

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, after many years leading the faith formation department of a Catholic high school, I proposed a wellness program for our juniors and seniors. We created a variety of activities, including walking, biking, cooking and even recess. I began surveying the students, learning more about the stressors weighing them down, sleep deficits that led some to fall asleep behind the wheel, and a stunning level of medication for ADD and mood disorders. The program was clearly addressing a need.

I decided to offer a meditation class, thinking half a dozen students would sign up and give me an opportunity to figure out what to do with them. Within a few months I had eight full sections and a waiting list—students more intent on a break in the day than seeking any kind of deep thoughts.

Throughout my life I'd taken time frequently for quiet reflection and prayer, but without any particular system. I knew vaguely that secular mindfulness was showing up in schools, hospitals, corporations and correctional facilities, and research showed it had the capacity to lessen anxiety and depression and improve student performance. I discovered the positive psychology movement, and the depth of new insights provided by sophisticated brain imaging and the study of the nervous system. I was amazed to hear about the enormous and ever-growing body of research on the intimate interconnections among our thoughts, our emotions, and our responses to the world.

As I learned more, I was struck by the similarities to—and differences from—my own spiritual habits. I developed the ability to translate: to take practical information from neuroscience about *how* things work and combine them with what I'd learned from childhood about *why* things work. I knew I could hear God better when I was calm, so I learned the benefits of noticing my body, relaxing my muscles and using my breath to slow down my brain. I

studied how trauma is carried in our bodies and challenges our spirits.

While teaching religion I had been honored to hear students' stories and talk with them about faith. Over two decades I had seen the shifts in their thinking as they grew more skeptical about religion and more distracted by activities and social media. In the wellness classes we broadened the conversation, and I learned even more about their struggles. I knew too many walked into the classroom with heartbreak hiding behind their smiles. It seemed to me the time was ripe to begin integrating what science and faith both have to teach us about tending to our hearts and our spirits.

So What Is This?

This is not a theology curriculum. Rather, it is a faith-based approach to wellness and social/emotional learning. It is one response to the challenges we all face and the distance so many feel from our traditional approach to religion. These pages present a series of lessons on practical spiritual habits that research confirms can heal as well as guide us. The lessons are intended to supplement, not replace, resources already being used in a classroom or ministry setting.

The spiritual practices we'll explore aren't new. They've been around for centuries, shaping great saints and ordinary people alike. As I was growing up they were as natural to me as breathing, but they are unfamiliar to most young people today—even many whose families attend church regularly. While these habits require attention and intention, they don't take a lot of time. They've endured because they work.

Very simply, we'll be exploring three elements:

- **Spiritual emotions** give us a felt connection to our deepest selves, one another, creation and God. These emotions include gratitude, hope, compassion, awe, serenity, joy, inspiration and love. Research shows these emotions heal our bodies as well as our spirits.

- **Spiritual practices** are things we do on a repeated basis to refocus and reset our thoughts and emotions. We can weave these soul habits throughout our day, and they don't have to take a lot of time. The practices include asking blessing, letting go, music, gratitude, one-liners and service. These habits deepen our capacity for spiritual emotions.

- **Research on the body/spirit connection** helps us better understand the interactions among our nervous systems and our thoughts, emotions and behavior. We can use this knowledge to fine-tune our practices so they are even more transformative.

These practices aren't magic. We can't manipulate God, and we can't control what will happen on any given day. But we can help ourselves prepare and tune in. By way of comparison: If a family member is trying to talk to me when I'm busy, I do well to turn off the radio, set aside the onion I'm chopping, and look them straight in the eyes. If what they say frustrates me, I can take a deep breath before answering. That shift doesn't guarantee I'll hear or respond perfectly, but it sure ups my chances. Similarly, I stand a better chance of listening and living attuned to God's presence if I regularly give time and attention to tools that help me open my thoughts, my emotions, and my heart.

What Is Spiritual Resilience?

Our goal in this course is to grow in our capacity for spiritual resilience. Although the term may not be familiar to everyone, most people seem to sense intuitively what it means. We are defining spiritual resilience as

the ability to maintain

- *a sturdy positive spirit and*
- *a clear sense of purpose and meaning*
- *even in the face of suffering.*

Each of these three elements deserves careful attention. This curriculum focuses most directly on developing the first—a

positive spirit—although it will indirectly contribute to the other two aspects of resilience. Resources on engaging with purpose, meaning and suffering are in development.

Why This? Why Now?

I developed this curriculum primarily in response to the emotional distress our young people are experiencing. The pandemic and escalating political and religious tensions have taken a particularly devastating toll on youth. Even under “normal” circumstances, cascading hormones and the challenge of forming an adult identity add turbulence to this stage of life. In addition, the perennial tragedies of poverty, addiction and violence create a foundation of trauma for far too many of our young people. Social media is a two-edged sword, bringing needed connection with the outside world yet too often bombarding young people with a rapid-fire, cynical worldview.

This all comes at a time when too many of our faith-based institutions are rocked by scandal and division. Church affiliation is dropping dramatically, particularly among the young, at a time when they desperately need spiritual grounding. As I wrote I realized these principles aren’t specific to any one age group. For many of us, it’s time to try something new.

How Does This Work?

This course consists of fifteen lessons. Each lesson:

- 1) Opens with prayer
- 2) Checks in on participants’ homework and their week in general
- 3) Offers some new information
- 4) Suggests how to bring the information to life
- 5) Closes with an action-based homework assignment

I recommend spacing single lessons a week or two apart. Shorter sessions keep the focus on action rather than covering lots of information, and participants need time to put their new learning into practice. The goal is not simply to understand but also to use the lessons in everyday life. This program is like basketball camp for the soul—there’s not much point in showing up unless you’re actually going to play the game. There’s no such thing as a perfect game or a perfect player—our goal is active participation on a no-cut team.

While presenting each class in a series is ideal, you can also combine lessons or pull out individual lessons to use singly. While classes do build on information in earlier sessions, for the most part they can also stand independently. You’ll find some suggested schedules on page 11.

It’s possible that at some point participants may feel overwhelmed by the amount of material covered. Encourage them to remember this is an overview. We’re “shopping” together, and no one is expected to carry the whole store home with them. Rather, over the course of the series we will help participants individually select practices and insights they would like to rely on. Ideally you will be able to support them in continuing and deepening their practice.

The Participants’ Journal

The success of this program depends on making the framework concrete, practical and memorable. Participants are much more likely to actually try out methods and raise their level of awareness if they capture their own thoughts and commitments as they go along. Some may return to the material in the future, if they have it available. Loose sheets of paper tend to get lost and tossed. If your setting does not have the resources to purchase the journals, please contact us.

This *Leaders’ Guide* is designed for volunteer catechists and leaders of faith-based agencies as well as professional campus ministers, chaplains and teachers. You may or may not come to this endeavor with previous training or experience. In an ideal

world we would all be rock-solid in these methods, practicing daily, shedding spiritual radiance on everyone we meet and totally comfortable talking about this stuff with people. Real life is more complex.

If you're a rookie, go ahead and tell the participants you are exploring some new terrain. Let them know you're not an expert and you're conducting an experiment together. The research behind these methods is solid, so you're on safe ground.

Even if you've been in formal ministry for a while, some of these lessons may be unfamiliar. If you feel awkward the first few times leading a breathing exercise, that's ok. Take a deep breath first yourself - and then dive in. More than once I have found myself just one step ahead of my students, but I discovered if I paid attention and did my homework one step was enough. What we need most is to be brave, honest, genuine and kind. The rest will take care of itself, although perhaps not without some messy moments.

Whether volunteer or professional, your own engagement with the material is key. You don't need years of experience in letting go or asking blessing, but if you're not trying to bring the practices to life yourself the lessons will sound hollow.

The lessons in the *Leaders' Guide* offer sample scripts you can use as you start out. If you'd like to read a "regular" book on this approach before leading a group, *The Spiritual Resilience Handbook* will give you a good foundation. Or you can check in with The Center for Spiritual Resilience at spiritualresilience.org to inquire about online or in-person support.

About the Research

Very little research has been done on the effects of Christian prayer or other spiritual practices. What research does exist has been done primarily on Carmelite nuns, whose lives are probably quite different from yours and mine. In contrast, vast amounts of secular research have been done on the benefits of positive

emotions, music, compassionate action and various non-Christian contemplative practices.

We are borrowing and extrapolating from that research. If gratitude has been shown to lower people's stress levels, it seems reasonable to expect that being grateful to God

would have a similar outcome. If studies show helping someone else brings joy, then serving others because Jesus instructed us to reach out is also likely to lift our mood

The Benefits

Throughout this course we'll be citing research on the benefits of spiritual emotions and practices. Some might say our emphasis on these benefits short-circuits their value because Christians are supposed to be selfless. They think we shouldn't pursue a connection with God for what we can get out of it, and they have a point.

Research also indicates chasing happiness directly doesn't work very well. Too often we get derailed by short-term excitement that distracts us from what really nourishes. Spiritual resilience goes deeper than happiness, and by its very nature predisposes us to care for others as well as ourselves. We are created to be in right relationship with ourselves, others and God, and we sense and instinctively rejoice in those moments. These methods can help us get there.

I would suggest the benefits to our wellbeing are evidence of the way God has created us: we thrive under the influence of love and grow ragged when stewing in frustration or resentment. We live this out as body/spirits—but until now we haven't understood very well what that means. Today we have the opportunity to apply abundant new knowledge to that connection.