

The Jesus Prayer for Christians with Daily Stress: A Two-Week Program¹

Joshua J. Knabb
California Baptist University

¹ This program is a modified, condensed version of the manualized approach in Knabb, Frederick, and Cumming (2016) and Knabb and Frederick (in press). The exercises and explanations have been adapted from these two sources. The format and structure of this program, as well as some technical language, has also been adapted from Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2013).

The Jesus Prayer for Christians with Daily Stress: An Overview

UNDERSTANDING STRESS²

For many individuals in contemporary Western society, stress is a familiar experience. The actual term *stress* is commonly used within the field of engineering to capture the weight of an external force upon a structure. The repeated exposure to an external force can lead to strain. When this happens, the structure is altered, resulting in wear and tear and a gradual deterioration.

Within the field of psychology, psychologists often view environmental demands as similar to the “external force” that steadily bears down upon a structure within the engineering profession. As another parallel, “strain,” or the impact that an external force has on a structure within engineering, tends to resemble the impact that environmental demands have on an individual over time, gradually wearing him or her down.

Within this process, researchers within the field of psychology tend to focus on either the environmental demand or the impact an environmental demand has on an individual. With the former, a major life event may lead to stress, such as a death in the family, troubled relationship, medical illness, or other unexpected life transition. When investigating the latter, researchers often emphasize the psychological impact an environmental demand has on the individual, focusing on the experience of “stress,” which may include feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, confusion, or anxiety.

As a somewhat newer area of investigation, researchers have more recently focused on the person’s *evaluation* of the environmental demand, rather than the environmental demand itself or the impact it has on someone. For example, one particular person may not experience an environmental demand as “stressful” if he or she is able to effectively manage the environmental demand, whereas another individual might be overwhelmed by “stress” if he or she does not believe salient psychological

² The main points in this section are from Lazarus (1999).

resources are available. A key element distinguishing these two experiences, of course, is the person's evaluation, which will be a point of focus for this two-week program.

THE PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF STRESS³

Within the United States, stress is a rather ubiquitous human experience. According to the annual *Stress in America* survey, the most frequently cited sources of stress include finances, work life, economic conditions, and family life. For roughly one-fourth of Americans surveyed, their current stress level has negatively impacted either their physical or mental health, with symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, loss of motivation, and fatigue.

More specifically, repeatedly experiencing stress can have a negative impact on the brain, with stress hormones affecting both the frontal lobes and hippocampus. In addition, within the *Stress in America* survey, roughly one-third of survey participants in the United States reported irritability, anxiousness, low motivation, loss of energy, or sadness due to stress. Also, one-third of participants stated they have had trouble with sleeping or overeating due to stress, and one-third indicated they have lost their patience or raised their voice in a conversation with a significant other due to stress.

As these data reveal, stress can have a significant impact on physiological, psychological, and relational functioning. Yet, the transactional model of stress, described in the next section, emphasizes the importance of the *evaluation* of environmental demands in determining whether they lead to either strain or perseverance. Therefore, what follows is a brief review of this popular model in the stress literature, followed by a discussion on the ways in which psychological science and the Christian faith can be blended to help you respond differently to stress in your daily life.

³ The main points in this section are from APA (2014) and Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, and Heim (2009).

THE TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF STRESS⁴

Richard Lazarus' transactional model is one of the more popular ways to make sense of stress. In a given situation, an individual must respond to a demand in his or her environment. Environmental demands can be major life events that have an impact on a large group of people (e.g., a natural disaster), events that impact one person (e.g., the loss of a job), or daily struggles (e.g., getting to work on time). However, from Lazarus' perspective, stress is not *just* someone's response to an environmental demand. Instead, stress is defined as follows:

- "A particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being."

Notice, here, that the emphasis is on the relationship between the environmental demand and the person's response, which includes the person's *evaluation* of this demand-response relationship. This evaluation tends to involve the ways in which the individual makes sense of the environmental demand, along with his or her views on whether or not he or she has the requisite resources to persevere in the midst of the perceived challenge.

From Lazarus' viewpoint, there are at least three things that impact a person's evaluation of the environmental demand-response relationship:

- Goals
 - In the midst of the challenge, the person must perceive that some sort of goal is being threatened; otherwise, the environmental demand is not seen as a source of stress
 - For example, someone might want a promotion at work, experiencing stress when the job might go to a co-worker instead
- Views of the self and the world
 - Someone's view of him- or herself and the world influences

⁴ The main points in this section are from Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Lazarus (1999).

whether or not he or she believes he or she possesses the cognitive and behavioral resources to overcome the environmental demand

- For example, someone might believe he or she is worthless, and that the world is an extremely unloving place, which impacts his or her evaluation of whether or not he or she can improve a strained relationship
- Available resources
 - Someone's views on the actual available resources determines whether or not he or she has confidence in his or her ability to persevere in the face of an environmental demand
 - For example, someone might believe he or she has no relational support, which makes it difficult to reach out for help when he or she needs assistance with a bill that is overdue

As someone attempts to evaluate this environmental demand-response dynamic, there are typically two evaluations that take place:

- Primary evaluation
 - "What is my goal or value in this situation?"
 - With the primary evaluation, someone is assessing whether or not the situation tends to influence his or her goal or value; if not, there is no perceived stress, whereas some sort of loss or threatening situation from the past, present, or future can be viewed as stressful
 - Essentially, the person is asking what is on the line in a given situation
- Secondary evaluation
 - "What can I do in response to this situation?"
 - If someone has reached the conclusion that there is a past loss, present harm, or future challenging situation, he or she is faced with a decision about how to cope
 - In this second evaluation, the person is attempting to identify resources for overcoming the perceived threat, loss, or challenge

When considering how individuals handle environmental demands that are viewed as stressful, Lazarus suggested that coping is defined as follows:

- “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.”

Overall, Lazarus’ transactional theory of stress can be helpful for you in that the focus is on the evaluation of the environmental demand-response relationship. From a Christian perspective, God is infinitely wise, loving, and powerful, interacting on a personal level with you from moment to moment. Because his providential care extends to all of creation (Matthew 6:25-34), it may be helpful to draw from *his* strength, turning to God to help you cope with environmental demands by evaluating them differently. For Christians, the goal in a stressful situation is to stay focused on God, recognizing he created you in his image to be in relationship with him. In this relationship with God, he offers you comfort, protection, safety, and peace, walking beside you from moment to moment. In other words, he is *the* available resource you need to persevere in the midst of life’s challenges.

The primary evaluation, from a Christian perspective, involves recognizing the value of your relationship with God as central in your response to stress. Rather than viewing the loss of a material possession, job, or friendship as the most important part of your life, first turning to God for strength and comfort can help you more effectively manage the environmental demand. In terms of the secondary evaluation, the first step in responding to the environmental demand involves surrendering to God’s providential care (from this two-week program’s perspective). By yielding to God’s will before doing anything else, you are reaching out to him as a source of strength in order to work with him to overcome the obstacle that is in your way.

This two-step process—recognizing your relationship with God comes before the roadblock you are facing and turning to him first as a source of strength—will be foundational in this brief, two-week program. Before turning to a particular form of religious coping that can help you with this,

as well as the vehicle through which this two-step process can be pursued, a recent approach to stress reduction will be reviewed to give you a better sense of an effective way to reassess stressful environmental demands.

MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION⁵

In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn developed the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts. Drawing from Buddhist mindfulness meditation, the MBSR course helps students to use mindfulness to evaluate environmental demands differently in order to effectively respond to both inner and outer demands. Whether these demands relate to inner pain or the environment, the focus is on non-judgmentally observing the changes that take place within the mind and body, responding to these experiences with compassion, openness, and curiosity. As Kabat-Zinn revealed, “The meditative practice brings us face-to-face within our own minds and bodies as we watch our constantly changing thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and impulses.”

To offer a basic definition, mindfulness involves focusing on one thing at a time in the present moment with an attitude of non-judgmental compassion, allowing thoughts, feelings, and sensations to run their natural course without trying to hold onto them or push them away. As a result, mindfulness can be applied to stress in that there is a focus on acceptance, helping practitioners to relate differently to life’s most painful experiences. As practitioners learn to stay rooted in the present moment with an attitude of non-judgmental compassion, many find they are more effectively able to live life, rooted in intentionality and increased awareness of each unfolding moment.

To date, MBSR has been applied to a range of different struggles, including stress, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression. What is more, the approach has been used in a variety of settings with a range of populations, including university students and different types of employees in the workplace. In a recent review of 18 MBSR studies, researchers found there was a significant improvement pre- to post-treatment for mental health, concluding, “MBSR

⁵ The main points in this section are from Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach (2004) and Kabat-Zinn (1990).

may help a broad range of individuals to cope with their clinical and nonclinical problems.”

Given that MBSR primarily relies on mindfulness, which has roots in the Buddhist tradition, this current two-week program was designed to help Christians like you to relate differently to stress by resting in God, utilizing the Jesus Prayer in place of mindfulness meditation. A key ingredient of the Jesus Prayer, to be sure, involves surrendering to God, trusting in his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power during instances of stress. Therefore, before offering a basic overview of the Jesus Prayer, the religious coping literature will be briefly reviewed, given that there is a growing research base that elucidates the benefits of positive forms of religious coping in response to life’s inevitable, ubiquitous sources of stress.

RELIGIOUS COPING AND STRESS⁶

A few decades ago, psychologist Kenneth Pargament began to research religious coping. For Pargament, stressful experiences in life are evaluated in certain ways, leading to the perception of stress as an influencing factor in the relationship between environmental demands and someone’s response to these demands. Citing Richard Lazarus’ research, Pargament emphasized that people attempt to cope with environmental demands by pursuing meaning, purpose, and significance. In the process, people inevitably draw from a personal lens through which they view both themselves and the world. In turn, individuals attempt to cope with life’s demands by converting this view of the world into specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Along the way, people will strive to clutch the very things that are meaningful to them, what Pargament calls “conservation.” This, of course, makes sense, given that people assign value to the things that are most important, attempting to maintain their relationship to life’s most valuable possessions (e.g., a relationship, a job, a material possession, a routine, a view of the world) in the face of adversity.

⁶ The main points in this section are from Ano and Vasconcelles (2005), Clements and Ermakova (2012), Pargament (1997), Pargament, Feuille, and Burdzy (2011), and Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000).

In addition to “conserving,” individuals will often attempt to make changes in the face of environmental demands, referred to by Pargament as “transformation.” In other words, there are times that people may realize that change is necessary in order to cope with a demand, rather than attempting to cling to what they already know.

When applied to the Christian faith, the Christian religious heritage most certainly offers a way to find significance in life. When faced with the realities of a fallen world, coping with environmental demands can involve both “conservation” and “transformation.” Many times, Christians will turn to their religious heritage to hold onto a well-established way of thinking or behaving—this might involve a certain pattern or ritual that has historically brought peace or comfort from day to day. On the other hand, there are times that involve the need for “transformation,” focusing on a changed life that consists of making radical adjustments in the face of difficulties and trials. “Transformation,” from this two-week program’s perspective, can occur when Christians attempt to align their will with God’s will, turning to him in difficult times to place their trust, hope, and faith in his infinite wisdom, goodness, and power. By consenting to God’s will (rather than pursuing their own will), Christians can find peace in any situation, consistent with Jesus’ attitude of surrender when pursuing the will of his father in the gospels (especially via the atonement; see Luke 22:42).

Over the years, Pargament has identified at least two types of religious coping—positive and negative. With positive religious coping, individuals focus on a deeper relationship with God, drawing from God’s love to work together on a solution and grow in the midst of an environmental demand. Conversely, negative religious coping often involves being preoccupied with God’s perceived distance, believing God is punishing the individual during stressful occurrences. In a review of almost 40 studies on religious coping, researchers found that positive religious coping was negatively associated with psychological maladjustment. Stated differently, people within the reviewed studies who reported using positive religious coping during instances of stress tended to report less distress, such as depression, anxiety, and other stress-related symptoms.

More recently, some authors have identified a specific form of positive

religious coping—*surrender*. With surrender, Christians are yielding to God in order to change their evaluation of environmental demands, rather than solely focusing on trying to change the environment or circumstance. Because God is infinitely knowledgeable and wise, loving and good, and present and powerful, he is trustworthy. Combined, these attributes mean that Christians can lean on God as a source of strength and guidance during difficult life events. This is especially important when considering a basic definition of stress. If stress is viewed as the evaluation that important resources are not available to effectively respond to an environmental demand, turning to God for strength, encouragement, protection, and comfort may be the most important part of the demand-response dynamic.

Returning to Pargament's distinction between "conservation" and "transformation" in the midst of environmental demands, this program will help you to "transform," focusing on teaching you a new way to respond to life's demands by drawing from the Jesus Prayer. Among other benefits, this program can help you learn to lean on God, finding rest in him when environmental changes are not possible. By changing your evaluation of environmental demands, you will be learning to find peace in the midst of the storm. By prioritizing your relationship with God to be your primary focus when faced with a demand, you will be turning to him to get you through the challenge, relying on *his* strength, rather than your own unilateral efforts.

To offer a quick example, imagine you are one of Jesus' disciples, fishing with him as you float in a boat on the Sea of Galilee (see, e.g., Matthew 8:23-27). A storm begins to form, which leads to heightened anxiety. Of course, in this scenario, the storm represents the environmental demand. In this experience, you quickly begin to evaluate what resources you have available to respond to the scary storm. In this process, you immediately recognize that Jesus is with you; as this "light bulb" goes off, you realize Jesus has the ability to calm the storm, and is keeping you safe. Surrendering to him, you find much-needed peace in the process, acknowledging his power as you bask in the peace of the moment.

On a daily basis, you have the ability to trust in God's infinite wisdom, goodness, and power, recognizing that he knows all things, has an

enduring, benevolent love for his creation, and has the power to orchestrate life's events in ways that are best for his people. Essentially, this means that you can trust in God's care, surrendering to him from moment to moment during instances of stress by valuing your relationship with him above anything else. When your relationship with God comes first, you are able to effectively respond to demands because you know God is with you, offering you strength in your moment of weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Interestingly, in a recent study, researchers found that the religious coping style of surrender was negatively linked to stress among both undergraduate students and a community sample of pregnant women. In other words, as these participants reported a greater willingness to surrender to God, they also reported less stress and stress-related symptoms. This, of course, is the central goal of the program—to help you learn to transform the experience you have of stress by re-evaluating environmental demands, leaning on God's infinite wisdom, goodness, and power to find rest in him. The vehicle through which this will be pursued, over the course of the next two weeks, is the Jesus Prayer, given its emphasis on sitting in silence with God.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE JESUS PRAYER⁷

The actual Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"—likely began in the first half of the first millennium, when the early desert Christians moved to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria to deepen their relationship with God by striving for radical intimacy. Relinquishing many of the comforts from their previous life, these desert Christians typically turned to the Bible as a way to focus their often-distracted mind. Because they had to deal with harsh desert conditions, such as hunger, heat, and less-than-optimal living conditions, many of them found that they faced tempting thoughts. Commonly turning to the Psalms, the early desert Christians focused on God's Word as a way to keep their attention on him throughout the day. At a certain point, they began to recite the Jesus Prayer, which combines a plea to Jesus for mercy

⁷ This section combines information from the writings of Matthewes-Green (2009), Talbot (2013), and Knabb, Frederick, and Cumming (2016).

(consistent with several passages in the gospels; see Luke 18:13) and Paul's instructions to continuously pray (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Interestingly, one of the most important words in the Jesus Prayer (other than the actual name of Jesus, of course) is "mercy," which seems to capture a "cry for help." In other words, as practitioners recite the prayer, they are asking Jesus to respond to them in the midst of their day, recognizing that he can offer compassion and understanding in the midst of whatever challenges arise.

As you recite the first part of the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," you are confessing that he is the Lord of your life, as well as that he is your Savior. These words are especially relevant in the context of daily demands, given that you are powerfully declaring that Jesus is in control of both your inner and outer world. These words, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," are commonly uttered with the in-breath, breathing in Jesus' name as a way to fill oneself with his presence. What is more, "have mercy on me," can help you to ask Jesus for his assistance, pleading him to respond to your predicament with loving compassion. Because Jesus lived a fully human life, he understands your struggles (Hebrews 4:15), and is ready to be with you in the midst of your challenges. When you are feeling overwhelmed, God is by your side. As you breath out the second part, "have mercy on me," you are letting go, recognizing that you do not need to control either your inner or outer world. Because God is in control, revealing himself to you in your personal relationship with Jesus Christ, you can trust in his loving care from moment to moment, even when your environmental demands seem to be all-consuming.

Over time, as you gently repeat the prayer, you are continuously returning to an awareness of Jesus' presence, letting go of your own efforts to respond to the demands in your life. Instead, you are placing your relationship with Jesus first in order to collaborate with God, responding to the storms of life with increased effectiveness because you are surrendering to God's plan.

THE JESUS PRAYER TRANSCRIPT^{8,9}

Try to get comfortable in your chair, placing your feet on the floor and closing your eyes. Rest your hands on your legs or the arms of your chair. When you are ready, begin to notice that you are breathing, recognizing that God is giving you your breath as a gift from moment to moment. In this very second, you do not need to do anything to control your breath. Instead, God is sovereign over your breathing cycle.

After a minute or two, begin to gently recite the Jesus Prayer in your mind, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Breath in by saying “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” recognizing that Jesus is residing within your inner world in this very moment. Also, breath out by saying “have mercy on me,” exhaling in order to let go of your own efforts to control the environmental demands in your life. Over and over again, inhale and exhale, aligning the prayer with your in-breath and out-breath in a gentle, compassionate manner.

Breath in Jesus’ presence, finding rest in your relationship with him, given he is with you and caring for you. Recognize that he is the Lord of your life; therefore, you do not need to do anything in this moment, other than acknowledging his sovereignty, love, and infinite wisdom.

Breath out as you say, “have mercy on me,” truly letting go of the grip you are trying to have over the demands in your life. See if you can imagine actually surrendering your life to him, including all of the things that have overwhelmed you in the last week or so. In this moment, you are asking Jesus for loving compassion, recognizing that he understands your predicament and is responding to you in your time of need.

Over and over again, breath in, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” and breath out, “have mercy on me.” Each time you say the prayer, try to sink deeper and deeper into an awareness of Jesus’ presence. In this very moment, he is with you and sustaining you, offering you loving compassion in your time of need. Because God is infinitely wise, loving, and powerful, he knows the

⁸ Please also refer to the “Jesus Prayer” audio track.

⁹ Adapted from Talbot (2013).

best path for you, and is walking with you as you face the demands in your life.

As this practice comes to a close, see if you can give thanks to Jesus, recognizing that he has been ministering to you in your time of need over the last 20 minutes. See if you can ask him to continue to be with you throughout the rest of your day, turning to him over and over again by reciting the Jesus Prayer.

DAILY TASKS

In this two-week program, you will have two primary tasks:

1. Practice the 10-minute Jesus prayer daily with the audio track provided.
2. Record your efforts every three days when you receive an email link for the survey, which asks about daily practice.
3. Complete the questionnaires at the end of the two weeks when you receive an email link for the survey, which ask about your experiences of stress, your relationship with God, and your spiritual functioning.

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