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BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

BUILDING A **NON-**
ANXIOUS
LIFE

DR. JOHN DELONY

FOREWORD BY DAVE RAMSEY

BUILDING A NON-ANXIOUS LIFE

“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your ~~body~~ what you will put on.... Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

—Matthew 6:25, 27 ESV

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Praise for *Building a Non-Anxious Life*

“Everyone has anxiety in some form or another. It seems to be the defining condition of modern human brains. But until now, there’s been no go-to manual that can help anyone, no matter their background, understand the science and soul of the problem—and also find solutions. *Building a Non-Anxious Life* is that manual. Its wisdom is wide and deep and delivered in a way that’s empathetic, straightforward, and true. This book will help you unpack the deeper reasons why you’re anxious and provide you with actionable tools that lead to lasting freedom.”

Michael Easter, author of *The Comfort Crisis* and *Scarcity Brain*

“In this era where we have taken full ownership of anxiety being an inevitable default mode in an increasingly fast-paced society, I cannot think of a better book or better ambassador that might help us not just cope but conquer (and re-conquer) it on a daily basis than John Delony. I believe strongly that our purpose will almost always be attached to some level of freedom that others desperately need. John is walking hard in his purpose, gifted in being able to provide choices for us to make rather than negativity for which we have to settle.

“Being able to choose things like connection over isolation, belief over paralyzing fear, and even choosing the hard thing over the most convenient is giving us freedom from being resigned to a life that doesn’t feel worth living. As a former advocate and spokesperson for youth suicide prevention and mental-health awareness, it brings me so much hope to know that information like this is being released into the world. This is content that will go far in giving us access to a better, more joyous, more stable quality of life. As John says himself, ‘I would not have written this book if I didn’t believe there is hope. For you, for me, for our kids, for the people we love, and for our world.’ Amen to hope. May you find it as you read.”

Jade Simmons, author of the #1 bestseller *Audacious Prayers for World Changers*, concert artist, and speaker

“Every time I’ve asked a mental-health professional to talk to me about anxiety, I’ve somehow left the conversation feeling *more* anxious. Then I met Dr. John, who has this superhero-like ability to be comfortably relatable when talking about things that have been overly intellectualized for far too long. This book is a celebration of everything that makes us human, a reminder of how beautiful it is to be perfectly imperfect, a master class on the healing power of community, and a road map on how to become our most fully realized selves.”

Will Guidara, James Beard Award-winning restaurateur

“Not only has listening to Dr. John Delony’s podcasts and reading his books changed my life for the better, but I am grateful to call John my personal friend. Not only does he have an unbelievably deep knowledge of mental health, but he has been transparent about his own struggles and cares DEEPLY to improve people’s lives. Unlike many experts who talk in circles and do not provide clarity, John

always provides clear, actionable instructions to improve your life. If you are willing to do the work, John's material will improve your life."

Dr. Layne Norton, founder of BioLayne and best-selling author

"John Delony's great new book, *Building a Non-Anxious Life*, is filled with crucial insight into the challenges we all face as we try to navigate today's hectic and anxiety-inducing world, and how to overcome them to build a better life. Through a combination of personal stories and insightful observations, John gives us easy, practical ways to create a peaceful life."

Dr. Caroline Leaf, cognitive neuroscientist and best-selling author

"In a post-Covid world, I am battle weary from the last few years. If that also describes you, then you too need to read this book.

"You will see a word that recurs often in this work: *choice*. Dr. Delony, to vastly oversimplify the beautiful messages in his book, has one overriding goal with this work: to give you back the choice that was so wrongly taken from you these past years. He reiterates a message I tell all my patients: All control is self-control. That's where it starts and where it stops.

"While Dr. Delony gives these messages with his usual humor, wisdom, and vulnerability, he is always clear that this book is not about his accomplishments but about yours. This book is about unlocking the person you still are, even in—and especially in—this brave new world we find ourselves in."

Michael Gomez, PhD, Director of Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Assistant Professor at the Pediatrics Department of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

"This book is an ice bath for the soul: a jarring yet essential plunge for anyone who suffers from anxiety."

Joshua Fields Millburn, *The Minimalists*

"John Delony is one of the few honest voices in mental health. His advice is authentic, applicable in the real world, and effective. If John says something, we always listen."

Sal DiStefano, personal trainer, co-founder of Mind Pump Media, and co-host of *MindPump* radio show and podcast

"Dr. Delony addresses head-on the sources and causes of anxiety and offers his readers remedies and paths to peace. Fear is often not our friend, and to have our feelings be our employee, not our employer, sets us free. Dr. Delony's work is a path to freedom and a life lived to the fullest."

Dr. Andrew Young, hostage negotiator, crisis counselor, and professor at Lubbock Christian University

“This book is so honest and relatable! In this book, John helps us understand the need to start the challenging but necessary move to build a non-anxious life. Our lives depend on it! His guidebook will have you taking notes in the margins and wanting to remember every piece of information he shares. So break out your highlighter and pen as you walk through this journey of regaining your life.”

Dr. Lynn Jennings, Jennings & Associates Counseling Services and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

“Dr. John Delony has spent his career seeking ways to bring joy, peace, connection, and health to members of his community. He has relentlessly pursued new tools to sharpen his craft along each phase of his journey, and his book *Building Non-Anxious Life* is the culmination of such effort. It is a masterful assimilation of the concepts from his first two books, brought together in a practical way to give his readers (and listeners) the tangible tools and steps needed to help them along the path of deliverance from the chains of anxiety.”

Jeffrey D. Smith, MD, Assistant Professor of Family Medicine at Frist College of Medicine, Belmont University

For Sheila—

My light in the darkness.

My lifelong adventure.

My love.

My home.

For Hank and Josephine—

My heartbeats.

My deepest laughter, joy, love, and silliness.

My greatest gifts and my greatest mission.

My hope for the future.

For David and Addell Delony—

You built legacy out of the ashes of a great war.

You stayed married over 70 years.

You taught, held firm, laughed, and loved.

You gave me a road map for a non-anxious life.

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FOREWORD BY DAVE RAMSEY

I have anxiety. You have anxiety. Everyone has anxiety. The question's not whether we have anxiety; it's how much of it we have and what we should do with it. All you have to do is look past the end of your nose and you'll see someone struggling at some level with some amount of anxiety. Are they handling it well? Is it ruining their life? Are they out of control? Or are they functional? When I look in the mirror, I can ask the same questions.

The fact is, we are the most stressed-out, anxiety-ridden, out-of-control culture in history. And the paradox is, we have the most prosperity we've ever had and shouldn't be worried. Most people don't have to worry about food, shelter, or clothing, and yet all the despair statistics are up—suicide, depression, anxiety. Everywhere we look, there are signs of anxiousness, and it's ruining way too many people's lives.

Noticing this rise in anxiety in the past few years, we launched a quick read at Ramsey with Dr. John Delony titled *RedefiningAnxiety* . After it sold hundreds of thousands of copies, we realized John had a lot to say to all of us about anxiety—how to define it and how to deal with it.

In this follow-up book, *Building a Non-Anxious Life*, John dives deeper. He brilliantly puts in front of us not just a compelling definition of anxiety but also the seven choices we can make to virtually eliminate it in our lives. I believe it's the best material I've read to deal with one of the greatest problems facing our culture.

As you'll see, John is not afraid to share his personal journey of dealing with anxiety. He's also not afraid to take a traditional, psychological-textbook approach to the subject of anxiety while simultaneously challenging a lot of the traditional, psychological-textbook approaches to

this subject. The mix is refreshing and empowering . . . *and* will cause some people in the psychology world to struggle with his conclusions. Those of us in the *real* world, however, love his conclusions—because they’re applicable, they’re crammed with common sense, and they follow a strong intellectual construct.

The insight we get from *Building a Non-Anxious Life* isn’t under the pretense that a *non-anxious* life exists. Life is not devoid of anxiety. Rather, it’s understanding that it’s possible to live a *less anxious* life by making intentional choices. It’s acknowledging there will always be struggle in some area of our lives. Stuff is always going to come at us, and we have to deal with it. But the seven choices John outlines give us the ability to effectively deal with the inevitable onslaught of life’s struggles and the anxiety that comes with them.

To the extent we understand these choices and observe them on a daily basis, our lives will become more joyful and more functional, and our relationships will improve. To the extent we follow these choices, we will experience peace like never before.

I’m excited at the journey you’re about to start. You’re on the brink of building and living a life you might not have thought possible. But building a non-anxious life *is* possible. And in the following pages, John will show you how.

INTRODUCTION

CANNONBALL

*It's not hard to fall
When you float like a cannonball.*

Damien Rice, "Cannonball" (2000)

The first time I ever took a call on live radio was in front of millions and millions of people, on the second-largest radio program in the country. And I had no experience in radio. Zero. I didn't know how to speak concisely, how to come in and out of commercial breaks . . . any of it. I was totally exposed, like the bad dream where you're giving a presentation in high school and you look down and suddenly realize you're not wearing any clothes. It was a call-in advice show, and I completely tanked my first call. I still remember freezing when the person asked me a comically simple question.

For the rest of the broadcast I was a spastic mess—sometimes my answers didn't make a lot of sense, and I developed weird vocal tics. One person called in to the show to complain about me, saying I was like a worm on hot coals.¹ But the train kept moving. And with some great coaching from Dave, James and the production team, and some of my other colleagues, I started to get the hang of it. It was a lot like changing the oil in the car while the car is flying down the highway.

This was in the summer of 2020, and people were calling in to the show about how anxious, worried, and burdened they were. It seemed everyone

was anxious.

About Covid.

About the lockdowns.

About masks or no masks, shots or no shots, social passports and rising death tolls.

About the countless jobs evaporated overnight and losing their livelihood, their income, their sense of community, and in many cases, their basic dignity. And since millions and millions of Americans live paycheck to paycheck and have few, if any, relationships outside of work, people were anxious about their very existence.

They were scared about their struggling kids, crumbling marriages, how to juggle a second job as a homeschool teacher, giving birth in the hospital all alone, or being unable to visit aging family members who were passing away. Millions and millions of people were told they *weren't essential*. Life was chaotic.

The world was electric and crackling.

And this wasn't a projection or an exaggeration. I felt it too. In my own home.

With no time for romance or connection, my wife and I quickly became co-managers of our house. I watched my kids get buried by Zoom school, and as someone who spent my entire pre-radio career studying and working with young people and their families, I was troubled by the disastrous effects this would have on their educational and social development.

I was also dreadfully lonely myself.

I could text and share memes, but I desperately missed my friends. And hugs. And punches on the arm. And laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. And in-person disagreements over hard life issues and who was going to pay for the chips and salsa. I was withering.

I did get to know my neighbors. We had socially distanced cookouts, driveway hangouts, and we picked up groceries for each other. But

underneath the pleasantries, and after all the pivoting that life required just to get through another week, my anxiety and depression alarms were ringing off the wall.

Yours were ringing too.

EVERYTHING CAME UNDONE

Covid didn't give us all anxiety. It poured gasoline on a growing fire that's been burning for years. Depending on what data you examine, anywhere from a quarter to half of the US population reports their lives are affected by anxiety, stress, or burnout. Anxiety is everywhere.

Before we go any further, I want to make sure we're using the same language. When I say *anxiety*, I'm talking about all of it. Yes, I'm referring to clinical anxiety, phobias, and social anxiety. But I'm also talking about debilitating worry and fear and chronic stress and burnout, and how our lives have been flooded with constant, heightened levels of threats and chaos. Anxiety is no longer just a clinical term—it's now part of the cultural vernacular. It encompasses everything from panic attacks to feeling lonely, angry, scared, or buzzing from the low-level hum that something big and scary and unseen is coming our way. So for the sake of this book, instead of playing diagnostic word games, I'm going to call it all anxiety.

Make no mistake: Things *are* happening. Big changes *are* coming. Most of us *are* right to be scared sometimes. The world will always be changing, both in massive leaps and in stumbling, crooked ways.

But this is not why everyone is buzzing, anxious, and stressed.

We're buzzing, anxious, and stressed because we've created a world our bodies can't exist in. We weren't designed for digital yet physically distant relationships. Our bodies can't handle the countless pressing emergencies and life tragedies, the onslaught of never-ending global trauma, and the incessant bells, clicks, and dings of notifications, murder podcasts, online learning, and an Artificial Intelligence arms race all at the same time. We humans have never had to live in an endless sea of information, opportunity, mating choices, food, and mobility. It's a tsunami of both great and terrifying things. We just have so much . . . everything.

We're trying to stay alive on a concoction of cortisol and adrenaline and unearned dopamine, and as the great Dr. Bessel van der Kolk says, the body is keeping the score of all of it.

In this new world of *everything all at once*, we've missed the mark about how to respond. We don't know what the elusive "good life" even looks like anymore. Consequently, the things we've been doing to reduce or resolve our anxiety aren't working. Instead of freeing us to thrive like we'd hoped, our efforts often aren't even keeping our heads above water. We're putting band-aids over bullet holes. No wonder things feel like they're coming apart.

NOT THE ISSUE

One day while I was co-hosting *The Ramsey Show*, a caller wanted to know how to get rid of his anxiety. He was scared and had a lot of things going on in his life, and he kept talking about himself like a broken machine that needed to be fixed. After listening to him for a while, I finally told him, “Sir, with all due respect, anxiety is not the issue here.”

During the commercial break, I took off my headphones and turned to Dave Ramsey, the co-host, and said, “Everybody keeps asking about anxiety. Anxiety isn’t the problem. Anxiety is just the alarm system letting people know things are off the rails. People have created very anxious lives, and their bodies are trying to get their attention.”

For years I’d been telling this to anyone who would listen—students, counseling clients, colleagues . . . even myself. Anxiety is just a smoke alarm, letting you know that something in your house is on fire. The alarm is not the problem. The fire is.

Dave replied, “You need to write that down. That’s your first book right there.”

And so it was.

In the summer of 2020, I wrote a 65-page quick read titled *Redefining Anxiety*. My friends called it a pamphlet. My mom called it a masterpiece. My young daughter simply laughed and said, “Dad . . . that’s not a book.”²

It was a to-the-point look at what anxiety is and isn’t, and how to deal with it in both the short- and long-term. I wrote the book because people were hurting, and I knew that yet another scientific treatise on this topic was not going to help anyone. We all needed (especially me) a quick and simple understanding of the myths surrounding anxiety, the truths about anxiety, and ultimately, how to get our lives back.

Redefining Anxiety took off.³ The book touched a nerve and found its way into homes, purses, glove compartments, and classrooms across the country. I heard from counselors, psychologists, medical doctors, and business leaders who bought cases to hand out to their patients, clients, and employees. I heard from parents of teenagers, active-duty military personnel, and senior citizens. Everyone seemed worried about what was happening to their minds, bodies, and families. And most people were grateful for a new paradigm—a new way of looking at anxiety and what they could do next.

Here's the deal. I knew people were anxious. I knew because I'm always nose-down in the latest mental-health research, and because I have two decades of experience working with people in the messiest, most chaotic experiences of their lives. I'd also recently been traveling the country, sitting behind closed doors with construction workers, moms and dads, university executives, business leaders, teachers, students, and multimillionaires. I was hearing it everywhere. The world felt like it was burning down around us.

And for the first time in years, I was feeling that way again too.

I clearly remember being buried by my own anxiety: Unable to sleep despite increasing levels of exhaustion. Sharing a bed with the woman who loved me, yet still feeling completely alone. Paranoid that *Everyone is coming after me!* or *It's all coming down!* while feeling the shame and despair of *This is my fault and I ~~can't~~ do anything about it.*

I talk so often about anxiety because I see it everywhere. I see it in my friends, my family, and in the mirror. I hear from you and how much you're hurting, and I remember how anxiety burned scars through my marriage, my relationships with my kids, my work, and my belief in myself.

And here it was, coming back from the dead, like a horror-movie villain.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BOOK

So you and me . . . we're in this one together.

I'm not talking at you; I'm walking with you. I left out all⁴ the counseling and psychology jargon and the endless theoretical propositions. Personally, as a former academic nerd, I find great value in theories and ideas. I believe they have their place in the world. But not here. They are great for contemplation and inquiry. I don't find them helpful when my friend is weeping or I'm sick to my stomach with fear and stress.

What you're about to read is not yet another pop-psychology piece or a work on how to be less anxious in the moment.⁵ This book is exploring the foundation beneath the house. We're going to get to the root of the issue in a straightforward way.

As the world has become increasingly complex and chaotic, our biggest worries are morphing. I used to frequently get questions like "How do I help my son with his ADHD?" or "Can you help me and my husband get back 'that lovin' feeling'?"

Now people are asking, in quiet, wide-eyed existential fear,

"Will I ever be able to sleep through the night again?"

"Has democracy run aground?"

"How do I stay sane in a world gone mad?"

"What hope can I offer my kids for their future?"

Everyone is anxious.

In the pages to come, I want us to address the root of concerns like these that have become such a part of everyday life.

And I'll also address hope.

As you read this book, do not forget . . .

This is a book about hope.

Hear me say loud and clear: I am profoundly hopeful about what comes next in your life, in your relationships, and in our world.

So if you're wanting information about diagnostics, brain function and chemistry, or the bio-social-physiological mechanics of anxiety from brilliant researchers, scientists, and clinicians from all over the world, I invite you to take your pick of the few million books, articles, and podcasts out there covering everything from anxiety and diet to anxiety and grief, anxiety and health, anxiety and medicine, and practically anything else you can imagine. But I've found that explaining the interplay between cortisol and epinephrine is not helpful to the exhausted single mom of three who can't get her heart to stop beating out of her chest. An elegant discussion about the HPA axis, serotonin re-uptake and dopamine modulation, and an overactive amygdala is the least of worries for the over-the-road truck driver who misses his kids so much he can't breathe. Or for the nursing student who can't stop the hurricane of ruminating thoughts. Or for the man who finds himself yelling at the driver ahead of him for going too slow, too fast, or too whatever—he's just mad.

At the end of the day, though we're told the anxiety numbers are going up and up for everyone, everywhere, *anxiety is not the problem* for the vast majority of us. The fire that's setting off all the smoke alarms is the problem. And all our attempts to cobble together the right combination of podcasts, self-help books, prescription drugs, and bi-monthly counseling sessions in order to stay sane—or to even simply stay alive—are not putting out the fires. We're trying to float like a cannonball.

I'll say this directly because there's too much at stake: **What we're doing is not working.**

What *will* work is the real-world scratching and clawing for truth. And rediscovering the old roads taken by millions of weary travelers over centuries who, while moving from place to place, took their circumstances and created something a little better than what they inherited.