

**Lectio Divina for Trauma-Related Emotions:
A Two-Week Program¹**

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¹ The format and structure of this program, as well as some technical language, has been adapted from Segal et al. (2012).

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Introduction

Because of the fall of humankind, 21st century Christians may end up experiencing a variety of traumatic events in their lifetime, including pandemics, natural disasters, auto accidents, abuse, assaults, and the death of loved ones.² In fact, in a recent study, over 75% of American adults reported experiencing a traumatic event.³ Although less than 10% of trauma survivors will go on to be formally diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),⁴ many will struggle with trauma-related symptoms, such as intrusive memories (e.g., vivid, lifelike memories about the past traumatic event) and negative thoughts (e.g., ruminating about the past traumatic event, worrying about future traumatic events) and feelings (e.g., fear, shame).⁵ Among these symptoms, trauma-related emotions may be especially overwhelming, with fear sometimes becoming a dominant emotion after the trauma has occurred.

As a trauma survivor, you have at least two ways to deal with these negative emotions. First, as a direct method, you can attempt to decrease your trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear, shame), which often arise from trauma-related intrusive memories and negative thoughts in the inner world and trauma-related reminders and triggers in the outer world. Second, as an indirect method, you can attempt to increase your positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, contentment), which can help you to improve your thinking (e.g., broadening your attention, flexibility, and problem solving) and behaviors (e.g., broadening your environmental opportunities and resources).⁶

In this two-week program, you will be learning about the Christian practice of lectio divina, an indirect method for increasing positive emotions and, as a result, managing your trauma-related emotions. Over the course of the next two weeks, you will have the opportunity to formally engage in lectio divina, following along with an audio recording for 10 minutes per day in a quiet environment, free from distractions. You will also have the opportunity to informally practice lectio divina for 2 minutes at a time throughout your day, especially when you are experiencing trauma-related emotions. Before presenting this practice in more detail, though, some of the potential benefits of meditative practice as an indirect method for managing trauma-related emotions are described.

² Gray et al. (2004).

³ Kilpatrick et al. (2013).

⁴ Kessler et al. (2005).

⁵ Michael et al. (2007).

⁶ Kearney et al. (2014).

Meditation, Positive Emotions, and Trauma Symptoms

In recent years, several different types of meditation have been researched in order to improve the positive emotions of people with a history of trauma. For example, loving-kindness meditation involves the repetition of short phrases (e.g., “May I be happy,” “May I be free from fear,” “May I be free from danger”) as a way to cultivate a variety of positive emotions.⁷ These statements, in turn, can be directed toward others (e.g., “May all beings be happy”).⁸ Over time, loving-kindness meditation may promote the positive emotions of gratitude, defined as “being the recipient of a benefit from another,”⁹ and contentment, defined as “the experience of the present moment as complete,”¹⁰ among others.¹¹ When this increase in positive emotions occurs, loving-kindness meditation practitioners may end up “undoing” their negative emotions.¹² For example, whereas trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear) may keep trauma survivors in a state of “fight or flight,” positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, contentment) may “undo” this experience by positively influencing both thoughts (e.g., being able to see the “bigger picture,” being more flexible in thinking, being able to come up with more solutions to problems, being able to broaden attention) and behaviors (e.g., being able to act in newer, healthier ways, both personally and relationally).¹³ Ultimately, whereas trauma-related emotions may narrow thoughts and behaviors in an unhealthy manner, positive emotions may broaden thoughts and behaviors in a healthy manner.¹⁴

Indeed, recent research has revealed that anywhere from 7 to 20 minutes of daily loving-kindness meditation can both increase positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, contentment) and decrease negative emotions (e.g., fear, shame).¹⁵ Yet, as a Christian trauma survivor, you may prefer to turn to your own religious heritage for a meditative strategy to help with your trauma-related emotions. Therefore, in this two-week program, you will have the opportunity to learn and practice the Christian spiritual discipline of lectio divina, or “divine reading,” which can help you to interact with God’s Word, the Bible, in a deeper manner in order to cultivate positive emotions and, thus, move in the direction of “undoing” trauma-related emotions.

Lectio Divina, Positive Emotions, and Trauma Symptoms

As a Christian alternative to loving-kindness meditation, “divine reading” (lectio divina in Latin) may be helpful in increasing your positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, contentment) when you are struggling with trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear, shame). Lectio divina slowly developed

⁷ Fredrickson et al. (2008); Salzberg (2005, p. 27).

⁸ Salzberg (2005, p. 33).

⁹ Emmons et al. (2019, p. 317).

¹⁰ Cordaro et al. (2016, p. 221).

¹¹ Fredrickson et al. (2008).

¹² Fredrickson (2001); Garland et al. (2010).

¹³ Fredrickson (2001); Garland et al. (2010).

¹⁴ Fredrickson (2001).

¹⁵ Fredrickson (2008); Hofmann et al. (2011, 2015).

over the last two millennia, beginning as a Christian monastic practice. Consisting of four steps, the practice can help Christians to interact with God’s Word, the Bible, on a deeper level and, in the process, cultivate positive emotions, such as gratitude and contentment.

Beginning around the third century, Christians started to move to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria to dually reject the materialistic societies they came from and rely exclusively on God.¹⁶ Along the way, as a simpler version of lectio divina, they recited the Psalms to shift their mind from tempting, compulsive thoughts to God’s presence.¹⁷ Fast-forward to the 12th century, and the Christian monk Guigo II developed a more formal method of lectio divina, with four overarching steps.¹⁸ These steps, which are widely used today among Christians from a variety of backgrounds, include the following ingredients¹⁹:

- *Read*: With the first step, we “slowly read, phrase by phrase,” a selected passage in Scripture.
- *Reflect/meditate*: With the second step, we reflect on, that is, meditate on or deeply ponder, a passage in Scripture, letting the “text soak into us.”
- *Respond/pray*: With the third step, we respond to the passage, praying to God in order to speak to him, listen to him, and commune with him.
- *Rest/contemplate*: With the fourth step, we rest in God, that is, contemplate God, by slowly, softly, and simply reciting a key word from the passage, before sitting in loving silence with God.

Overall, the goals of lectio divina²⁰ include the following:

- Cultivating a deeper, more intimate relationship with God by interacting with and internalizing God’s Word, the Bible
- Practicing a present-moment awareness of God
- Developing a more sustained attention on God
- Increasing gratitude (i.e., recognizing that everything is a gift from God) and contentment (i.e., being satisfied with whatever God brings in the present moment)

As a Christian trauma survivor, you may be able to indirectly address the trauma-related emotions you are struggling with, doing so with the spiritual discipline of lectio divina. With 10 minutes of formal practice each day, along with 2 minutes of informal practice when you have the time throughout the day, “divine reading” of the Psalms can help you to cultivate the positive emotions of gratitude and contentment and move toward “undoing” the trauma-related emotions you are experiencing. What follows, therefore, are the four steps of lectio

¹⁶ Paintner (2012).

¹⁷ Farag (2012); Paintner (2012).

¹⁸ Guigo II (2012).

¹⁹ Adapted from Wilhoit and Howard (2012).

²⁰ Adapted from Paintner (2012).

divina in action, presenting them in transcript format by drawing upon the Psalms so as to capture gratitude and contentment in the Christian life.

Lectio Divina: 10-Minute Formal Practice²¹

Please use the audio track for your daily practice

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/r0s2dqoiu4phr7z/Lectio%20Divina%20Meditation.mp3?dl=0>), reading this transcript solely for the purpose of familiarizing yourself with the daily task that you will be completing. Find a quiet environment, free from distractions. Sit up straight in a supportive chair, with your hands rested comfortably on your lap. Close your eyes, and say a brief prayer to God, asking him to be with you over the next 10 minutes and help you to cultivate gratitude and contentment as you slowly interact with God’s Word, the Bible.

Now, begin to move through the four steps of lectio divina:

1. Slowly *read* through the first ten verses of Psalm 34, phrase by phrase and line by line²²:

I will praise the LORD at all times. I will constantly speak his praises. I will boast only in the LORD; let all who are helpless take heart. Come, let us tell of the LORD’s greatness; let us exalt his name together. I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears. Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces. In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened; he saved me from all my troubles. For the angel of the LORD is a guard; he surrounds and defends all who fear him. Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him! Fear the LORD, you his godly people, for those who fear him will have all they need. Even strong young lions sometimes go hungry, but those who trust in the LORD will lack no good thing.

2. Slowly, softly, and simply *meditate* on two key phrases: “Taste and see that the LORD is good” and “Those who trust in the LORD will lack no good thing.” As you gently and internally recite these two verses, give thanks to God, who is good, and find a deeper contentment in him in this very moment. Focus all your attention on God, praising him and trusting in his goodness.
3. *Pray* to God, asking him to continue to fill you with a deeper, more enduring sense of gratitude and contentment during this time. Pray that God will help you to be thankful for all that you have in this world and see this moment as complete and lacking nothing, given he is with you right now.

²¹ Adapted from Paintner (2012) and Wilhoit and Howard (2012).

²² Psalm 34:1-10 (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2015).

4. *Contemplate* God's goodness by slowly, softly, and simply reciting "The LORD is good," over and over again. With all of your being, rest in this unalterable reality: "The LORD is good." In this very moment, God is offering his goodness to you as he loves you and fellowships with you. After reciting this verse a few times, just rest in loving silence, with a grateful, contented attitude toward God. In this moment, there is nothing else to do, other than connecting to a deeper thankfulness and contentment, anchored to God's loving goodness.

Whenever another thought, feeling, sensation, or memory arises, just notice it, then gently return to the practice.

As this practice comes to an end, ask God to remind you of his goodness throughout the day, thanking him and resting in a deeper contentment that you are lacking nothing in your relationship with him.

Lectio Divina: 2-Minute Informal Practice²³

Throughout the day, spend 2 minutes moving through a shorter version of lectio divina, which more concisely combines the second (reflect/meditate) and fourth (rest/contemplate) steps:

1. *Meditate* on two combined, slightly modified verses from Psalm 34: "The LORD is good. I have all I need."
2. *Contemplate* God's goodness by sitting in silence with him, maintaining an attitude of thankfulness and contentment toward God in the here-and-now.

Whenever another thought, feeling, sensation, or memory arises, just notice it, then gently return to the practice.

As you conclude, try to take this gratitude and contentment with you throughout the day, recognizing that God is good and, therefore, you lack nothing in the present moment.

Daily Tasks

Moving forward in this two-week program, you will have four primary tasks:

1. Once per day, formally practice the 10-minute version of lectio divina in a quiet environment, free from distractions. Use the audio track provided each day, rather than trying to remember the transcript.
2. Throughout the day, informally practice the 2-minute version of lectio divina, especially when you are experiencing trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear, shame).

²³ Adapted from Paintner (2012) and Wilhoit and Howard (2012).

3. Record your efforts once per week when you receive an email link for the survey, which asks about daily practice, both formal and informal.
4. Complete the questionnaires once at the beginning and once at the end of the two weeks when you receive an email link for the survey.

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