Morris, Joshua. "Review of *Are You Mad at Me? How to Stop Focusing on What Others Think and Start Living for You*." *Military Chaplaincy Review*, May 21, 2026. https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.162348.

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Are You Mad at Me? How to Stop Focusing on What Others Think and Start Living for You*

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https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.162348

Military Chaplaincy Review

Are You Mad at Me? How to Stop Focusing on What Others Think and Start Living for You By Meg Josephson. New York: Gallery, 2025. 294 pages.

Meg Josephson's *Are You Mad at Me? How to Stop Focusing on What Others Think and Start Living for You* enters an ongoing, popular conversation around mental health in thoughtfully accessible ways. Josephson, a therapist, centers her personal experiences of trauma while also narrating composite stories of those she counsels. Her methodology seamlessly blends Internal Family Systems (IFS), attachment theories, mindfulness, and both Western and Eastern forms of spirituality.

At face value, *Are You Mad at Me?* seems like an airport book: Have you ever found yourself wondering if people are mad at you? Do you suspect the people around you are secretly conspiring to hold an intervention about how disappointed they are in you? Perhaps you leave a meeting certain that you missed the mark, and your upcoming evaluation will only prove your supervisor's disappointment. If you have, you might be experiencing fawning, a response to situations in which we do not feel safe. This is where shallow descriptions of the book fall short: *Are You Mad at Me?* is a trauma book. The book describes the phenomenon of fawning—"the other F word"—how it is experienced as a trauma response, and embodied entry points for healing.[1]

Josephson's book is published into specific contexts around discussions of mental health, trauma, and healing. Mental health conversations are everywhere in the U.S. today: from the epidemic of loneliness through the fraught place of empathy in politics to the prevalence of therapy-speak on social media, to name just a few. The more people learn about themselves and their own current contexts, the more they can navigate their world. This is a central tenet of the trauma-informed care movement. If our schools, hospitals, clinics, police stations, etc. are trauma-informed, then the

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1 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 10.

experiences and interactions are already beginning in a more supportive vein. The centering question of the movement is "what has happened to you?" rather than "what is wrong with you?"

The prevalence of mental health discussions may risk oversaturation. In other words: if it can mean anything and be anywhere, the danger lingers that it means nothing. It's worth exploring whether the immediate access to popularizations of mental health concepts is a pathway to healing. The ubiquity of therapyspeak cuts in many different directions. Joephson's book exemplifies a direction towards healing.

What does "trauma" mean? A working definition is helpful. Clinically, trauma is a subjective experience or response to a traumatic event (or series of events) that continues to be experienced with adverse effects. The use of subjective centers the notion that not every traumatic event is experienced as a trauma. For example, one car accident has the potential to be traumatic depending on myriad factors beyond the scope of this review. In other words, trauma is outside of our control. Further, trauma, and this is vital for understanding fawning, is something that also takes place *inside* the body. Resmaa Menakem argues that trauma can be summed up as a bodily "response to anything it experiences as too much, too soon, or too fast."[2]

The human body and brain then work to protect from trauma. Josephson notes that "our brain's primary job is to keep us safe, plain and simple."[3] In survival mode, the body responds with fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. None of these responses are totalizing, there are seasons or contexts where a person might fight more than flee, for example. The first three concepts are familiar enough, so I will briefly note how Josephson describes them and spend the rest of this review on the implications of the fawn response.

Our fight response is the urge to respond to a threat with aggression (ultimately to alleviate the threat). A fight response could be physically violent or verbally violent. The flight response is our response to flee, to physically leave a potentially harmful situation. This is a literal retreat like running away, or as Josephson notes, it could include "ghosting" a relationship.[4] When our response is freeze, we do "the second-best thing" to fleeing and "mentally departing and blocking out what's going on."[5] A freeze response may look like dissociating, numbing, or mentally being in another place. Each of these is about reacting and *moving away* from a threat. This is where the fawn

2 Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery, 2017), 17.

3 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 12.

4 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 12.

5 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 12-13.

response differs. Josephson cites Pete Walker's 2013 *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* as coining fawning, but *Are You Mad at Me?* centers fawning in engaging and normalizing ways.[6]

The fawn response moves toward the threat, "becoming more appealing to the threat, being liked by the threat—so that you can feel safe."[7] The threat might be real or perceived; the fawn response appeases the threat. If we were taught (consciously or unconsciously) to please others, to sacrifice our own needs for the needs of others, then we might be responding to a safety trigger for survival. Fawning emerges in unsafe environments in which, crucially, unresolved conflict lingers. When conflict is unresolved, our younger selves had to make meaning out of it; therefore, often, we blame ourselves and internalize the pain. Josephson homes in on the consequence of this shift: "A child is left to make sense of the conflict on their own...when this happens again and again, the child's explanation evolves from *I cause bad things to happen* to *I am bad* (emphasis original)."[8]

Are you mad at me becomes a barometer of safety. This is, like the other three responses, learned, that is "then reinforced by society; we're taught that our main role in life is to please, appease, and sacrifice our needs for the comfort of other people."[9] The nature of fawning as becoming more appealing to a threat as a means of survival is a liberating realization. The tendency can be reduced to people-pleasing, and while people-pleasing is a facet of fawning, the response operates at much deeper level. Fawning is just as much a survival tactic as fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Josephson names how fawning manifests within six attachment prototypes: the peacekeeper ("it is easier to shove my emotions down than to risk upsetting the other person"),[10] the performer ("I'm personally responsible for making other people happy"),[11] the caretaker ("I thought that if I cared enough for them, they'd eventually care about me"),[12] the lone wolf ("love should feel really hard to get"),[13] the perfectionist ("My emotions are too much, and I'm never doing enough"),[14] and the chameleon ("I must blend in and make myself small to be safe").[15] Readers may find themselves in one of those vignettes, or maybe depending on the season of life, having said many of the responses.

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6 Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); See also Pete Walker, "Codependency, Trauma, and the Fawn Response," https://www.pete-walker.com/codependencyFawnResponse.htm.

7 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 13.

8 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 37.

9 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 13.

10 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 37.

11 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 40.

12 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 43.

13 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 45.

14 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 49.

15 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 53.

The attachment styles reveal that the human nervous system, identities, contexts, and experiences create the means of achieving safety. Survival is always context dependent. In some ways, then, fawning works. There are times when fawning is appropriate: for example, a person-of-color is pulled over by the police, the safety response to fawn might come up.[16] The internal experience of fawning is as a braiding of a hyper vigilant sensitivity and anxiety. Ultimately, we experience the fawn response as bad. We might ask: "why do I keep asking if my partner is mad at me?"; "What is wrong with me?"; "Why am I so anxious?" It is not bad; it is unconscious, and it has worked in the past. Fawning is a survival tactic. The healing journey comes as we notice not only the response but also when we can notice we are safe without it.

Josephson's work is inviting and normalizing. The playful title could engender an emotional distancing that prevents the reader from vulnerably entering the deep lifetime of healing work. As caregivers disentangle their own fawning from providing care for those who fawn, Josephson provides a helpful centering acronym. The NICER practice helps to "cultivate an awareness that is stronger than our thoughts."[17] When the overthinking kicks in with its catastrophizing logic, NICER encourages us to *notice* the experience that is emerging, for example: "I am noticing that I am feeling anxious and wishing I had said yes to that extra committee work. They probably think I not interested in our shared work." After noticing that it is emerging, we *invite* the experience to be present. Instead of rushing to fix it, solve it, or heal it, we give it permission to exist. It is okay. "Nothing is wrong with me for saying no." "This feeling is ok to exist."

Through the invitation of allowing it to be present, NICER encourages us to have some *curiosity* around what the anxious thoughts and reactions are communicating. What is it, exactly, that is hooked when I say no to more committee responsibilities at work? Do I sense that I am a "bad" employee? "Why do I feel differently?" "What is it that is getting hooked here?" Once our curiosity is guiding our processing, NICER helps us *embrace* that part of ourselves that needed to feel safe. We are merely embracing that part of our self that is feeling unsafe; once again, not trying to fix it or heal it. Each part is welcome. Finally, from this scanning we *return* to what is happening in front of us—and within us. We return to something tangible in the present. Josephson comments that our return "gently" shifts our "focus to what's happening now; you're training your mind to return to the present."[18] It is that training that I want to pivot towards.

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16 Taking an intersectional approach, Josephson highlights that for people-of-color, women, those who experience disability, the LGBTQIA+ community fawning is a necessary survival tactic. For people-of-color she notes the impulse to be the model minority to "survive in a society where white people have long been the gatekeepers..." See *Are You Mad*, 22.

17 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 103.

18 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 107.

Josephson notes that NICER is not a panacea to solve and fix our fawning; rather, its power is placing the fawning in its rightful context. Further, NICER works as a regulation tool. If we so easily get knocked off center and dysregulated, NICER assists in bringing the experience back to center. The middle portion of the book encourages the reader to explore and utilize mindfulness practices—even five minutes a day—as it builds resilient healing practices in us. These practices are not new to those who practice an embodied mindfulness, such as "elongating the exhale" in which you make your exhale longer than inhale to stimulate the vagus nerve and "immediately activates the parasympathetic nervous system.";[19] humming as it also connects to the vagus nerve; visualize a time you felt safe; using one's force in productive ways like pushing against a wall to direct our force against something and allowing your anger to exist someplace.[20] Ultimately, Josephson is empowering readers to cultivate deeper compassion for our bodies.[21] It is this part of Josephson's methodology that makes the book so beneficial. She uses IFS to name how different parts of our self in different seasons of life worked to survive in those contexts. She reminds us that "every second of every day, our bodies are working endlessly to allow us to live."[22] From the various organs, systems, and breath that got us to the place we are now, we give thanks.

Are You Mad at Me? is a book religious support personnel should read. It is not just how fawning will come up in counseling sessions, or how NICER is a helpful addition to our counseling repertoire, but the liberating piece of the book is the normalization of the fawn response. In any caregiving scenario the goal is not to solve or fix, but to slow down and come to a better understanding of inciting contexts, move towards healing (in the multiple ways healing manifests), and come to love ourselves more completely. *Are You Mad at Me?* was written for me, I found myself highlighting, note-taking, and really struggling internally to work through this book as I work through my own fawning. It was a journey to come to know myself and really love myself at a deeper level.

Published: May 21, 2026 EDT.

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19 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 162.

20 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 165.

21 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 166.

22 Josephson, *Are You Mad*, 166.