

3/31/22

Week 14: Rescue LIFE

Sheila Walsh

Shawn and Jill Johnson

SHEILA: Hello, welcome to *Life Today*. I'm Sheila Walsh, here by myself today. But I'm very excited to be joined by two pretty special people. This book is called *Attacking Anxiety*: From panicked and depressed to alive and free.

I am joined by Shawn and Jill Johnson. I'm so grateful you're both here.

JILL: Thank you. Thank you for having us. It is an honor to be here.

SHEILA: Thank you for writing such a vulnerable honest book as a pastor. Was that hard to do?

SHAWN: Yeah.

[Laughing]

SHEILA: Short answer.

SHAWN: One of the biggest struggles for me was admitting it all. And so, to be honest, by the time I decided to write the book, it wasn't that hard because I had already gone public with it to our church, but that was hard.

SHEILA: You know it's interesting. I watched a YouTube video of both of you, and it was one of your church services. It was fabulous and you're sharing your story. You said something at the

beginning I thought was so interesting that as believers we find it easier to rejoice with those who rejoice than to mourn with those who mourn. Why do you think that is?

SHAWN: I think it is because we have such a hard time sharing with other believers that we're in mourning. And it is hard to help somebody when you don't know they're struggling. I think especially with this topic, with anxiety and depression, there's almost this idea that if I'm in church I shouldn't have anxiety, I shouldn't have depression. We serve a God of peace and hope and joy and freedom. And so I must be broke in a way that's just not allowed in the church. So I think we hide it. You can't have people battle with you when they don't know you're in a battle.

SHEILA: That's so true. You describe in the book a kind of cataclysmic event at the side of a road. But I remember reading that thinking, what came before that? I mean how much were you struggling before that?

SHAWN: Ten years before where the book starts, we were doing our very first magazine interview on fast-growing churches in America.

SHEILA: No pressure there!

SHAWN: Right? And I'll never forget, one of the first questions was, did you ever think you'd be this successful? And I thought if you only knew. Literally, earlier that day, I was downtown Denver in my doctor's office crying and shaking and telling him I didn't know what was wrong with me. He said, "You're having a panic attack." And he put me on anti-anxiety medication, and I didn't want to tell anybody. And so I hid that for ten years; even the depths of it from my wife and family, but definitely people in the church. Because I was scared to death I might be broken in a way that's just not allowed in the church. So now what?

SHEILA: Jill, how much could you tell in those years? Were you able to sense that there was something not right, not good?

JILL: Well, we've been married, goodness, 23 years now, and shortly after we got married, he

began to have panic attacks, and so, I was used to him struggling with the anxiety attacks. But what I noticed is, as time went on, they became more frequent and harder for him; they would come on quickly and frequently.

And so I got to a place, yes, by the time this book begins, I knew something was not good. I kept thinking, I don't know how he is going to sustain his life pace. I don't know how he's going to sustain all of the things he's doing while struggling so badly, it was constant -- it seemed constant. This book starts in 2019, and by 2019 those attacks were just coming and coming and coming so I knew something had to change because I was afraid of what would happen if it didn't.

SHEILA: Tell us about that day. I know that's probably hard to go back to, but what was going on in you at that time?

SHAWN: I was actually just driving home from the dentist, and I felt a panic attack coming on.

SHEILA: What does that feel like for somebody who doesn't know, who thinks, does that mean you just feel scared? What does that feel like?

SHAWN: For me, there will be a thought; usually it starts with a thought of, oh, no! Here it comes! A lot of times for me it would be tied to feeling claustrophobic; not necessarily physically, just stuck. Just stuck in a situation. And my chest will start to tighten up.

In fact, I've told her before, I think I'm having a heart attack. My chest muscles would get tight, which then would send signals to my brain that something is wrong and so it starts spinning. My heartbeat will get really fast. All my body will start tingling. And my mind would get so twisted up that I would honestly feel like I'm going to die, and this is never going to stop. Those are sort of the overwhelming thoughts, I'm going to die, and this is never going to stop.

So I was just driving in my car, and I started having one. I could tell it was just worse than any I'd ever had before; so bad that I knew I wasn't going to be able to make it home. And so I called

Jill and I was crying and shaking. I just said, "Pray for me. Please pray for me." I think I even said something like, "I can't live this way" or something.

And she said, "Oh babe, are you okay? Can you make it home?"

I said, "I don't think I can." And then hung up the phone, which in retrospect was not the best way to go about that. I didn't know what to do.

I started thinking, where can I go? I can't go to a school because there are kids. I can't go to my office, I didn't want our staff to see me this way. I can't go to our house because I feel like I have to be outside, and all of our neighbors live real close. Most of them have red shirt stickers on their car windows. They can't see the pastor out in the yard freaking out.

And so I just pulled over on the side of the road. I just started walking up and down these foothills. And I remember I was just crying and shaking. Like yelling to God, "Why won't you help me? Why won't you help me?"

And then I blinked, I don't know how long I was there, and Jill and a couple of friends showed up. She knew where I was coming from. They found me. And I remember just saying, "I can't live this way. I can't live this way. I can't be a pastor. I can't do any of it." I was telling Jill things like, "I think you'd be better off without me."

And then my friends got me home with Jill. We were sitting at my kitchen table and my body was just exhausted because it had been a couple of hours of just -- and one of my friends said, "Hey, you're not thinking about doing anything stupid, are you?"

I remember I was like, "No." And I thought about it for a second and I was like, "You should take my guns." I had some hunting guns down in a safe in the basement. I said, "You better take those." I knew that day like something has to change.

SHEILA: So what do you do? Obviously, it's come to a head at that point. Do you try and get

help? I think I read that you got on a plane, and you were trying to go somewhere, and you can't even make it.

SHAWN: Yeah. Jill called one of my pastors and he lives in Alabama. He said, "Just come here. Come spend time with us." And so a couple of days went by, we got on a plane. We got out on the runway, and I started having a panic attack on the plane. And the pilot came back, saw me, and went, "No. We're not taking you up in the air."

Jill was like, "Please, we really --"

He's like, "No."

So they went back to the gate, kicked us off the flight. Super humiliating.

So I went and spent two weeks with our pastor in Alabama. Had some of what I felt were just life-changing conversations. And not too long after that, went to a seven-week inpatient antianxiety counseling facility. And after that, just kept going to counseling, therapy, pastoral care, time in the word. Just battling.

SHEILA: One of the things I thought was interesting because I've been hospitalized with clinical depression, my husband has struggled with panic attacks. You're there with him but your thing is, now I'm alone because there is nobody who understands the depth of what I'm feeling. How did you cope with that? Because I've often felt for my husband. I'm doing pretty well now but when I do spiral at all, the hardest thing is he wants to do something. He wants to fix it. And there is nothing -- there is nothing, really, that he can do.

JILL: Right. And I've found that to be true for myself and so many times I've realized the things I would try to say at the moment, they just weren't working. They didn't help. And sometimes, actually, the things I would say or the things that I would try, I would try to rub his back, I'd try to speak real softly and calmly and quietly and encourage. And actually, the things I was doing in the moment, a lot of the time were not helpful to him at all. I wasn't bringing him out of that

dark place.

But one thing I found as we just continued to go through it, truly, the Lord is my hiding place through it and any support, any encouragement I was able to give Shawn always, the most meaningful moments for me helping him or supporting him, they all kind of came out of my quiet time moments, my time just spending with Jesus for the day.

I actually was talking to Shawn about it. He's like, it's almost as if your support to me is like when you get on an airplane and the flight attendant says, "In case of an emergency you put on your oxygen mask first so you can help the one next to you." That's the best support I gave Shawn, honestly and genuinely, came from a place of me just every day feeling helpless in his battle and in his struggle. But every day, literally, the Lord was showing me all through Psalms, I'm your hiding place, I'm your hiding place. I made the Lord my hiding place meaning I just escaped to his presence when I could, and whether it was I cried or I was silent or I played worship music, I just found that in those moments he would strengthen me. Not always feeling him; I didn't always feel him, but I knew he was there. I knew he was listening.

And yes, in my own private quiet times with the Lord each day a scripture would come, and I would say, "Oh! I feel like Shawn could use this scripture." So most of the time, it wasn't my words, it was God's words, and I would send him a scripture and finally, he was like, "Would you put all of these scriptures in one place so that I can see them?" But meaningful moments came out of just spending time with Jesus first.

SHEILA: You have so much practical advice in this book too. You talk about things, um, not to do. You say, "Don't judge me. I already feel stupid enough." What kind of things would you say to somebody who has a spouse or a child or a parent who struggles with anxiety?

SHAWN: I actually learned so much about that by watching my wife help me, to be honest. Because I can now look back and go, what was so helpful in those moments? And what I've come to learn is you never have the right words, there are no right words. Right words won't fix it. There are no words she could say that would take me out of that spiral -- just being there was

game-changing.

It is interesting when we started our church we didn't have -- there were no people, no offerings, no money, no anything, so we all had side jobs and I was a chaplain at a hospital. And when I was training, the lady who was training me how to be a chaplain, we were about to go into a room, and we were going to go spend time with a family of someone who had just died.

And I told her, I said, and I'm crying, I'm like, "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say."

She said, "You never do. This is called a ministry of presence. We're just going to be there. We're going to go in this room and we're going to be there." And that's what she did.

She didn't judge me. She reminded me often that she wasn't leaving because when you're struggling, you not only feel everything you feel but then about every other breath you're so embarrassed, you're so ashamed and you're worried, are the people I love the most going to leave me because I'm this broken? So she would constantly remind me, I'm not going anywhere, I'll just be here. And I'm safe.

SHEILA: One of the things I wondered, it's a phrase you use, I can't remember if it was on the thing I watched or in the book, but you say, "You can't be his savior, but you can remind him of who his Savior is." What do you mean by that?

JILL: Well, I wanted nothing more than in his moments of panic, I wanted nothing more than to help. And I think for a long time, I felt bad that I wasn't helping him the way I wanted to or in a visible way. I'd pray with him and sometimes, even then, nothing seemed to work. I think it was the Lord, it had to be, but the thought occurred to me as we went on, I'm not his savior. And I do believe that that was the Lord reminding me, Jill, you cannot save Shawn, that's not your job, that's my job.

And so I then looked at well, then what can I do? I can sit there. I can, again, just be, and then at

the end of the day, I had to trust that one of my favorite scriptures, Isaiah 54:13, All my children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be their peace.

And so I got to this place of going, okay, God. You, Jesus, are his savior. It's your job, God, to help him navigate this and to free him. I'll sit, I'll pray, I'll worship, I'll do my best, and just wait and trust.

SHEILA: One of the greatest things about the book and I'm going to tell you in a moment how you can get your own copy of this book, is you give some very practical steps in navigating through a panic attack. I'm thinking, probably some of our viewers are wondering how you're doing now? Because I remember somebody asking me, "How long did it take them to fix you?" I said, "Well if they ever do, I'll let you know." I said, "No, it's better than that. I'm not fixed, I'm redeemed. And it's a different thing." How are you doing today?

SHAWN: It's interesting you said that. When I went to that seven-week inpatient counseling place, even my wife, but friends, family, would say things like, "I can't wait until you get back and you're healthy."

I would read that and go, I know you're trying to help me but that's a lot of pressure. So like I can't come home until I'm healthy? And I even brought that up to one of my counselors one day. I said, "I feel all this pressure to be fixed when I come back. What if I'm not?"

He said, "You actually need to help your family members understand, just change those words slightly because we don't get to do anything perfect until heaven. So you're not waiting until you're healthy, you're going to get healthier, you're going to get better. You're going to get stronger."

And I am all those things. I am. I'm living with some peace and some joy and some hope that honestly, in the moment, I did not even see possible.

SHEILA: And I think that's one of the things I love about your book is this encouragement:

Hold on, it's not always going to be like this. Because I've been, a long time but I've been in those moments where I thought, you believe the lies of the enemy, your family would be better without you -- and those are absolute lies.

You counter those with the truth of the Word of God. I wonder how your ministry has changed, because just even watching, I watched two of your church services and I thought, this is just fantastic! How has your ministry together changed because of your honesty and vulnerability?

SHAWN: It has gone to a whole new level -- a whole new level of influence that we never saw coming. I was afraid to death to tell the church how broken I was. And so in 2020, when I came back in January of 2020, which all my counselors, because we all had great vision coming for 2020, said, "Don't do anything stressful! No major changes. Ease into work."

[Laughter]

SHEILA: Yeah, right!

SHAWN: But I told the church that; I told them everything. In fact, I was asking some pastors, because I'm like I don't know how to do this. I was asking some pastor friends like, how much do I share? And I remember there was one person who said, "Hey! Be careful how much you share because you don't want them to lose faith in you." And I remember leaving that conversation being so like torn inside because I've always felt like I don't have a lot to offer if it's not authenticity.

But then last minute, I talked to one other friend and he's a pastor and just a great man of God. I told him and he goes, "No, forget that! Do you know what your church wants to know? They want to know your house sucks, too, sometimes." And I know it sounds crass but it was like that's right!

So I told the church everything. I said, "I'm better and I'm healthier and I'm stronger. I'm still a broken guy but if you'll have me I'll lead this church to the best of my ability in my brokenness."

I've never felt more embraced by our church. I thought it was going to be the opposite.

SHEILA: That's wonderful. Obviously, you'll want to read this book. It is whether you're struggling yourself or you have a friend that is struggling. Just in the days we're living in, this is a great book.

So what I'd like you to do is I'd like you to take a look at some people who are struggling at the moment in very different ways, feeling hopeless. But you and I have the privilege of bringing them some hope. Would you watch this?

On the mission field

ANNOUNCER: For the wicked men and women working as modern-day slave traders, neighborhoods like this are the perfect hunting grounds. Using deceit and threats of violence they prey on the innocent, the poor, and the most vulnerable. Human traffickers rob the hopes and dreams of their victims just to make a small profit.

Open Captions

>> My name is Pinky Das. I come from a poor family. But I had dreams of getting an education. But that didn't happen. A year ago, when my baby was six months old, there was a lady who claimed she could give me work. But I was tricked and sold to a brothel. When I tried to leave, they said, "We bought you for this amount." When I couldn't pay them, they refused to release me.

ANNOUNCER: The emotional and physical abuse these women face every day prove to be an effective prison. Even though sometimes they aren't behind actual cell bars, the victims in a brothel are held captive nonetheless.

Open Captions

>> I thought of running away, but I always got caught. And I was threatened that my son would be sold to somebody else. Now I'm scared that my son will be taken away from me.

ANNOUNCER: LIFE Outreach and its mission partners have since rescued Pinky Das and her son. Today, she has started her journey to fulfill all her dreams. Together, we will reach, rescue, and restore hundreds of other women around the world just like Pinky Das.

Open Captions

>> I still have hope that my dream will come true. I'm going to learn things, and I'm going to work for myself. And I want my son to have a better future.

End of video

In the studio

SHEILA: I've met so many young girls just like that beautiful young woman, and sometimes they're 12, 13 years old. They're told, hey, come and we're going to get you this great job in the village, and you'll be able to send money back to your family. And then they're usually given something to eat, a lovely meal, but it is drugged, and they wake up beside some man and their life is forever changed.

Here's the thing, they're just like you and me. They're just little girls who started with one dream, something that they felt, like Pinky Das, like she could do when she grew up, and suddenly that it is all turned into a nightmare. I'll never forget my first trip to Southeast Asia and the desperation I felt when I got back to the little hotel where we were staying having seen what I saw and knowing that those girls were going to have to go back on the street that night. And I'd sat with them on the sidewalk, and they ate a box of Oreos. And now they're going to be put in these dresses and makeup. And I remember literally lying face down on the carpet in my hotel room and just sobbing.

I've never heard the audible voice of God, but I heard the Lord speak to me and say, "Sheila, get

up and dry your face and do something." We have the most amazing partners on the ground right now. I haven't been able to go on one of these trips for the last two years because of COVID but our partners are on the ground right now.

We have some amazing friends of this ministry who have put up a matching gift of \$320,000. So whatever you give today they will match dollar for dollar. It normally takes on average about \$128 to start that process of either reaching, rescuing, or restoring a girl. But now if you're able to give \$128 they will match that and that will literally be two girls grabbed from the gates of hell and brought into freedom so that they know they have a name, they have a future. They're not victims that have no help. God hears every one of their prayers.

And as long as you and I are on the earth at this time, we are God's boots on the ground, and it is our joy to rescue. If you can give \$64, they will match that and that will go to reaching, rescuing, restoring one girl.

I really believe that trafficking is a work of the enemy. It is just hellish. Whenever we walk those streets, I feel such a sense of evil. I have to pray in the spirit the whole time I'm there. But let's not just watch. Let's not just pray. Let's be an answer to their prayers and do something. Do something today. Just do what you can.

Would you go to your phone and just give the best gift you can? And then we will bring you the stories like Pinky Das, of someone, not only is she safe, but her son has a future and a hope. Please call now. Thank you!

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Innocent children and young people longing to be loved and cared for are being abducted and sold at the hands of violent predators, forced into the evil industry of human trafficking.

Through Mission: Rescue Life you can reach out to warn children who are at risk for sex

trafficking, rescue those already enslaved, restore young lives and give them a future.

We have a generous \$320,000 matching gift. Now your gift of \$128 to help reach, rescue, or restore one child can be doubled to help two children. Your \$64 gift will be matched to help save one child from the horrors of human trafficking. And a \$32 mission rescue gift will be doubled to \$64.

With your gift today, we'll send you the *Prayers For Life* Journal, a perfect book to write down your prayers as you reflect on your relationship with Christ. With your gift of \$128 or more, you'll also receive the N.I.V. Thinline Bible, along with 365 days of *Prayer For Life*, a beautiful devotional filled with scriptures and key thoughts for each day of the year. Keep all three resources close by for your daily prayer time as you meditate on God's Word.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1280, which will now help save 20 children. And you may request our inspiring bronze sculpture, "Let the Children Come."

Please call, write, or make your gift online.

End of video

In the studio

SHEILA: If the lines are busy, please keep calling. For any gift at all please request the book, *Attacking Anxiety*. Shawn and Jill, I just want to thank you both. This was phenomenal. And Christ looks beautiful in your brokenness.

SHAWN: Thank you! Thank you.

SHEILA: We love you here at LIFE and we'll see you next time. So from James, Betty, Randy, and the whole crew, God bless you! See you soon!