s so easy to park our minds in bad spots—to dwell on and rehash and wish things were different. But to obsess over hard things only deepens our emotional emptiness. I love how Jennie helps us see how unhealthy thoughts can be overcome by our faith, starting right now.”

—LYSA TER KEURST , #1 *New York Times* best-selling author and president  
of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“I know from personal experience just how easily our thoughts try to hijack our faith and throw us into a negative spiral. *Get Out of Your Head* will equip you with practical biblical tools to take control of your thoughts so they don’t control you.”

—CHRISTINE CAINE , best-selling author and founder of A21 and Propel  
Women

“My wife, Heather, and I both read this book and were deeply helped by it. *Get Out of Your Head* is packed full of truth and insight from God’s Word, personal vulnerability and honesty from Jennie, and practical wisdom and encouragement for all of us. I pray and believe that God will use it to guard your heart and mind in Christ.”

—DAVID PLATT , pastor of McLean Bible Church and best-selling author of  
*Something Needs to Change*

“Sometimes the only barrier to our personal and spiritual growth is our thinking. Jennie Allen’s new book gives us all hope and shows us how to deal with the negative thoughts that stifle and paralyze us. We need to be reminded daily of how to take every thought captive and surrender to the only One who can free us. This book is a beautiful reminder that God is at work in all the messiness of our minds. God beckons us to get out of our heads and practice daily presence and rest with Him.”

—LATASHA MORRISON , author and founder of Be the Bridge

“The battle between your ears determines how you win at life. And I can testify, because of how she’s personally fought for me and generations of women around the globe, there is no better faith fighter, Word warrior, and soul defender than Jennie Allen, who makes herself your personal trainer in these practical, transformational pages, alight with holy fire. She shows you how to take down anxiety, take back the mental high ground, and take more territory for the kingdom. Get out your highlighter, and get ready to gain the victory. You are about to get out of your head and get to where your heart has always hoped to be.”

—ANN VOSKAMP , *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

“You know those books you buy twenty copies of and then forcefully give to everyone you know? Yeah, this is one of those books. Hands down. Powerful. Prophetic. Necessary.”

—JEFFERSON BETHKE , *New York Times* best-selling author of *Jesus > Religion*

“Someone might read the title of Jennie Allen’s latest book—*Get Out of Your Head: Stopping the Spiral of Toxic Thoughts*—and casually assume that it’s sort of a pop-psychology ‘just think positive thoughts and you’ll be fine’ kind of book. If so, they’d be making a wrong assumption. This

substantive and probing book faithfully engages the reader with truths about the Bible, theology, science, spiritual disciplines, mental health, and, ultimately, about following Jesus. With honesty and vulnerability in sharing her own confessions and struggles, Jennie has written a book that I truly believe will challenge, bless, and empower all those who read it.”

—REV. EUGENE CHO, founder of One Day’s Wages and author of *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk*

“Jennie Allen speaks so powerfully to this generation and teaches us so simply how to not allow our limitations to be our loudest story. Jesus > us. His desire is that we get out of our heads and live profound lives of freedom for His glory.”

—SHELLEY GIGLIO, cofounder of Passion Conferences and Passion City Church

“I’m so glad Jennie tackles a difficult topic that so many of us face. Renewing our mind is essential for a life of flourishing with God. These pages hold clear action items to help you get out of your head and on to the journey of walking free.”

—REBEKAH LYONS, author *Rhythms of Renewal*

“What a timely message! In *Get Out of Your Head*, my friend and mentor Jennie Allen does a beautiful job of taking your hand, leading you to those places in your mind that need healing, and allowing space for Jesus to break chains. I recommend this book to everyone—especially our generation!”

—SADIE ROBERTSON, *New York Times* best-selling author, speaker, and founder of Live Original

“Jennie Allen has been a trusted voice in my life for years. She is wise and kind and loves Jesus with a contagious passion rarely found. She’s also fearsome in the way she loves people and engages difficult issues. You’re going to find a boatload of love and truth in these pages. This book won’t just change the way you think; it will alter the way you live.”

—BOB GOFF , *New York Times* best-selling author of *Love Does* and *Everybody, Always*





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Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

–ROMANS 12:2

**This means it's possible.**

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Part One

# **ALL THE THOUGHTS**



# Thinking About Thinking

“**T**ake every thought captive.” They say authors write books for two reasons: either the author is an expert on the subject, or the subject makes the author desperate enough to spend years finding the answers. The latter most definitely describes me.

This morning I woke up intending to write to you. *But first*, I thought, *I need to spend time with God*. So what did I do? I picked up my phone. I noticed an email about something I was working on, in which the sender was “constructively” critical of my work. Just as I decided to set my phone down, something else stole my attention...and the next thing I knew, I was on Instagram, noticing others’ wins and glories contrasted with my work in process that seemed to not be measuring up. In minutes with my phone, I decided that I was an inadequate writer, I was spending my life chasing things that mean nothing because I am nothing, I have nothing to say. I was spiraling fast into discouragement.

Then my husband, Zac, came in happy, having just met with God, and I snapped at him. My spiral began to spin faster and more chaotically. In less than an hour, I had diminished myself, criticized all my work, decided to quit ministry, ignored God, and pushed away my greatest advocate and friend.

*Wow. Brilliant, Jennie. And that was only this morning? And now you want to try to help me with my chaotic thoughts?*

Well, I hear you. And I imagine all my life I will be in process with this. But because of the discoveries I get to share with you here, instead of my spiral stealing a day, a week, a few years...just an hour into it, there was a shift in my thinking.

I did not stay paralyzed. I am free and joyful and writing to you.

I want you to know that you do not have to stay stuck either. God built a way for us to escape the downward spiral. But we rarely take it. We have bought the lie that we are victims of our thoughts rather than warriors equipped to fight on the front lines of the greatest battle of our generation: the battle for our minds.

The apostle Paul understood the war that takes place in our thoughts, how our circumstances and imaginations can become weapons that undermine our faith and hope. The Bible records his bold declaration that we are to “take every thought captive to obey Christ.” <sup>1</sup>

Take every thought captive? Is that possible? Have you ever tried?

Once, a bird flew into our tiny house and wouldn't fly out. It took more than an hour for our whole family working together to catch that silly little sparrow. Shooting the bird with a BB gun? Easy. But capturing the wild sparrow flailing through our house was an altogether different task, a nearly impossible one.

How much more impossible to capture a wild thought on the fly? Yet the book I build my life on is telling me to capture *all my thoughts, every one of them* ?

Is God serious?

Is this even possible? Because honestly my thoughts run wilder than that hyperactive sparrow.

And yours do too. I see the same wild chaos in your eyes and those of nearly every woman I meet. Like the young woman in so much pain who sat across from me this week, drowning in anxiety she has been fighting for two years. She looked at me, pleading, “Help. Tell me what to do!”

“I don't want to live anxious,” she said. “I'm in counseling. I'm in Bible study. I'm willing to take medicine. I want to trust God. Why can't I change? Why do I feel so stuck in this?”

Goodness, I relate and have fought the same thing.

It's incredible, if you think about it: How can something we can't see control so much of who we are, determine what we feel and what we do and what we say or don't, dictate how we move or sleep, and inform what we want, what we hate, and what we love?

How can the thing that houses all those thoughts—just a bunch of folded tissue—contain so much of what makes us who we are?

Learning to capture our thoughts matters. **Because how we think shapes how we live.** <sup>2</sup>

## THE PATTERNS THAT KEEP US STUCK

The subject of neuroscience has captivated me for years now, ever since one of my brilliant daughters began educating me on the science of the brain. When Kate, now a junior in high school, was in the seventh grade, she came home from school one afternoon and announced to the rest of us—her two brothers, her sister, my husband, Zac, and me—that she was going to cure Alzheimer's disease someday.

We smiled, but years later she still is reading books and articles on the subject, listening to every TED Talk on the brain, sharing research with me. Things like...

Did you know that more has been discovered about our minds in the last twenty years than in all the time before that?

Did you know that an estimated 60 to 80 percent of visits to primary care physicians have a stress-related component? <sup>3</sup>

Did you know that research shows that “75 to 98 percent of mental, physical, and behavioral illness comes from one's thought life”? <sup>4</sup>

Did you know that, with what we know about the brain today, when Scripture is talking about the heart, it really could be talking about the mind and the emotions we experience in our brains?

Well, no, Kate, I did not. But that's very interesting.  
The truth is, it *is* very interesting to me.

Somewhere along the way, Kate's fascination became mine too. Because she taught me that what she is learning in science is also scattered throughout my Bible and many of the truths in the Bible concerning our thought lives have been backed up by science. This all became increasingly important to me as I became gripped by the idea that taking control of our minds could be the key to finding peace in the other parts of our lives.

For several years I'd been in deep running IF:Gathering, the organization I believe God prompted me to start to disciple women and equip them to go disciple others. I loved our community, our gatherings, and the impact we seemed to be having, but over time I noticed a troubling trend among the women I loved and served every day.

Women would feel conviction at an event or as they worked through our discipleship resources, and they would surrender their lives more fully to Jesus. They would soar on the wings of that resolve for a week, a month, sometimes a year or even two. But inevitably at some point they'd slip back into old habits, old patterns of doing life. Maybe you know exactly what I mean.

Maybe right now you're thinking of that toxic relationship you finally got out of but then, in a weak moment, resumed.

Or you finally found peace about a less-than-desirable season of your life—but now your emotions have spiraled downward again, and all you do is complain.

Or you were convicted about your porn habit and stopped, only to slip back into the habit weeks later.

Or you recognized a pattern of being critical of your spouse, surrendered it, and truly started to change...just before you circled back to where you began.

*Why, I wondered, don't the changes so many women desperately want to make stick over the long haul?*

And why did I still struggle with some of the same fears, negative patterns, and other sins that I had been fighting for years?

Even as I observed this boomerang effect at a broad level, I was also in relationship with dear friends, women I knew well, who seemed to battle

the same issues year after year. Each time we'd get together, I'd hear the same song, five hundredth verse.

What prevented them from thriving? Why couldn't they get unstuck? Kate's discoveries as she continued to study the brain suggested one strong possibility:

It's all in our heads.

## BREAKING THE SPIRAL

There is much we don't know about the brain. But what's also true, like Kate says: we've learned more about the brain in the past twenty years than we knew for the previous two thousand. We once thought of the mind as an immutable thing. The brain you were born with and the way it worked—or didn't—was just “how it was”; no sense fretting over what can't be changed. We now know that **the brain is constantly changing, whether or not we intend for it to.**

In hopes of discovering how women can break free from our problematic patterns, I started picking up heady books about the mind and about neuroscience and about how real change occurs. I watched TED Talks that Kate pointed me toward about our brain's plasticity.

I listened to brainy podcasts.

I watched brainy documentaries.

I talked to brainy people.

I began to see a pattern at work in many of us. Our emotions were leading us to thoughts, and those thoughts were dictating our decisions, and our decisions were determining behaviors, and then the behaviors were shaping our relationships, all of which would take us back to either healthy or unhealthy thoughts.

Round and round and round we go, spinning down, seemingly out of control, our lives becoming defined by this endless cycle.

Depressing.

Unless. Unless there is a way to interrupt it.

How many of us are spending all our energy in conversations and counseling and prayer, trying to shift the most visceral thing about us—our emotions—yet having no success?

If you feel sad and I tell you to quit feeling sad, has any progress been made?

What if, instead of spending our energy trying to fix the symptoms, we went to the root of the problem, deeper even than the emotions that seem to kick off our cycles? The reality is that our emotions are a by-product of something else.

Our emotions are a by-product of the way we think.

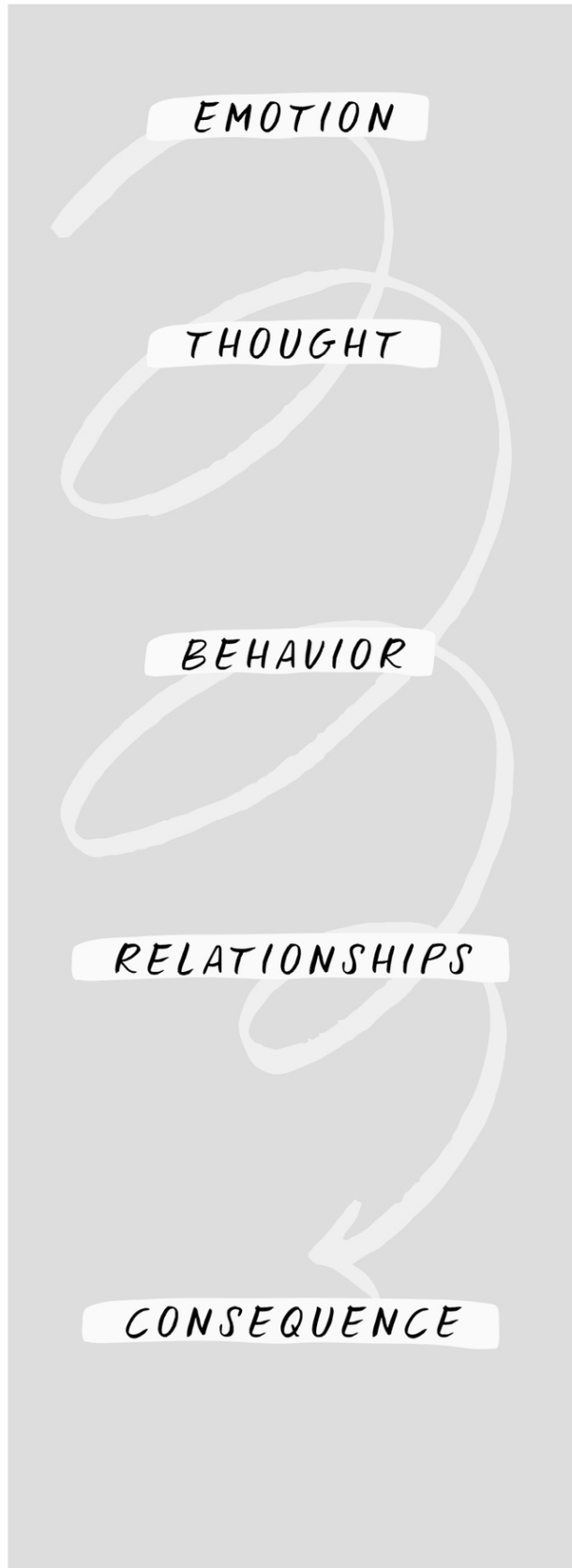
EMOTION

THOUGHT

BEHAVIOR

RELATIONSHIPS

CONSEQUENCE



What's good about this news is that we can change our thinking. The Bible tells us so. "Do not be conformed to this world," one verse says, "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." <sup>5</sup>

My deep dive into the inner workings of the brain confirmed what the Bible says: we can take every thought captive. Not only can our thoughts be changed, but we can be the ones to change them.

The problem is, we get on this spiraling train, often unaware of where our thoughts could eventually lead. The well-known Puritan theologian John Owen said that the enemy's goal in every sin is death. His actual words were "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." <sup>6</sup>It's time for us to fight.

The average person has more than thirty thousand thoughts per day. Of those, so many are negative that "according to researchers, the vast majority of the illnesses that plague us today are a direct result of a toxic thought life." <sup>7</sup>

The spiral is real and stuffed with more thoughts than it seems we can manage.

But what if, instead of trying to take every thought captive, we took just one thought captive?

What if I told you that one beautiful, powerful thought could shift this chaotic spiral of your life for the better...every time you thought it? What if you could grab hold of one truth that would quiet the flurry of untruths that has left you feeling powerless over your brain?

One thought to think. Could you do that?

Such a thought exists. More on that later.

I understand that despite the straightforward nature of my ask—that you take hold of one truth to focus your mind—fulfilling it is no small thing. Why? Because a full-fledged assault is taking place in those folds of tissue that make you who you are. **The greatest spiritual battle of our generation is being fought between our ears.**

What we believe and what we think about matters, and the enemy knows it. And he is determined to get in your head to distract you from doing good and to sink you so deep that you feel helpless, overwhelmed, shut down, and incapable of rising to make a difference for the kingdom of God.

Even if you're one of those who won't be shut down and you are loving God and people as you go, a million toxic thoughts haunt you each step of



the way.

Whether you find yourself shut down or just haunted by nagging discontent, here is my declaration on behalf of both you and me:

No more.

And I say “on behalf of both you and me” for a reason. The great irony is that while I thought God was directing me to all this great, groundbreaking information—how my friends could heal their lives by healing their brains and by thinking more thoughtfully about their thoughts—so that I could help everyone else, what I couldn’t possibly have known at the time was that I was about to need this healing myself.