

Dakota Annual Conference Lunch-n-Learn June 6, 2025

Guarded Hearts and Minds: Peace that Surpasses Understanding

Rev. Ron Olson, Diane Owen and panel of experts.

Our world is rapidly changing, there is massive uncertainty in so many areas, politically, socially, and economically. That uncertainty has the potential to disrupt our inner peace. It doesn't have to! But if it does, where do we go to get it back? Together with a panel of clergy and mental health professionals, we will explore today's conditions contributing to stressful conditions, a few things we can do to reduce the contributing factors – for our people and for ourselves, and the resources that we have available to us, as clergy and laity, that can help us restore or maintain the inner peace God offers to us, even as our world is decidedly not at peace.

Sample Mental Health and Spiritual Practices

Mindfulness: Using the senses to stay in the present (5-4-3-2-1)

We have 5 physical senses: sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste. By focusing on what we observe with these 5 senses, we can reduce the stress that often comes from the sense of being out of control as we focus on the past (what happened that I regret or wanted to change) or the future (what might be that has me feeling anxious). Both of these states, living too much in the past or the future, can easily make us feel anxious, because we have no control over any of that. Instead, take charge of the present. Observe what is around you, right now. Ground yourself in the "now." Here's one way to do that:

5--Focus on **5** things you can **see**: I see my hands in front of me; that beautiful spruce tree in my backyard; the flutter of the leaves on my apple tree; the picture on the wall of my lovely family, the colorful and varied rocks in my landscaping.

4--What are **4** things you can **feel**? I can feel the smoothness of my desk; the warmth of the cup of coffee in my hand; the soft texture of my clothing; the snug feeling of my comfortable shoes.

3--What are **3** things you can hear? I hear the robins singing; the sound of the cars passing by in the street; the sound of the fan in my office

2--What are **2** things you can smell: I smell the comforting and nutty smell of coffee; the smell of fresh ink as I print my paper.

1--What is **1** thing you can taste: I taste the honey on my toast. So good!

4 Elements Exercise for Stress Reduction

Adapted from Elan Shapiro, 2012 by Beverlee Laidlaw Chasse

EARTH – GROUNDING, REALITY OF SAFETY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

- Take a minute to 'land,' be here, now.
- Feel both feet on the ground
- Feel the support of the chair
- Look around and notice 3 things.
- What do you see? What do you hear?
- Imagine you are a tree, roots coming down through your feet, connecting with the healing energy and strength of the Earth.

AIR – BREATHING FOR CENTERING

- Imagine a balloon in your belly.
- INHALE: Fill the balloon
- EXHALE: Deflate the balloon completely and squeeze out emotional distress
- Try this breathing pattern:
 - - Inhale for 4 seconds
 - - Hold for 2 seconds
 - - Exhale for 4 seconds
 - - Hold for 2 seconds
- Repeat for about a dozen deeper, slower breaths.

WATER – CALM AND CONTROLLED, SWITCHING ON THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

- Make saliva. Moisturize your mouth.
- When anxious (fight, flight, or freeze), your mouth goes dry.
- Making saliva activates the digestive system and triggers the Parasympathetic Nervous System — bringing calm, focus, and control.

FIRE – LIGHT UP THE PATH OF YOUR IMAGINATION

- Bring up a SAFE PLACE or a time you felt good about yourself.
- Let yourself be there: What do you see, hear, smell?
- How does it feel — outside and inside your body?
- Activate with the Butterfly Hug:
 - - Cross arms across your chest
 - - Intertwine thumbs, spread fingers under collarbones
 - - Slowly tap alternately on each side of the chest
- This enhances feelings of safety and calm.

- Wear a 4 Elements Bracelet as a reminder that you can immediately reduce stress using this exercise.

Breath Prayers / Centering Prayers

1. Breath Prayer

Choose a short scripture or phrase that you can repeat when you inhale and exhale.

Example: Be still and know (on inhale) that I am God (on exhale) (from Psalm 46:10)

Breathe in and out slowly and deeply, repeating the phrase until you feel yourself begin to de-stress.

2. Diminishing Breath Prayer

Using the same phrase, repeat the phrase over and over again and dropping one word with each repetition.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know that I

Be still and know that

Be still and know

Be still and

Be still

Be

Going Deeper – Alternative and Lengthier Practices

1. Journaling Prayers

- Write a letter from yourself to God
- Write a letter from God to yourself
- Write a letter to yourself from the future

2. Psalm and Lament Writing

- Pick a favorite Psalm or Lament that might speak to the emotions your are feeling
- Read through the Psalm a few times
- Now rewrite the Psalm, with its ebb and flow of meaning and intent, in your own words or to describe your own situation more clearly

3. Guided Imagination

- a. Read through a favorite story from the Bible, i.e Jesus Stills / Calms the Storm – Mark 4:35-41
- b. Immerse yourself in the story as you read it, using your imagination and senses – what do you see, who is there with you, what do you feel, smell, taste, what do you say (or not), who do you interact with and how

4. Yoga – to incorporate body movement with meditation and deep breathing

5. Body Scans

- a. A meditative body scan of sensations in the body, starting at your toes and moving up to the crown of your head, pausing as you move slowly from one part of the body to the next, remaining present and noticing at each point in the body what you are sensing and feeling.

- b. [Body Scan Script | Worksheet | Therapist Aid](#)

6. Prayer Dance

- a. Use a well-known prayer or one that you create on your own and allow your body to move along with each phrase,
- b. Example - the Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven (raise arms upward), hallowed be thy name (kneel or bow down), etc.

7. Praying in Color / Prayer Doodling

- a. Using a sheet of paper and various colored writing utensils, allow yourself to draw, doodle, write words, etc. to the various thoughts that come to mind that you pray and focus on

Additional Resources & Ideas

Utilize digital well-being settings on your phone and other devices to

- Mute notifications during work hours
- Set App use limits
- Monitor screen time
- Set Do Not Disturb times at key times of your day (work hours, bedtime, etc.)

Utilize phone apps for calming sounds, prayer, explore various music styles that can provide calm and aid with certain neurodivergent needs (noise cancelling, focused reading, etc.)

Book: *Paths to Prayer: Finding Your Own Way to the Presence of God* by Patricia D. Brown – discovering your prayer type and exploring 40 ways to pray

Wespath wellbeing resources for clergy <https://www.wespath.org/health-well-being/MH-Tool>