Prayer: O God of Peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still, and know that thou art God: through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

1. What is stress? Stress is a physical, psychological or emotional factor that causes bodily and/or mental tension. Stress can be external (environment, social situations) or internal (illness).

2. In our current world of Covid-19, quarantines, social isolation, fear of the unknown, boredom, worry about our health, financial loss, and conflicting information, we are all susceptible to stress and anxiety.

3. What is stress? Stress is a physical, psychological or emotional factor that causes bodily and/or mental tension. Stress can be external (environment, social situations, home schooling or working from home for the first time) or internal (illness).

4. Acute stress is usually brief and is the most common and frequent type of stress. Acute stress is usually caused by reactive thinking. Acute stress is thought induced.

5. Acute stress may cause headaches, irritability, tension, back or neck pain, other muscle aches, stomach/gut/bowel problems such as heartburn, acid stomach, diarrhea. You may have elevated heart rate, rapid heart rate, sweaty palms, sleep problems, dizziness and chest pain.

6. Acute stress is present is everyone’s life.


8. They are frequently Type A personalities or are “worriers”. Common signs are similar to acute stress and include emotional distress, compromised cognitive functions such as attention, concentration, processing speed, learning are affected and the immune system can be compromised-frequent colds, asthma, allergies, other immune issues.
9. Ask yourself, what type of stressors are you currently experiencing in your life? What types of negative thoughts are running through your mind? What concerns and fears do you have? In these uncertain times, how do we reduce our anxiety, reduce our fears for the future and live in the here and now?

10. What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention to the present.

11. This state encompasses observing one’s thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad.

12. To live mindfully is to live in the moment and reawaken oneself to the present, rather than dwelling on the past or anticipating the future.

13. Mindfulness is frequently used in meditation and certain kinds of therapy. It has many positive benefits, including lowering stress levels, reducing harmful ruminating, and protecting against depression and anxiety. Research even suggests that mindfulness can help people better cope with rejection and social isolation.

Exercises:

1. Deep Breathing

   Our first exercise can start by sitting cross-legged on a cushion on the floor, laying on the floor or sitting in a chair. Put your feet flat on the floor and sit with a straight back, arms lose at your side or in your lap – not crossed. Many find it helpful to close their eyes as they begin or find a spot to focus on. From there, simply breathe deeply in through your nose and out slowly through your mouth, keeping your attention completely on your breath. You want to fill your diaphragm fully with air.
You can put your hand on your lower belly to feel the inhale and exhale.

Notice how the air fills your lungs and exits the lungs.

Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.....

1. Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Push the breath into your lower lungs and feel your diaphragm expanding.

2. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let thoughts rise and fall of their own accord and be at one with your breath.

3. In through your nose, out through your mouth.

4. Purposefully listen your breath, focusing your sense of awareness on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life.

5. Then watch with your awareness as it works its way up and out of your mouth and its energy dissipates into the world.

Don’t be surprised if you feel a little light-headed after deep breathing for 3-5 minutes – your body is not used to all that oxygen!

If you are someone who thought they’d never be able to meditate, guess what? You are half way there already!

If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three?
2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful because it helps you notice and appreciate seemingly simple elements of your environment in a more profound way.

The exercise is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or looking at our phones.

1. Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon. Start your deep breathing.

2. Don’t do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into watching for as long as your concentration allows.

3. Look at this object as if you are seeing it for the first time.

4. Visually explore every aspect of its formation, and allow yourself to be consumed by its presence.

5. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its purpose within the natural world.

3. Mindful Awareness

This exercise is designed to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation of simple daily tasks and the results they achieve.

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example.

At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment and where the door will lead you.
Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable this process and the brain that facilitates your understanding of how to use the computer.

These ‘touch point’ cues don’t have to be physical ones.

For example: Each time you think a negative thought, you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful and release the negativity.

Or, perhaps each time you smell food, you take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with your family and friends.

Everyday since we have sheltered at home, I take time to appreciate the people and things I am thankful for that day.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today and, instead of going through your daily motions on autopilot, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings these actions brings to your life.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way, and indeed to train your mind to be less swayed by the influence of past experiences and preconception.

So much of what we “feel” is influenced by past experience. For example, we may dislike a song because it reminds of us of a breakup or another period of life when things felt negative.

So the idea of this exercise is to listen to some music from a neutral standpoint, with a present awareness that is unhindered by preconception.

Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.

1. Close your eyes and put on your headphones.
2. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song.

3. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of track. Even if the music isn’t to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.

4. Explore the song by listening to the dynamics of each instrument. Separate each sound in your mind and analyze each one by one.

5. Hone in on the vocals: the sound of the voice, its range and tones. If there is more than one voice, separate them out as you did in step 4.

The idea is to listen intently, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgment of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation. Don't think, hear.

5. Mindful Immersion

The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentment in the moment and escape the persistent striving we find ourselves caught up in on a daily basis.

Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task in order to get on with doing something else, take that regular routine and fully experience it like never before.

For example: if you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions:

Feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean.

The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task.
Instead of laboring through and constantly thinking about finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally and spiritually.

Who knows, you might even enjoy the cleaning for once!

6. Mindful Appreciation

In this last exercise, all you have to do is notice 5 things in your day that usually go unappreciated.

These things can be objects or people; it’s up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life, the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

For example: electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes provide you warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the garden, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work?
- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth?
Once you have identified your 5 things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.

6. Mindful Prayer
In a recent confirmation class, our Rector, Jack Alvey, gave us a handout and discussed prayer from the Episcopal Questions, Episcopal Answers book. Two quotes had a profound effect on me:

One is: “The primary purpose of prayer is not to necessarily to ask God for things. Instead, the purpose of prayer is to connect with our Creator and allow the spiritual dimension of life to call us into a deeper commitment to love.”

The second one was: “Perhaps when we pray, we are creating space for God to act. We are opening up channels-perhaps at a quantum level- for love to act and make a difference.”

*Mindfulness deep breathing and exercises may help us open those channels for love to act and to prepare us to experience God.*

Simple mindfulness exercises can be practiced anywhere and anytime. Research indicates that engaging your senses outdoors is especially beneficial. For most of these exercises, you’ll need to set aside time when you can be in a quiet place without distractions or interruptions. You might choose to practice this type of exercise early in the morning before you begin your daily routine.

Aim to practice mindfulness every day for about six months. Over time, you might find that mindfulness becomes effortless. My students initially thought the mindfulness exercises were silly but by the end of the semester, they were begging for more.

*Think of it as a commitment to reconnecting with and nurturing yourself.*

Either way, all you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.
More suggestions:

- Pay attention. It’s hard to slow down and notice things in a busy world. Try to take the time to experience your environment with all of your senses — touch, sound, sight, smell and taste. For example, when you eat a favorite food, take the time to smell, taste and truly enjoy it.
- Live in the moment. Try to intentionally bring an open, accepting and discerning attention to everything you do. Find joy in simple pleasures.
- Accept yourself. Treat yourself the way you would treat a good friend.
- Focus on your breathing. When you have negative thoughts, try to sit down, take a deep breath and close your eyes. Focus on your breath as it moves in and out of your body. Sitting and breathing for even just a minute can help.

You can also try more structured mindfulness exercises, such as:

- Body scan meditation. Lie on your back with your legs extended and arms at your sides, palms facing up. Focus your attention slowly and deliberately on each part of your body, in order, from toe to head or head to toe. Be aware of any sensations, emotions or thoughts associated with each part of your body.
- Sitting meditation. Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and hands in your lap. Breathing through your nose, focus on your breath moving in and out of your body. If physical sensations or thoughts interrupt your meditation, note the experience and then return your focus to your breath.

What are the benefits of meditation?

Meditation has been studied in many clinical trials. The overall evidence supports the effectiveness of meditation for various conditions, including:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Depression
- Insomnia
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
Preliminary research indicates that meditation can also help people with asthma and fibromyalgia.

Meditation can help you experience thoughts and emotions with greater balance and acceptance. Meditation also has been shown to:

- Improve attention
- Decrease job burnout
- Improve sleep
- Improve diabetes control

There are many simple ways to practice mindfulness. Some examples include:

- Pay attention. It's hard to slow down and notice things in a busy world. Try to take the time to experience your environment with all of your senses — touch, sound, sight, smell and taste. For example, when you eat a favorite food, take the time to smell, taste and truly enjoy it.
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- Sitting meditation. Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and hands in your lap. Breathing through your nose, focus on your breath moving in and out of your body. If physical sensations or thoughts interrupt your meditation, note the experience and then return your focus to your breath.
Walking meditation. Find a quiet place 10 to 20 feet in length, and begin to walk slowly. Focus on the experience of walking, being aware of the sensations of standing and the subtle movements that keep your balance. When you reach the end of your path, turn and continue walking, maintaining awareness of your sensations.

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