

## Personal Meaning

The chapters of this book up to this point have considered the physical, emotional, behavioral, and mental aspects of anxiety disorders. Guidelines have been offered for dealing with these various levels of the problem. On a bodily level, anxiety, panic, and phobias can be helped through abdominal breathing, relaxation, exercise, and/or medication. Emotionally, learning to identify and express feelings can relieve the tension that lies behind anxiety. Behaviorally, exposure can overcome phobic avoidance. On a mental level, replacing fearful self-talk and beliefs with realistic thoughts and assumptions can help reduce anxiety in all of its diverse forms.

For many people, the wide range of approaches presented up to this point will be enough to ensure recovery. Making a commitment to follow through with the program outlined in this book, whether on your own or with a therapist, will help you to take back your life from anxiety. You may require a bit more, however. All the techniques described so far can help a great deal, yet for certain people they aren't quite enough. An underlying level of anxiety remains—an anxiety that comes from not having answered basic questions about the meaning and purpose of your life.

Existential psychologists such as Rollo May have used the term "existential anxiety" to refer to the type of anxiety that arises from having been unable to reach your full potential in life. This is a vague sense of tension, boredom, perhaps even "quiet desperation" that arises from feeling held back, for one reason or another, from being all that you can be. You live with a feeling of incompleteness—a sense that something vital is missing—although you may not consciously recognize what it is. If someone were to ask you, "Where is your life going?" or "What do you think your life is about?" you would tend to have trouble answering. Or you might think of things that, on further reflection, don't seem "quite enough" to make your life as meaningful as you would like it to be.

For some people, a lack of purpose or meaning in life can provide fertile ground for the development of panic attacks and phobias. Although panic may be caused by a number of factors, it sometimes reflects a sudden revelation (and desperation) that your life has no obvious direction. Similarly, the fear of being trapped or confined, or "unable to escape," that underlies so many phobias *may* reflect a deeper fear of being trapped by your current circumstances in life, whether involving a dead-end career, a relationship, or any other situation that feels confining yet would require substantial risks to move out of. Phobic avoidance, in turn, *may* reflect a deeper avoidance of the very risks that are necessary to realize your full potential and life purpose. It has been my experience with a number of clients that their

anxiety disorders (it doesn't seem to matter which particular type) did not fully resolve until they found something that could give their life a greater sense of meaning *and* they took the necessary risks to embrace it. In one case, this involved a career change, and in still another it meant cultivating a creative talent with music.

The purpose of this chapter is to give you the opportunity to reflect on the question of your life's meaning, as well as to explore whether spirituality might provide at least one direction in which to find answers. Spirituality is a universal concept. It refers not to any particular religion but to a basic sense of there being a larger purpose to life, as well as a larger power—a "Higher Power," if you will—that transcends the human order of things. Not only may spirituality provide life with greater meaning, but it can help overcome anxiety directly because it leads to qualities such as inner peace, serenity, faith, and unconditional love.

If you feel that meaning and spirituality are important, you may want to take a look at my book *Beyond Anxiety & Phobia: A New Spectrum of Holistic Approaches to Long-Term Recovery*, which explores these topics in considerably more depth. In fact, this book presents a wide range of approaches intended to go beyond what is presented in *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook*. It was written as a supplement or companion to the workbook. See the "Further Reading" section of this chapter.

## Finding Your Unique Purpose

Each of us has one or more special purposes to fulfill that can give our life a sense of completeness. Those people who fully realize their special purpose often say, by the time they reach their senior years, that they feel satisfied with their life—that they did as much as they could to accomplish what they set out to do. Common examples of life purposes might include raising a family, succeeding in a fulfilling career, making a contribution to your community, developing and expressing an artistic talent, completing an educational goal and using what you've learned to serve others, overcoming an addiction or the problems of a dysfunctional childhood, and conveying what you've learned to others. Life purposes appear to have a twofold function: 1) allowing you to feel more complete and whole, and 2) allowing you in some way to serve or contribute to the betterment of others. Realizing what truly gives your life meaning and purpose is likely to carry you beyond your own personal needs and to have a beneficial impact on someone else—whether that someone is a child, the people you work for, your community, or anyone to whom you convey what you've learned from your experience. In discovering your true purpose and potential, you move beyond immediate concerns for personal security and satisfaction toward making a meaningful contribution.

If you currently feel out of touch with your life purpose, how do you go about discovering what it is? The questionnaire that follows is designed to stimulate your thinking in ways that can help you to formulate your own unique goals. Your answers to the questions may give you some insights into what it is that is most important for you to do with your life. Give yourself at least one full day to reflect on these questions and write out your answers. You may even want to ponder these questions for a week or a month. After you've arrived at the answers for yourself, practice visualizing what your life would look like if you were truly

fulfilling your special purpose. Then you might share your answers to these questions with a close personal friend or counselor and get that person's input and feedback. If realizing your purpose involves making a career change, it might be helpful to work with a career counselor. If it involves going back to school, you'll want to talk to an academic guidance counselor at the school you're considering.

### *Personal Values Inventory*

1. Does the work you're presently doing express what you truly want to be doing? If not, how can you begin to take steps toward discovering and doing work that would be more personally fulfilling?
2. Are you satisfied with the education you've obtained? Would you like to go back to school and increase your education and training? If so, how can you begin to move in that direction?
3. Do you have creative outlets? Are there any areas of your life where you feel you can be creative? If not, what creative activities could you develop?
4. Have you developed your spiritual life? Is doing so something you would like to explore further?
5. What would you like to do with your life if you could do what you truly wanted? (Assume, for the purpose of this question, that money and the responsibilities of your current job and family are not a limitation.)
6. What would you like to accomplish with your life? What would you like to have accomplished by the time you reach seventy in order to feel that your life has been productive and meaningful?
7. What are your most important values? What values give your life the greatest meaning? Some examples of values include

Happy family life	Material success
Intimacy	Career achievement
Friendship	Creative expression
Good health	Personal growth
Peace of mind	Spiritual awareness
Serving others	Dedication to a social cause

8. Is there anything that you deeply value and yet feel you haven't fully experienced or realized in your life? What changes do you need to make—or what risks do you need to take—to more fully realize your most important values?

9. Do you have any special talents or skills that you haven't fully developed or expressed? What changes do you need to make—or what risks do you need to take—in order to develop and express your special talents and skills?
10. In the light of the above questions, your most important life purposes would include (list):
11. What obstacles exist to pursuing and realizing your life purposes?
12. What are you willing to *commit* to doing in the next month, year, and three years to eliminate the obstacles in question 11 and move toward realizing your special purposes?

One month:

One year:

Three years:

### *Life Purpose Visualization*

Write a scenario on a separate sheet of paper of what your life would look like if you were to fully realize your unique life purposes. You can design separate visualizations for each purpose or incorporate the realization of all of your life purposes into a single description. Be sure to make your scenario sufficiently detailed to include where you're living and working, whom you are with, what activities make up your day, and what a typical day

would look like. Once you've completed a detailed description, record it, preferably in your own voice. You may want to record it after a few minutes of preliminary instructions to relax. Visualizing the fulfillment of your life purpose on a regular, consistent basis will go a long way toward accelerating the process of actually realizing your goal.

## Spirituality

This section on spirituality is included because many clients of mine have achieved breakthroughs in their condition as the result of developing their spiritual life. If this section speaks to you, then it may serve to motivate you to cultivate your spirituality. If you already have a deep spiritual commitment, what follows may simply reinforce what you know rather than teach you anything new. Conversely, if this section seems repellent or inapplicable, you need not feel compelled to read it or incorporate it into your recovery program. You can entirely overcome your particular problem with anxiety by relying on the strategies and guidelines presented in previous chapters of this workbook.

Spirituality involves the recognition and acceptance of a Higher Power beyond your own intelligence and will, with whom you can have a relationship. This Higher Power can provide you with an experience of inspiration, joy, security, peace of mind, and guidance that goes beyond what is possible in the absence of the conviction that such a power exists.

For our purposes here, spirituality can be seen as being distinct from religion. Different world religions have proposed various doctrines and belief systems about the nature of a Higher Power and humanity's relationship with it. Spirituality, on the other hand, refers to the *common experience* behind these various points of view—an experience involving an awareness of and relationship with something that transcends your personal self as well as the human order of things. This "something" has been given various names ("God" being the most popular in Western society) and defined in ways that are too numerous to count. For the purposes of this chapter, it can be referred to as a (or "your") *Higher Power*. You can choose to define what that means for yourself in whatever way feels most appropriate. Your own sense of a Higher Power can be as abstract as "cosmic consciousness" or as down-to-earth as the beauty of the ocean or mountains. It can be quite personal, as in the case of Jesus or Krishna. Even if you regard yourself as an agnostic or atheist, you may get a sense of inspiration from taking a walk in the forest or contemplating a beautiful sunset. Or a small child's smile may give you a special sense of joy. Whatever inspires you and takes you beyond yourself into a larger perspective points in the direction of what is referred to here as your Higher Power.

The purpose of this section is to emphasize that there is much healing and benefit to be obtained by cultivating your spiritual life (if that is something you feel drawn to or that feels right for you). Of all the methods and guidelines suggested in this workbook, a personal spiritual commitment is likely to reach the deepest in helping you to overcome the basic sense of fear or insecurity that underlies the various types of anxiety disorders. Whereas other methods described in previous chapters work at different levels—body, feelings, mind, or behavior—spiritual awareness and growth can effect a transformation in your whole being. It can help you to develop a basic trust and faith that is unshakable. Of course, the other

methods described in previous chapters are still important and necessary. Please keep in mind that the ideas and exercises presented in this chapter are not a substitute for working with all of the other strategies and skills in this book.

A number of my clients have experienced major turnarounds in their condition as a result of cultivating their spirituality. Developing a relationship with their Higher Power did not necessarily cure a specific phobia or obsession, but it provided the moral support, courage, hope, and faith for them to follow through with their personal recovery program. It provided them with a sense that they are not alone in the universe and that there is a source of guidance and support that is available at times of confusion and discouragement.

What are some of the specific benefits to be gained by developing your spirituality? Before enumerating several of these, it is important to understand that no one pursues spiritual growth in order to "get" such benefits. You will develop yourself spiritually only because you feel a deep, inner prompting to do so. The benefits are simply a consequence that follows from choosing to cultivate a relationship with your Higher Power. If you have already developed your spiritual life, you will understand the benefits listed below.

### *Security and Safety*

A sense of inner security and safety is especially important if you frequently deal with anxiety, worries, panic attacks, or phobias. Through developing a connection with your Higher Power, you gain security through the conviction that you are not all alone in the universe, even at those times when you feel temporarily separated from other people. You feel increasingly safe as you come to believe that there is a source you can always turn to in times of difficulty. There is much security to be gained through the understanding that there is no problem or difficulty, however great, that cannot be resolved through the help of your Higher Power.

### *Peace of Mind*

Peace of mind is the result of feeling a deep, abiding sense of security and safety. The more reliance and trust you develop in your Higher Power, the easier it becomes to deal without fear or worry with the inevitable challenges life brings. It is not that you give up your self or your will to such a power; rather you simply learn that you can "let go" and turn to your Higher Power when you feel stuck with a problem in living and don't know how to proceed. Learning how to let go when solutions to problems aren't immediately apparent can go a long way toward reducing worry and anxiety in your life. Peace of mind is what develops in the absence of such anxiety.

### *Self-Confidence*

As you develop a relationship with your Higher Power, you come to remember that you did not create yourself. You are reminded that you are a part of the universe of creation,

as much so as the birds, stars, and trees. If this is a benign and supportive universe we live in—and developing a relationship with your Higher Power will help you to believe that it is—then in essence you're good, lovable, and worthy of respect just by virtue of the fact that you're here. However you behave—whatever choices you make—you are still inherently good and worthwhile. Your own judgments of yourself, however negative, do not ultimately count if you are a creation of the universe like everything else. As one person humorously put it, "God doesn't make junk." (It is, of course, a mistake to assume that this type of reasoning can be used to justify ignorant or unethical behavior. It's important to keep in mind the distinction between how a person behaves and what a person is in essence.)

### *The Capacity to Give and Receive Unconditional Love*

The most fundamental characteristic of your Higher Power is that it offers you an experience of unconditional love. This is a kind of love that differs from romantic love or even ordinary friendship. It entails an absolute caring for the welfare of another, without any conditions. That is, no matter how another person appears or acts, you have compassion and care for him or her without judgment. As you develop a deeper connection with your Higher Power, you come to experience greater degrees of unconditional love in your life. You feel your heart opening more easily to people and their concerns. You feel freer of judgment toward them or of making comparisons among them. Unconditional love shows up in your increased capacity both to give love to others and to experience more of it coming into your life. You begin to experience less fear and more joy in your life and help to inspire others to experience their own capacity for unconditional love. This kind of love also manifests itself through the experience of having everything you need in your life to get on with what you want to do. This is spoken of in the Bible by the saying "Seek ye first the Kingdom, and all will be added unto you."

### *Guidance*

Developing a relationship with your Higher Power will provide you with guidance for making decisions and solving problems. Your Higher Power has a universal wisdom that goes beyond what you can accomplish through your own intellect. In traditional religions, this has been referred to as the "all-knowingness of God" or "divine intelligence." Through connecting with your Higher Power, you can draw upon this greater wisdom to help you resolve all kinds of difficulties. You have probably already experienced this aspect of your Higher Power at moments when you've felt a deep conviction about something or have had an intuitive flash that turns out to be quite accurate. By learning to ask your Higher Power for guidance, you'll be surprised to find that every sincere request sooner or later is answered. And the quality of that answer generally exceeds what you could have figured out through your own conscious intellect or will.

These are some—by no means all—of the characteristics that define a close relationship with your Higher Power. All of them can contribute in a significant way to your personal

recovery process. Keep in mind that there are many different paths you can take in coming into a greater awareness of your Higher Power. The particular path you choose, whether traditional or nontraditional, is up to you. The extent and sincerity of your commitment to your chosen path will determine the degree of personal healing you experience.

## Changes in Beliefs Associated with Spirituality

Developing spiritually not only leads to new experiences and changes in the way you feel, it also can lead to a shift in your basic beliefs and assumptions about life and the world. As you develop spiritually, many of your beliefs about the meaning of life in general, and what your life is about specifically, can shift dramatically. And as these basic beliefs change, your view of your condition—your personal struggle with anxiety—also begins to change.

These shifts in beliefs can lead to having more compassion and tolerance toward yourself, as well as to finding a deeper meaning in the challenges you face, instead of viewing them as arbitrary and meaningless. You may feel less like a victim who has a particular problem with anxiety. Instead, you may come to regard your condition as an *opportunity* to grow and expand who you are.

What follows is a list of ten assumptions that are frequently associated with spirituality. They are not taken from any one source, tradition, or creed, but are based on my personal experience. Although they represent my own personal point of view, these ideas have been useful points of departure for discussion with a number of my clients. As you read through the ideas, give consideration to those that fit or make sense to you and feel free to discard those that do not. Each of us has a basic philosophy about life that we have to formulate on our own.

Some of these ideas may stimulate questions that you may want to discuss with a significant other, a trusted friend, or even a minister, priest, or rabbi. All of the ideas can lead to a more optimistic and tolerant view of life. As you adopt any of these ideas that fit for you, you may find your attitude about your condition—as well as life in general—becoming a little more positive and a little less burdensome.

### **1. Life is a school. The primary meaning and purpose of life is that it is a "classroom" for growth in consciousness.**

Most people tend to define their life's meaning in terms of those people, activities, self-images, or objects to which they attach the greatest value. Whatever you value most in life—whether family, another individual, work, a particular role or self-image, your health, or material possessions—these things are probably what define your life's meaning. If you lost what you valued the most, your life might seem to lose its meaning. Think for a moment about what you value most highly in your life and what gives you the greatest satisfaction and comfort. Then imagine what your life would be like if these things were all suddenly taken away.

The truth, of course, is that everything you value most *will* eventually pass away. Nothing that you cherish lasts forever. Yet if everything you value must someday cease to be, what is

the *ultimate* meaning of life? And as long as you assume that there is nothing more to existence than your present life—what there is right now—then there doesn't seem to be *any* ultimate meaning. You end up saying (along with Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists) that the only meaning life has is what you make of it in the present moment. Apart from this, life appears to have no meaning in and of itself. Since everything, including life itself, eventually passes away, how can there be any ultimate point to any of it?

Most forms of spirituality, traditional and modern, move beyond this existential predicament. Most of them make some kind of assumption that human life is *not* all there is. Something of us persists beyond human life, and so life comes to be seen as a temporary sojourn—not the final destination. Life comes to be understood as a preparation or training ground for something else that cannot be fully understood or revealed while you are alive.

It is this particular interpretation of life's "ultimate" meaning that I have found to be most valid and helpful. If the final meaning of life is that it is a classroom or school for growth in consciousness—for the development of wisdom and the capacity to love—then the fact that everything passes away takes on an entirely new meaning. The tasks and challenges that come up in life, and your response to them, do not have eternal repercussions. Nor do they have no meaning at all. They are more like lessons in a school, lessons to which you apply yourself and which you try to master as best you can. Each lesson is repeated until it is mastered. As you master old lessons, new ones are put before you. This "earth school" is thus a place where you learn and grow; it is not your final dwelling place. Eventually it is time to leave this classroom and move on.

## **2. Adversity and difficult situations are lessons designed for your growth—they are not random, capricious acts of fate. In the larger scheme of things, everything happens for a purpose.**

If you accept the idea that life is a classroom, then the adversity and difficulties that come into your life may be viewed as part of the curriculum—as lessons for growth. This is a very different point of view from one that sees life's misfortunes as random quirks of fate. The latter perspective leads to a sense of victimization. You can end up feeling powerless in a capricious world which appears to be completely inequitable in its treatment of people, some of whom have such good luck, while others have misfortune heaped upon them.

The view proposed here is that the difficulties of life are lessons to promote growth in wisdom, compassion, love, and other positive qualities (some religious traditions refer to "tests" or "lessons"). The greater the difficulty, the greater the potential for learning and growth. If you accept this idea, then the next question you may ask is, who establishes the curriculum or "assigns" your life lessons? Many of us may ask this question in one form or another when a given life challenge seems particularly difficult. We tend to protest and even rail against some of the misfortunes and limitations we're faced with. The question arises: "How could a loving God permit this?"

There is no easy answer to this question. None of us can fully understand how our life lessons are administered and assigned, though different spiritual traditions have different views on this matter (Eastern traditions speak of "karma," while Judeo-Christian traditions speak of "tests" and "temptations"). Each of us has to struggle with the challenges life brings

without fully understanding why. What does seem apparent is that growth could not occur if the lessons were *always* easy. If the purpose of life is for us to grow in wisdom, consciousness, and compassion, then at least some of the lessons need to be difficult. This may not be an altogether consoling view, but it at least makes some sense out of the difficult situations that occur in life.

Given this view, you can stop asking, “Why did this happen to me?” and instead ask the more constructive questions: “What is this meant to teach me? What can be learned from this?” You might take whatever worry or concern is bothering you the most in your life at this time and try asking the latter two questions instead of the first.

**3. Your personal limitations and flaws are the grist you have to work with for your inner growth. Sometimes you can heal and overcome them with modest effort. In other cases, they may stay with you for a long time in order to push you to evolve and develop to your fullest potential. You are not wrong or in any way to blame because of your limitations.**

Think for a moment about some of your own personal limitations—the ones you find most difficult to live with. If you are dealing with an anxiety disorder, think about your condition. You may ask why anyone should have to deal with a difficult condition such as panic disorder, agoraphobia, social phobia, or an obsessive-compulsive disorder for even a few months, let alone a longer time. Hopefully you have utilized all of the best treatments—including medication, if necessary—and have experienced a significant and genuine recovery. In many cases, a full recovery from an anxiety disorder is certainly possible. Suppose, however, that you have received all the best treatments, worked very hard for one or two years, and have experienced *some* improvement—yet you are still dealing with your condition to a degree. Is that a reason for you to think of yourself as a failure? A reason to think that you are somehow less skillful or persistent than those people who overcame their condition quickly?

If you’ve worked hard on overcoming your condition but are still troubled by it, perhaps there is some significant growth experience to find in the process of having to work with your difficulty for a long time. It all depends upon the lesson you happen to be learning. Having a difficult condition that is easily dispensed with in a short time would certainly help develop your confidence in your own self-mastery—an important lesson in itself. Yet it wouldn’t necessarily develop qualities of compassion or patience. It often seems that only through having to struggle with our own infirmities for a time can we learn fully how to feel compassion or have patience with others’ difficulties.

As a second example, suppose that your lesson is to learn how to let go of the excessive need for control—even more, to learn how to let go and allow your Higher Power or God to have an impact on your life. One way (not the only way) this might be learned is to have to deal with a difficult situation in which all your efforts to control it just don’t work. The ability to let go of control is often fostered by those very difficulties in life that are most challenging. Some conditions and situations are so challenging that they *compel* us to let go. There is no other alternative. To struggle or fight against the condition only creates more distress and suffering. It is often at the exact moment when you fully let go of your worry or stop struggling

that you may experience some kind of response or relief from your Higher Power. To let go and trust in your Higher Power should not be thought of as relinquishing responsibility for your life. Rather, it involves doing all you can to help yourself first, and then turning things over to another source of assistance.

In sum, it is a mistake to fault yourself for having any intractable condition, no matter how disabling or how long you've had it. It is there to foster and deepen certain qualities of your inner self. *How you respond to it and what you learn from it is what's important—not the condition itself.*

#### **4. Your life has a creative purpose and mission. There is something creative that is yours to develop and offer.**

Your life is not a random sequence of accidental events but follows a plan. This plan is *created* from a level that none of us can fully understand. Part of this plan consists of the lessons for growth in consciousness that were described in the preceding three sections.

Another very important aspect of the plan is your creative endowments, talents, or "gifts." Each of us has at least one personal form of creativity that can give our life meaning and purpose. The development and full expression of your creative talents and gifts is your "life purpose" or "life mission" spoken of earlier in this chapter.

Your life purpose is something that you feel you *need* to do in order to feel whole, complete, and fulfilled in your life. It's uniquely your own—something that can't be duplicated. Only you can do it. It comes from within, and it has nothing to do with what your parents, partner, or friends might want you to do. Generally, it moves you beyond yourself and has an impact on something or someone else.

Your purpose or mission can be a vocation or avocation—its scope can extend to the entire world or to just one other person. Examples include raising a family, mastering a musical instrument, volunteering your services to help youth or the elderly, writing poems, speaking eloquently before groups, or tending the garden in your backyard.

Until you develop and express your creative gifts, your life will seem incomplete. You will feel more anxiety because you are not making time to do what you truly want to do, what you were, in fact, born to do. The first part of this chapter was designed to help you get in touch with your creative purpose and mission. If you are not quite sure yet what it is, you may want to discuss your answers to the *Personal Values Inventory* at the beginning of this chapter with a trusted friend or counselor. You may also find the book *Fulfill Your Soul's Purpose* by Naomi Stephan to be useful.

#### **5. A Higher Source of support and guidance is always available.**

This idea is the basis of this entire section on spirituality. Much fear and anxiety is based on the perception that you are separate and alone—or else it is based on the anticipation of rejection or loss that might eventually result in your being separate and alone. The truth is that you are not alone. Even at those times when you might find it difficult to turn to other human beings for support, there remains another source of support that can always be called on. Your Higher Power is not merely an abstract entity that created and sustains the universe.

It is a force, power, or presence with which you can enter into a personal relationship. This relationship is as personal as any you could have with another human being.

In this personal relationship, you can experience both *support* and *guidance*. Support often appears in the form of inspiration or enthusiasm that can help lift and sustain you at times of low motivation and discouragement. Guidance can come in the form of clear insights and intuitions that provide discrimination and direction about what you need to do. Frequently, this type of inspired insight or realization is wiser than anything you might have figured out with your rational mind.

You may experience a dilemma about this. If you think of inspiration and intuition originating in your own subconscious mind, how do they come then from a Higher Power—from something seemingly separate from you? Certainly from the perspective of the conscious mind, everything does seem separate—you perceive yourself as separate from others, from the world, and most likely from a Higher Power. There is another level, though, that the conscious mind can't comprehend, where all things are joined. Eastern philosophy refers to this as "the One in which all things reside." The modern physicist David Bohm speaks of the "implicate order" in which everything is connected. In the Bible (New Testament), this idea is expressed in the statement "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."

To receive support and guidance from your Higher Power, you simply need to ask. Nothing more is necessary. While this might seem easy enough, it may not be in practice if you believe that you're supposed to figure out and handle everything entirely on your own. Or it may not be easy if you feel that it's irrational, weak, or in some other way beneath your dignity to rely on an invisible power for support. To trust and rely on your Higher Power takes a certain willingness to let go of control as well as a certain humility (it's often humbling to come to the realization that you can't handle something completely on your own). The ability to let go and trust is something that can be learned. Often the life lessons that are the hardest—the ones that push you to your absolute limit—tend to be the ones that have the most to teach about letting go.

As you increasingly learn to allow your Higher Power (Spirit) to assist in your life, you can grow in trusting that it is sometimes appropriate to relinquish control.

## **6. Contact with your Higher Power is directly available within your personal experience.**

You can discover a personal relationship with your Higher Power within your own immediate experience. It is as personal a relationship as any you might have with another human being. It is a two-way relationship. You can receive support, guidance, inspiration, peace of mind, inner strength, hope, and many other gifts from your Higher Power; you can also communicate your needs to Spirit through prayer and directly communicate feelings of gratitude and reverence. Such a relationship can deepen and grow to the extent that you choose to give it attention and time.

There are numerous ways in which your Higher Power can manifest in your personal experience. Some fairly common examples follow:

- Feeling supported by a loving presence.

- An inner knowing or intuitive recognition. Some deep insight comes to you and you have a clear, unequivocal sense that it is true.
- After a period of stress or struggle, you suddenly feel an influx of calmness or peace. Because it comes to you without any effort on your part, there is a sense that it comes from a place beyond your personal ego.
- Feelings of awe and wonder when beholding the beauty of nature.
- Visionary experiences—actually having a visual impression within or outside of your mind of a spiritual being or presence.
- Synchronicities—something in the outside world coincidentally matches what is going on in your mind. It feels like more than just a coincidence. For example, you're obsessively worrying about something while driving and a car pulls in front of you with a personalized license plate that says, "Let Go."
- Miracles—for example, spontaneous healings that defy medical explanation.

As you read this, think about some of the ways in which you have experienced the presence of a Higher Power within your own experience. There are many forms other than those listed above.

### **7. Questions sincerely asked of your Higher Power are answered.**

This idea is really an extension of the previous point about your Higher Power being a source of support and guidance. The reason for making this point separately is to underscore the fact that your Higher Power's support and guidance is not only bestowed on you—you can deliberately ask for it. The famous quote of Jesus "Ask and you shall receive" is true regardless of the particular spiritual tradition or orientation you follow.

It is the assumption of all religious approaches that incorporate prayer that prayer will be answered. Perhaps you have had experiences of your prayers being answered. It often seems that the degree of earnestness of your request has something to do with how readily the prayer receives a response. A common example is when you feel overwhelmed with some situation and you almost literally cry out for help to your Higher Power. In many, if not most, cases, something about the situation improves or shifts, often within a short time.

There is actually scientific research that confirms the efficacy of prayer. Several well-controlled empirical studies of prayer are reported in the book *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search* by Larry Dossey, MD.

In sum, there is both anecdotal and research support for the idea that prayer is effective. This doesn't mean that whatever you pray for will come true. There are some qualifications that, in this author's experience, need to be kept in mind: 1) the request or plea needs to be made with genuine earnestness and sincerity, 2) the "answer" or response to prayer may not come immediately—it may take days, weeks, or months, and 3) the answer may not come all at once—instead, only a step in the direction of the answer may come (for example, if you're praying for healing from chronic pain, the answer may come in the form of a strong intuition to visit a particular doctor or healing practitioner). Prayer can be answered in many ways, and

sometimes the answer may not be what you expected. It is not possible to know in advance how a particular prayer will be answered (that is when faith comes in). What can be trusted is that there will be an answer, and that answer will serve your highest good.

**8. What you truly ask for or intend from the deepest level of yourself—  
from your heart—will tend to come to you.**

One of the most powerful things that can foster positive change and healing is a sincerely held intention. With clients and in my own experience, I have observed how the power of intention can promote miraculous consequences. What you believe in and commit to with your whole heart tends to come true. When the intention is for your own highest good—and when it doesn't conflict with anyone else's highest good—it is most likely to become manifest.

A deeply held intention shifts and focuses your own consciousness. It also appears to have ramifications on events in the world apart from you. Events in the outer world will tend to align with your most deeply held intention. Goethe summed this up in his famous remark:

Concerning all acts of initiative or creation,  
there is one elementary truth;

The ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans:  
the moment one definitely commits oneself,  
then Providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one  
that would never otherwise have occurred.

A whole stream of events issue from the decision,  
raising in one's favor  
all manner of unforeseen incidents and assistance,  
which no person could have dreamt  
would have come their way.

**9. Love is stronger than fear. Pure, unconditional love emanates from your  
Higher Power (God) and is at the very center of your being and all beings.  
All fears can be understood as different forms of separation: separation  
from others, ourselves, and God—separation from the love that unites all  
things.**

Love is stronger than fear because it goes deeper. On a conscious level, love is the experience of feeling your heart go out toward unity with someone or something other than yourself. On a deeper level, love is the "ground state" or essential foundation of the entire universe. This is a view that is common both to Eastern and Western religions. Love is not something we either possess or do not possess, because it literally *defines* what we are at our core and in essence. Fear may go deep but never as deep as love, because fear arises only when we feel separate from the ground state that unifies us with everything else.

The popular phrase "We are all one" expresses the truth about love and is, on a level beyond what our conscious mind can fully comprehend, literally true.

Most of the anxiety you experience may be related to specific fears of abandonment, rejection and humiliation, loss of control, confinement, injury, or death. Fear can take on any of these forms, based on your conditioning and past experience. Yet none of these fears could ever arise if you did not experience separation. The existence of fear always points to a degree of separation—separation of your conscious mind from your innermost being, separation from others, and/or separation from God. If it is true that in essence all of us are united as one, then every fear we feel—no matter how much we believe it—is, in fact, just an illusion. If we could perceive things the way they truly are, there would be no reason to have any more fear.

Love and fear constitute perhaps the most profound duality in human existence. Yet the former can always overcome the latter.

### **10. Death is not an end but a transition. Our essential nature or soul survives physical death. (To fear death as “the end” is simply an illusion.)**

This basic idea is shared by all of the world’s religions. They all assume that an individual’s soul continues to exist after physical death, although they differ somewhat in their conceptions about the nature of the afterlife.

Actual evidence for this view has emerged in the past twenty-five years from the widespread research on “near-death experiences.” As you most likely already know, near-death experiences are based on reports of what people experienced between the time when their vital signs indicated imminent or actual death and when they were subsequently revived. These reports all share several things, such as passing through a tunnel, meeting a being of light that radiates love and understanding, witnessing a scene-by-scene review of your entire life, and sometimes meeting relatives who have already died. A smaller number of these reports describe otherworldly scenes and locales associated with the events that are experienced. Though the thousands of such reports that have been collected worldwide don’t “prove” that consciousness survives death, they certainly make a strong case in that direction. Further evidence that near-death survivors get a peek into an afterlife comes from the fact that many of them lose their fear of death and become more deeply spiritual following their experience. If what they went through was simply a dream, why would it have such a deep and lasting impact?

Does fear of death come up for you or underlie other fears you might have about sickness or injury? If so, you might want to look at the literature on near-death experiences and come to your own conclusions about life after death. The classic book in the field is *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody, but there are large number of other good books on the topic.

## **Exercise 1: Spirituality and Your View of Your Condition**

Go back over the ten assumptions above. Decide which ones fit for you, which ones you would want to question or discuss, and which, if any, don’t fit or make sense to you.

If some of these ideas strike you as true, how would believing them change your view of your anxiety condition? Your view of life in general? On a separate sheet of paper, write down your answers to these two questions.

## Exercise 2: Connecting with Your Higher Power

The following exercise is intended to help you get in touch with your Higher Power and obtain assistance to deal with any issue causing you worry or anxiety. Use the exercise only if it feels appropriate to you. (You may have your own methods of prayer and meditation that you prefer.) Give yourself time to get relaxed and centered first before working with the affirmations and visualization.

1. Get comfortable in a seated position (or lie down if you prefer). Spend at least five minutes using any technique you wish to get relaxed. You can do abdominal breathing, do progressive muscle relaxation, visualize going to your peaceful place, or meditate. (See chapter 4 for instructions for specific relaxation techniques.)
2. If you're not already aware of it, bring to mind the situation, the person, or whatever it is that you are worried or anxious about. Focus on this for several moments until you have it clearly in mind. If feelings of anxiety come up, allow yourself to feel them.
3. Affirm over and over, with as much conviction as you can,

"I turn this over to my Higher Power (or God)."

"I release this problem to my Higher Power (or God)."

Simply repeat these statements slowly, calmly, and with feeling as many times as you wish until you begin to feel better. While doing this, it is good to bring to mind the following ideas about your Higher Power:

- It is "all knowing"—in other words, it has wisdom and intelligence that go beyond your conscious capacity to perceive solutions to problems.
  - In its greater wisdom, your Higher Power has a solution to whatever you're worried about.
  - Even though you can't see the solution to your worry right now, you can affirm faith that there is no problem that can't be resolved through the help of your Higher Power.
4. If you are visually inclined, imagine that you're going to meet your Higher Power. You might see yourself in a garden or a beautiful setting of your choice, and then imagine that you see a figure—your Higher Power—approaching you. It may be indistinct at first and grow gradually clearer. You may notice that this figure exudes love and wisdom. It might be a wise old man or woman, a being of light, Jesus, the supreme being in your particular religion, or any other presence that adequately represents your Higher Power.
  5. While in the presence of your Higher Power—whether you visualize it or not—simply find a way to ask for help. For example, you might say, "I ask for your help and guidance with \_\_\_\_\_." Keep repeating your request until you feel better.

You may want to listen to see if your Higher Power has an immediate answer or an insight to offer you about your request. It is quite all right, though, simply to make your request and ask for help without getting an answer. The purpose of this process is to develop trust and belief in your Higher Power (what has traditionally been called "faith in God").

The key to this part of the process is an attitude of genuine humility. By asking for help from your Higher Power, you relinquish some of your conscious control of the situation and exercise a willingness to trust.

6. *Optional:* If it feels appropriate, visualize a beam of white light going to that place in your body that feels anxious or worried. Often this will be the solar plexus region (in the middle of your trunk right below the center of your rib cage) or the "pit" of your stomach. Let that area be filled with the light until the anxiety dissolves or fades away. Keep directing white light to that region until it completely settles down and is free of anxiety.

Give this entire process time. It may be necessary to persist with it for as long as a half hour to forty-five minutes in order to feel a genuine connection with your Higher Power and a deeply felt trust that the problem you're worried about can truly be resolved. If, after completing this process, your worry comes back the next day, simply repeat the exercise every day until you've mastered your worry.

## Options for Developing Your Spiritual Life

You can deepen your commitment to spirituality through any of the following means:

1. Regular participation in church or your preferred spiritually based organization.
2. Regular reading of inspirational literature of your preference. It's good to do this at least once per day—upon awakening, during your lunch break, or before retiring.
3. Regular practice of meditation (see chapter 18).
4. Regular practice of prayer or spiritual affirmations (see the books by Louise Hay and Shakti Gawain below for how to work with spiritual affirmations).
5. Involvement in a 12-step program that is relevant to your needs. The 12-step programs offer many people a well-conceived and effective approach for healing addictions. Although they began with Alcoholics Anonymous fifty years ago, they now include a wide range of programs, such as Emotions Anonymous, Codependents Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex and Love Addictions Anonymous, and Workaholics Anonymous. Consult your local chapter of the National Council on Alcoholism for a list of 12-step groups in your area.

## A Final Caveat

Reading the previous sections may have made spirituality sound as if it were a cure-all. You might even be left with the idea that developing a relationship with your Higher Power is *all* that is necessary for you to overcome your problem with panic, phobias, or anxiety. This is very unlikely to be true. You're still going to need to draw on all of the strategies presented in this workbook to deal with your particular problem with anxiety. Relaxation, exercise, coping strategies for panic, imagery and real-life desensitization, changing self-talk and mistaken beliefs, expressing feelings, developing assertiveness, and working on self-esteem will all be necessary.

What developing your spirituality can do is give you the inspiration and hope to persist in following through with your recovery program. It can also provide you with a powerful means for breaking through to your next step forward at those times when you're feeling stuck, discouraged, or confused.

## Summary of Things to Do

1. Do you feel aware of your own unique life purpose or purposes? Use the *Personal Values Inventory* to assist you in clarifying what you would most like to do with your life.
2. Reflect on the ten ideas presented in the section "Changes in Beliefs Associated with Spirituality" and complete exercise 1.
3. Practice the meditation "Connecting with Your Higher Power" in exercise 2 when you feel up against a personal issue that you've been unable to resolve through your own conscious efforts.
4. Among the list of options for developing your spiritual life, decide which one(s) you'd be willing to commit more time to during the next month.

## Further Reading

If you are on a traditional religious path, you probably are already familiar with a number of written sources of inspiration and guidance. The Bible has a tremendous amount of insight and wisdom to offer if you are of Christian or Jewish faith. Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and other traditional cultures all possess a rich literature of spiritual wisdom. The books listed below are not aligned with any particular religion, but, like this chapter, speak to a universal spirituality.

Bourne, Edmund J. *Beyond Anxiety & Phobia*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2001.

- Dass, Ram, and Paul Gorman. *How Can I Help?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.
- Dossey, Larry. *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002.
- Gawain, Shakti, with Laurel King. *Living in the Light*. Revised edition. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1998.
- Hay, Louise. *You Can Heal Your Life*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1999. (Includes many helpful tools and affirmations for developing self-worth.)
- Jampolsky, Gerald. *Good-bye to Guilt*. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.
- . *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*. 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 2004.
- Moody, Raymond. *Life After Life*. 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
- Rodegast, Pat, and Judith Stanton. *Emmanuel's Book*. New York: Bantam Books, 1987.
- Roman, Sanaya. *Spiritual Growth*. Tiburon, CA: H J Kramer, 1989.
- Stephan, Naomi. *Fulfill Your Soul's Purpose*. Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin, 1999.
- Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999. (An excellent resource for going beyond the conditioned mind and developing awareness.)
- Williamson, Marianne. *Illuminata*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1994. (An outstanding collection of thoughts and prayers for modern times.)
- Zukav, Gary. *The Seat of the Soul*. New York: Fireside Books, 1990.