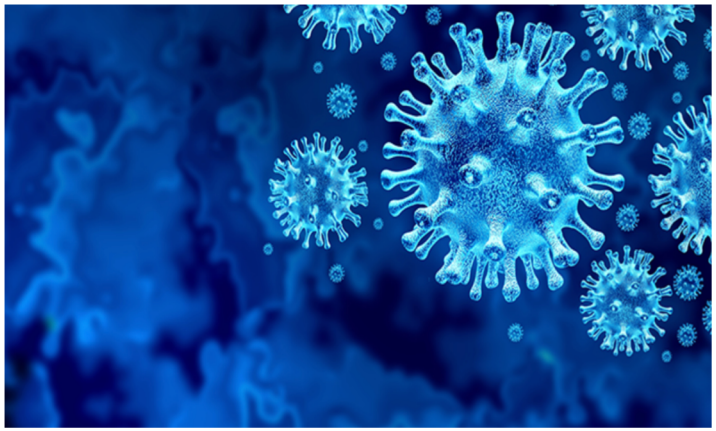
FINDING GOD DURING A PANDEMIC
INSIGHTS ON SELF-CARE

Dr. Karen Shields Wright

April 16, 2020

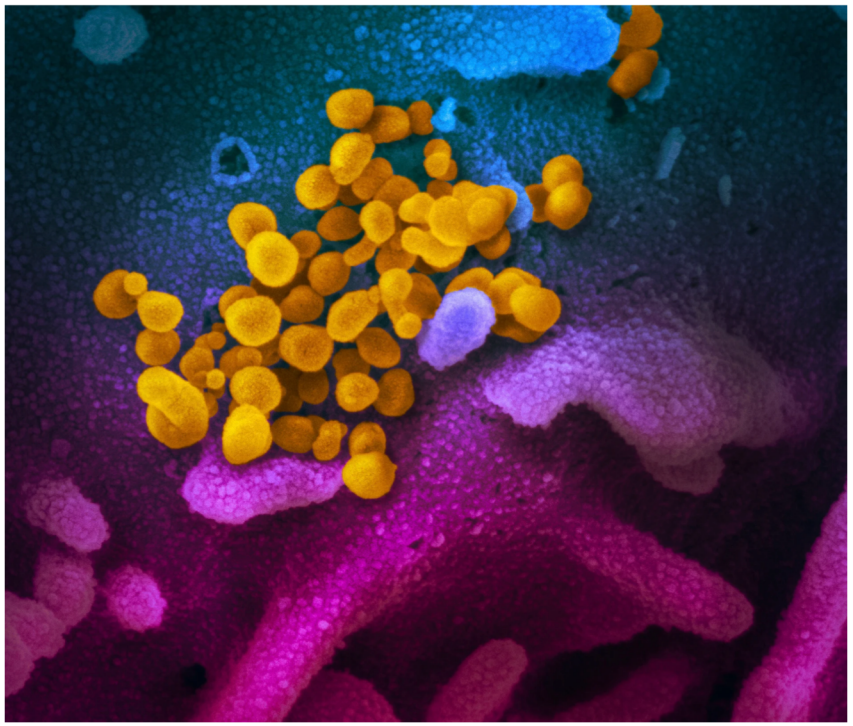


SITUATION:
CRISIS CRITICAL

SARS-CoV-2 virus, new to the human system cause of COVID-19 devasting disease.

This historic seismic event is changing forever how we live.

How can we find God in the midst of this personal and communal upheaval?



(NIAID-RML)

What you're seeing above is a scanning electron microscope image in false colour, showing the COVID-19 virus from a patient in the US; the viral particles are coloured yellow as it emerges from the surface of a cell, which is coloured blue and pink.

CALLED TO HOPE

This is a different a message transmitted from heart to heart – for every human heart awaits this Good News. It is the contagion of hope: “**Christ, my hope, is risen!**”

Pope Francis

CALLED TO LOVE

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.
This is the greatest and the first commandment.
The second is like it:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Matthew 22: 37-40

WHAT DOES LOVE, IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC, LOOK LIKE?

Love is expressed in action

St. Ignatius

Love is to desire the good for the other; and do what one can to assist

Pope Benedict

WHAT CAN I DO FOR OTHERS?

Concrete Actions Steps

- Solidarity – in self-isolation, social distancing, washing hands, face masks

- Support the heroic selflessness of the front line healthcare workers in any way we can, offering our prayers

- Express gratitude in person when we can to those essential workers who provide our food and other basic services who also are at risk

WHAT CAN I DO FOR MYSELF TO HELP OTHERS?

Concrete Action Steps?

- We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves – that call for self-care is a spiritual care.

- In honoring that call, in momentary and intentional ways, we naturally support the flourishing of our body and our soul.

- Practice practical mind-body methods, in the way God designed our bodies we can use in prayer, to access more deeply the peace that surpasses understanding and, in doing so, maintain balance in this time of collective uncertainty.

WHAT CAN WE DO TODAY?

Concrete Action Steps

- Researchers offer use clues to how the body reacts to stress and what methods best produce healthier outcomes, which will help us, help others.

- I will offer some insights into the ways God designed the body to respond to stress, and what self-care mind-body methods can be used to enhance our health to offer a quietude for our prayer.

- I will focus on Centering methods (for soul and body) for the momentary and intentional turning to God – a pray time - that calms the body and helps brings us closer to God.

CENTERING:
AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF SELF-CARE FOR BODY AND SOUL

SELF CARE & THE PURPOSE OF HEALTH

- SELF CARE is a chosen behavior, intentional, and self initiated to support one's health and general well-being.

- "HEALTH is a dynamic tension towards physical, mental, social, and spiritual harmony, and not only the absence of illness, which gives one the ability to **fulfill the mission** which has been entrusted to them, **according to the state of life** in which one finds oneself."

  - St. John Paul II, 2000

WHAT IS STRESS?

- Prior to this epidemic 60%-90% of healthcare visits have been shown to be related to stress-induced conditions.

- Stress is **a lived experience** in which our body must adjust to physically, cognitively, and emotionally; and depending upon the stressor, its intensity and duration; and our response to it creates dis-ease at the very least.

- Common Stressors: Environmental, Daily, Life Changes, Chemical, Social, Spiritual

COMMON STRESS WARNING SIGNALS

COMMON STRESS WARNING SIGNALS

Physical Symptoms

Headaches
Indigestion
Stomachaches
Sweaty palms
Tight neck, shoulders
Racing heart
Back pain
Sleep difficulties
Restlessness
Dizziness
Tiredness
Ringing in ears

Emotional Symptoms

Crying
Nervousness, anxiety
Boredom - no meaning to things
Easily upset
Overwhelming sense of pressure
Edginess - ready to explode
Feeling powerless to change things
Anger or Loneliness
Unhappiness for no reason

Cognitive Symptoms (Automatic Thoughts)

Trouble thinking clearly
Forgetfulness
Lack of creativity
Memory loss
Inability to make decision
Thoughts of running away
Constant worry
Loss of sense of humor

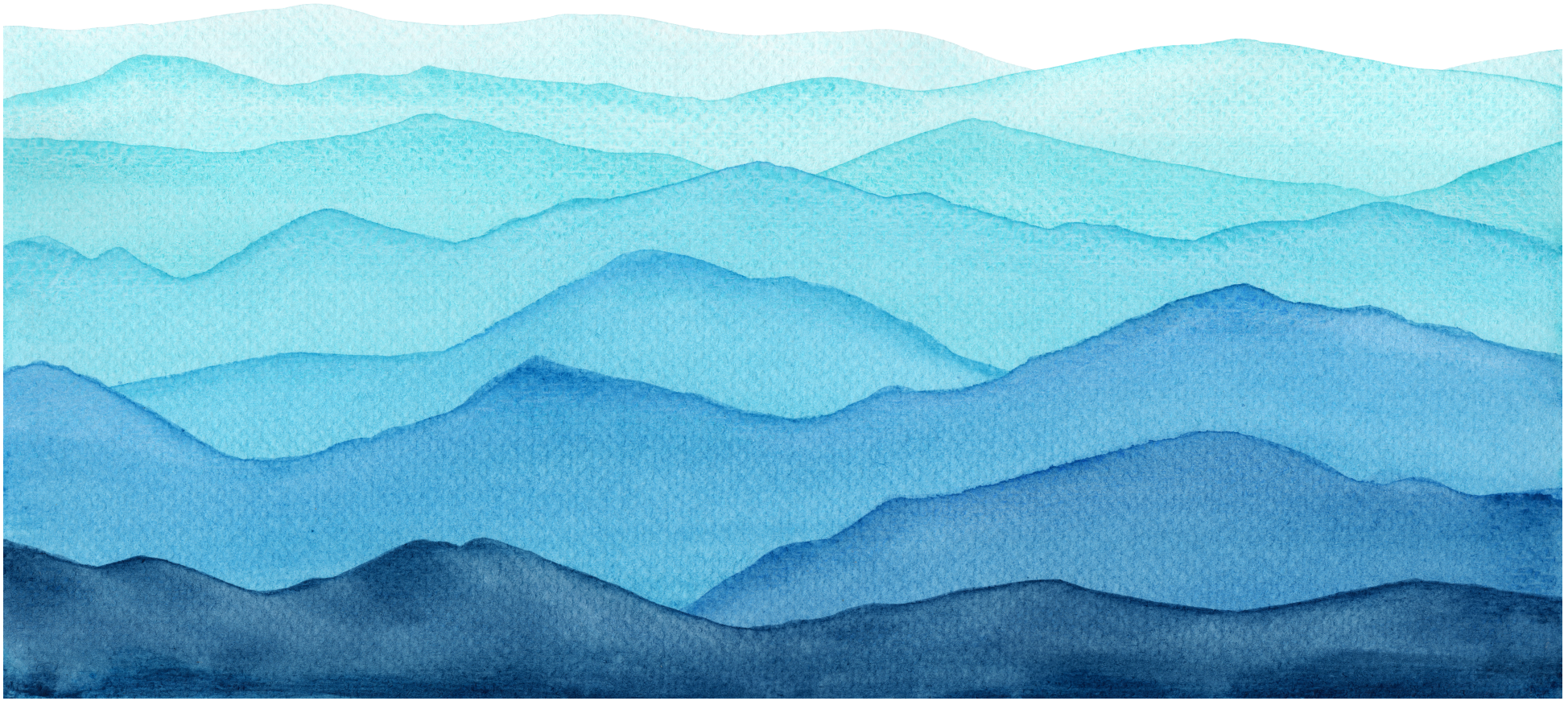
Behavioral Symptoms

Excess smoking
Bossiness
Compulsive gum chewing
Attitude critical of others
Grinding of teeth at night
Overuse of Alcohol
Compulsive Eating
Inability to get things done

Relational or Spiritual Symptoms

Isolating oneself
Impatience
Feeling a loss
Loss of what gave comfort, and strength before
Feeling hopeless or despair or hope
Questioning the meaning of life or suffering

GOD’S DESIGN TO STRESS



THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

The **Relaxation Response** is a state that is elicited within the body which offsets the effect of stress and increases our resiliency (ability to bounce back) through such activities as mind/body techniques, exercise, and prayer.

- Physiological Effects – reduced blood pressure, changes in brain waves
- Remembered Wellness – term for body's ability to heal
- Faith Factor & God Wellness – termed use in MB medicine added benefits
- St. Francis Effect – term related related to our affects on others

CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

The brain and spinal cord play a crucial role in the psycho-biological sensory system.

The brain responds to 3 sources of stimuli:

· The outside environment - external stimuli - *THREATS*
· The inside environment of our body - bottom-up stimuli
· The brain itself, which is a top-down stimuli – *WHAT YOU THINK AFFECTS YOU*

Prefrontal cortex regulates cognitive processing such as problem solving, planning, and attention becomes impaired during a stress response.

Amygdala is part of the limbic system is has an emotional tracking system, it is on guard 24/7 keeping watch for threats, in its rapid deployment system it engages our stress response Autonomic Nervous System affects target tissues which also working on the brain's reward system. It our primordial intelligence. – This is what is quieted from the use of Centering so as not go into hyperarousal state producing anxiety or depression.

PERIPHERAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

It connects the Central (brain and spinal cord) to the organs and limbs, serving as a communication relay system.

Voluntary - Somatic Nervous System –conscious part that innervates our Muscles & Skin

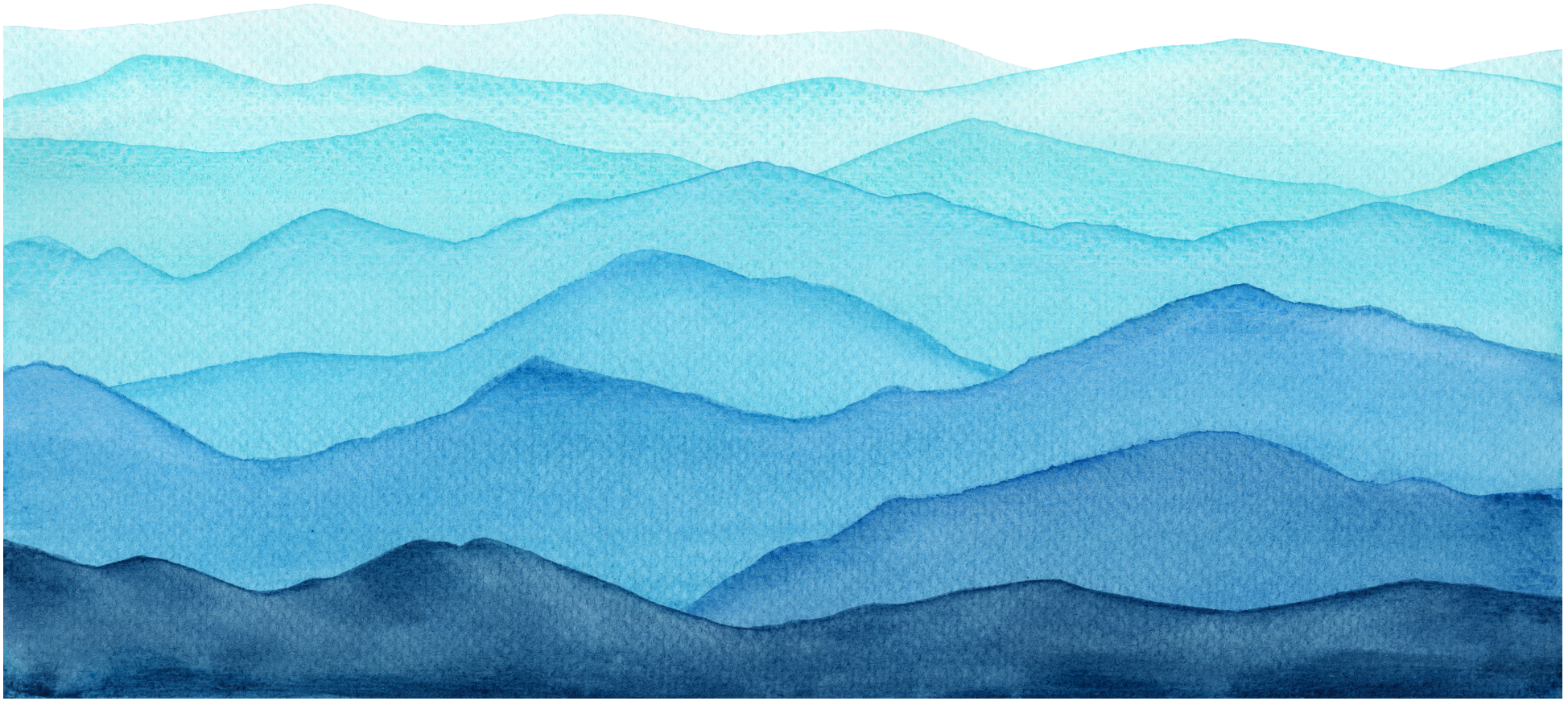
Involuntary - Automatic Nervous System –

1. Sympathetic Nervous System – known for its *FLIGHT OR FIGHT* mechanism, it operates through the Thoracic and Lumbar nerves. Stress hormones Cortisol has long term negative effects – chronic disease.

2. Parasympathetic Nervous System – known for *REST & DIGEST* activation, it operates through the Cranial and Sacrum nerves.

These 2 Systems are complementary in nature; when one is activated, the other 'takes a back seat'.
The benefits of Centering is increase the resiliency to be able to bounce back from a stressor.

MIND-BODY MEDICINE



MIND-BODY METHODS

- Mind-Body Techniques – primary objective is to elicit the Relaxation Response to enhance the body's Remembered Wellness rather than the direct achievement of a specific therapeutic goal.

  - Meditation is a *brain exercise* for increasing resiliency (its method was taken from *acts of prayer)*.

  - Mindfulness is a *brain exercise* of being aware of one's outer world and inner landscape in a detached non-judgmental way (is different from Ignatian awareness.)

NEUROPLASTICITY, RESILIENCY & ALLOSTASIS

- Neuroplasticity is the brain's miraculous ability to rewire itself and create new connections that bypass areas that may be damaged.
  - When we change our beliefs and attitudes, it changes the brain, thereby affecting how our body automatically reacts.

- Resiliency is the ability to rebound or bounce back from adversity.

- Allostasis is a term used for the body’s ability for stability through change – via neuroendocrine and immune systems.

IMPORTANCE OF SAVORING

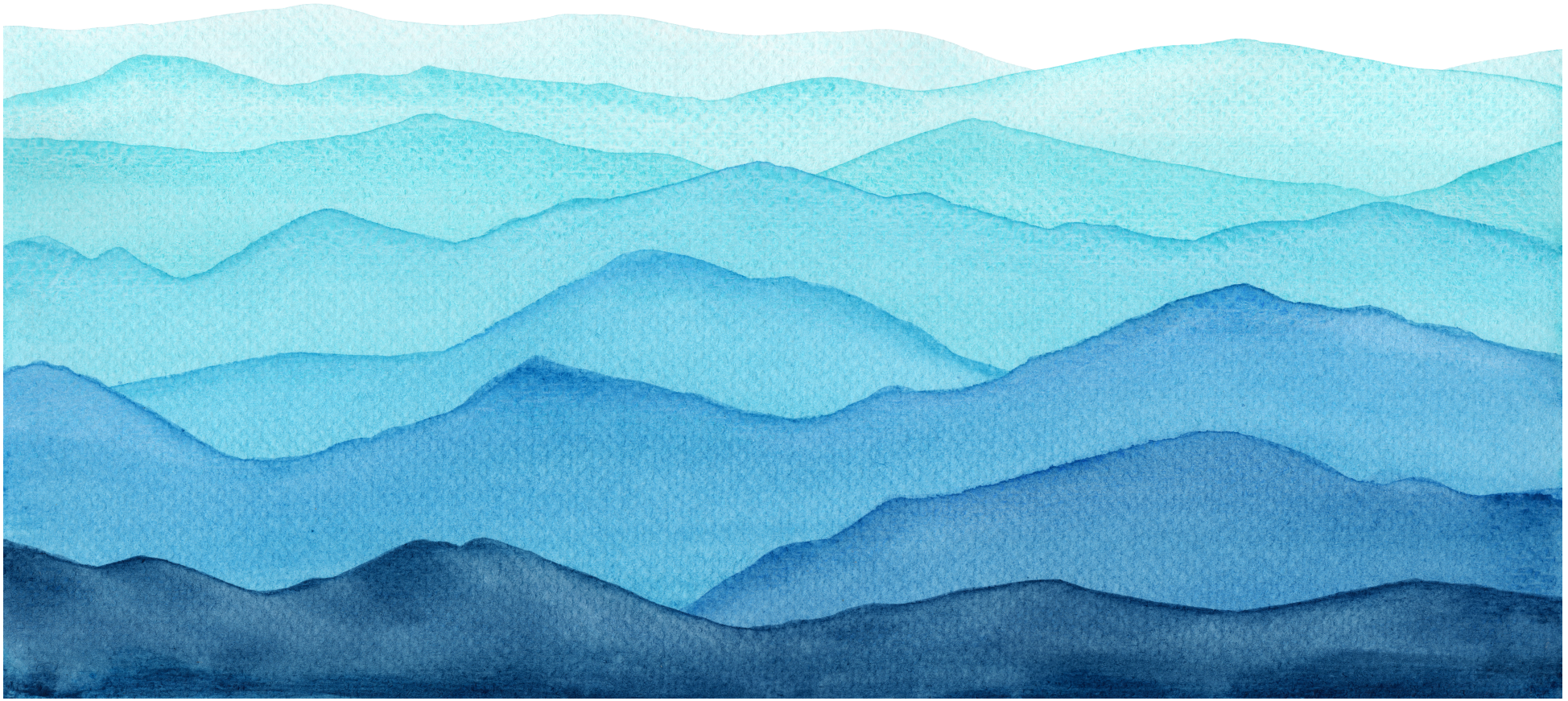
- Our propensity for negativity - due to an embedded evolutionary survival mechanism

- Negative events are immediately stored in long-term memory
- Positive experiences are kept short-term memory

  - Savoring for 10—20 moves positive experiences into our long-term memory.
  - 5-1 ratio.

  Note: Ignatian Meditation and Contemplation

CENTERING AS PRAYER



MEDITATION IN MIND-BODY MEDICINE

1. A focusing element –- a word, image, sound, phrase

2. The adoption of a passive attitude toward intruding thoughts and a return to the focusing element.

THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

MEDITATION IS A BEHAVIOR, A BIDIRECTIONAL PROCESS

Behavior ← →Brain Activity ← → Brain Structure

RESEARCH ON THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF A CENTERING 'MEDITATION'

Neuroplasticity and the Elicitation of the Relaxation Response

Physiological Changes

- Evokes an overall quieted in the brain, tested under Functional Brain Mapping
- Cortical Thickness – MRI Brain showed an increase in size in certain regions.
- Decreases hyperarousal reactivity of the Sympathetic Nervous System – Amygdala
- Enhanced immune response and endocrine function
- Promoted increased healing time
- Increased focus and attention in students
- Reduced high blood pressure

Treatment for

- Depression, Pain, Eating Disorders, Anxiety, Hypertension, Insomnia, Smoking cessation, Rumination, Worry, other stress related conditions
- Note: its complementary care not an alternative

Ongoing Research

- Increasing Resiliency
- Reduces Allostatic Loading
- Improves self-regulation
- Stress Buffering Effects
- Counters oxidative stress
- Slows rate of cellular aging
- Telomeres (end of chromosomes)
- Positive impact on others* (increased wellness in self-reporting from patients on caregivers who meditated)

Self - Reported Effects

- Sense of calm and well-being that extends beyond time spent
- Increased capacity to handle difficult situation and emotions
- Better memory and attentional capacity
- Increased quality of life

CENTERING MEDITATION AS PRAYER

A 2 Step Method (same method which elicits the Relaxation Response)

1. The repetition of a word, phrase, sound, thought, image as a focusing element
2. The passive return to the focusing element only when other thoughts intrude (it is not repeated over and over again during our time in prayer.)

For a theological explanation and more information
https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/

CENTERING: A PRAYER OF SILENT LOVE

The Intention is to be with God, the Holy Spirit as the centering Attention

A Centering is a prayer time of intentional silence (outward and inward) to rest into the experience of just being with God as the beloved of our Creator, the Life, and Giver of grace.

'Centering' as in moving our Attention towards our breathing or a focusing element which will allow our minds, filled with multiple layers of thoughts and images, so as to not be scattering off on its own.

'Prayer 'as in an Intentional time spent acknowledging Whose (God) we are in relationship to who we are, always in union, and within a communication that has no need for words or actions.

COMPARISON OF PRAYER OF SILENT LOVE MEDITATION VS. CONTEMPORARY MEDITATION/MINDFULNESS

	The Prayer of Silent Love Meditation	**Contemporary Meditation & Mindfulness**
Intention	To be with God and Self	To be with one's Self
Attention	On God	On Self
Focus Element	Sacred & Meaningful	Meaningful
Spiritual Exercise	Yes	No
Brain Exercise	Yes	Yes
Mind/Body/Soul	Mind/Body/Soul	Mind/Body
Elicits the Relaxation Response	Yes	Yes
Elicits the Remembered Wellness	Yes	Yes
Health Benefits	Yes	Yes
Evidenced Based	Thousands of Years of Human Experience in Various Religious Traditions / Current Science	Recent History ~ 50 years of Human Experience as a Health Intervention / Current Science
Satisfying Social Needs	with Another (God)	Alone
Transcendental/Mystical Experience	Transcendental and or Mystical Experience	Researched Transcendental Experience

The 3 Avenues for a Centering Element for the ‘repetition’

1. A prechosen Word or Image or Sound for the Centering element that reminds you of Love loving (select which fits best for you since each uses a different part of brain)
2. Lectio Divina’s Contemplatio phase – a chosen or listen for what word or phrase God has for you in ‘sitting with’ as the Centering element
3. Your Breath as the Centering element

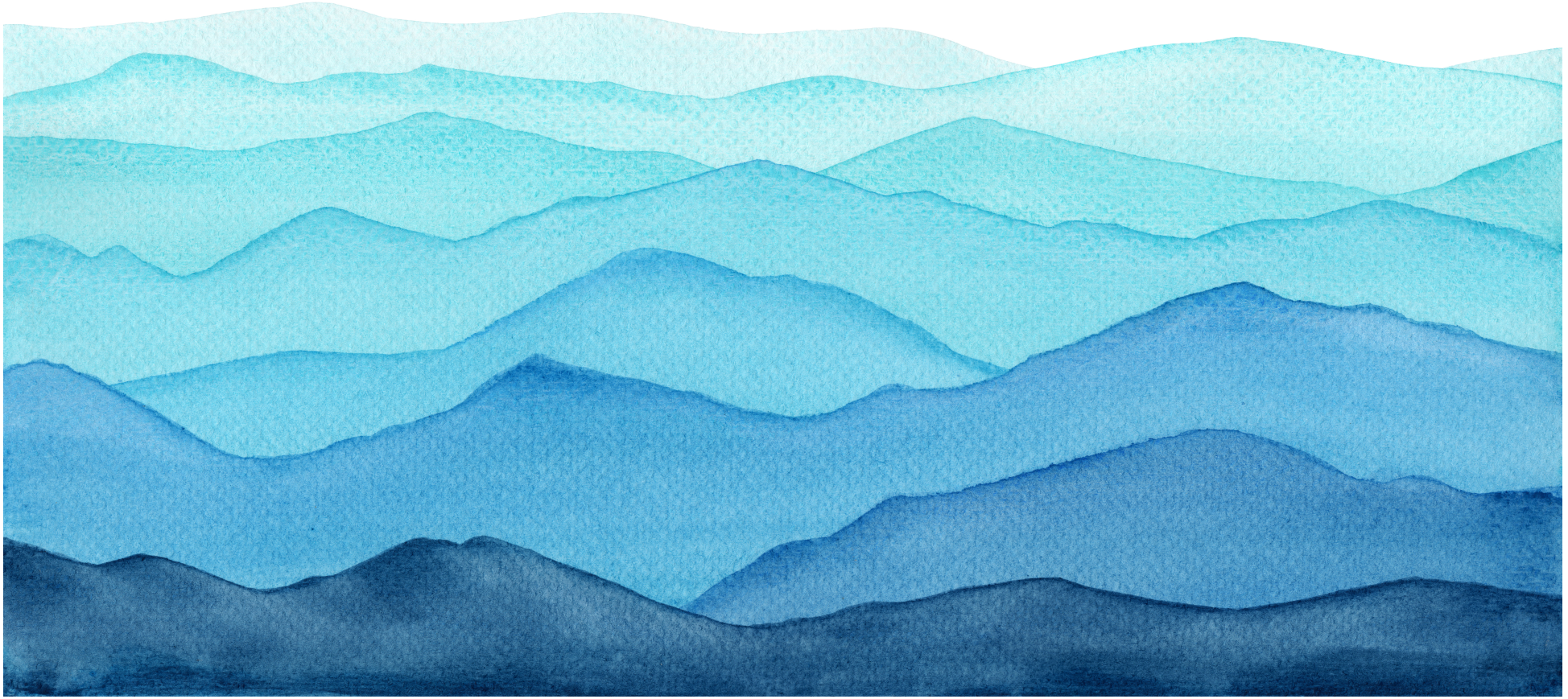
Word Examples of Centering Element

Jesus, Abba, Peace, Shalom, Christos, Ave Maria, Deo Gratia, Love, Joy

Method for Disposition of the Heart in the Prayer of Silent Love

- Entering into the Silence elicits the Relaxation Response during a prayerful time.
- Silence, Solitude, Stillness for Intention
- Sit comfortable, feet on floor, hands on lap (best for circulation)
- Take 2-3 deep breaths – slowly in through nose for count of 3– then out mouth 5 count
- Start your Centering Element to allow for Attention
- As thoughts intrude, passively return to your repetition Centering Element
- Best for 10-20minutes - daily after rising in the morning (and or early evening)

MIND-BODY CENTERING



MIND-BODY RESET

2 ways to interrupt the 'Fight or Flight' response and to trigger the body's normal relaxation response.

1. STAND UP

2. RELAXED ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Take 1 -3 minutes

- Sit quietly and rest hands on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose.
  - Feel your belly lift as you breathe in.
- Exhale through your mouth.

MOMENTARY CENTERING

Set a time or anytime you sense stress building up during the day.
Take 1- 3minutes . Go into the silence.
Relaxed abdominal breathing.

RE-CENTERING

Rest with your hand on your belly to use your breath as a focusing method OR
Mentally say your favorite prayer or word; OR share with God you feelings and thoughts.

MINI-VISUALIZATION (Ignatian Contemplation)

Select a real or imaginary place
Stay a while in this place while you breathe naturally yet slowly
Application of the Interior Senses

Use all your senses to see, touch, smell, taste : such as the breeze, the sounds,

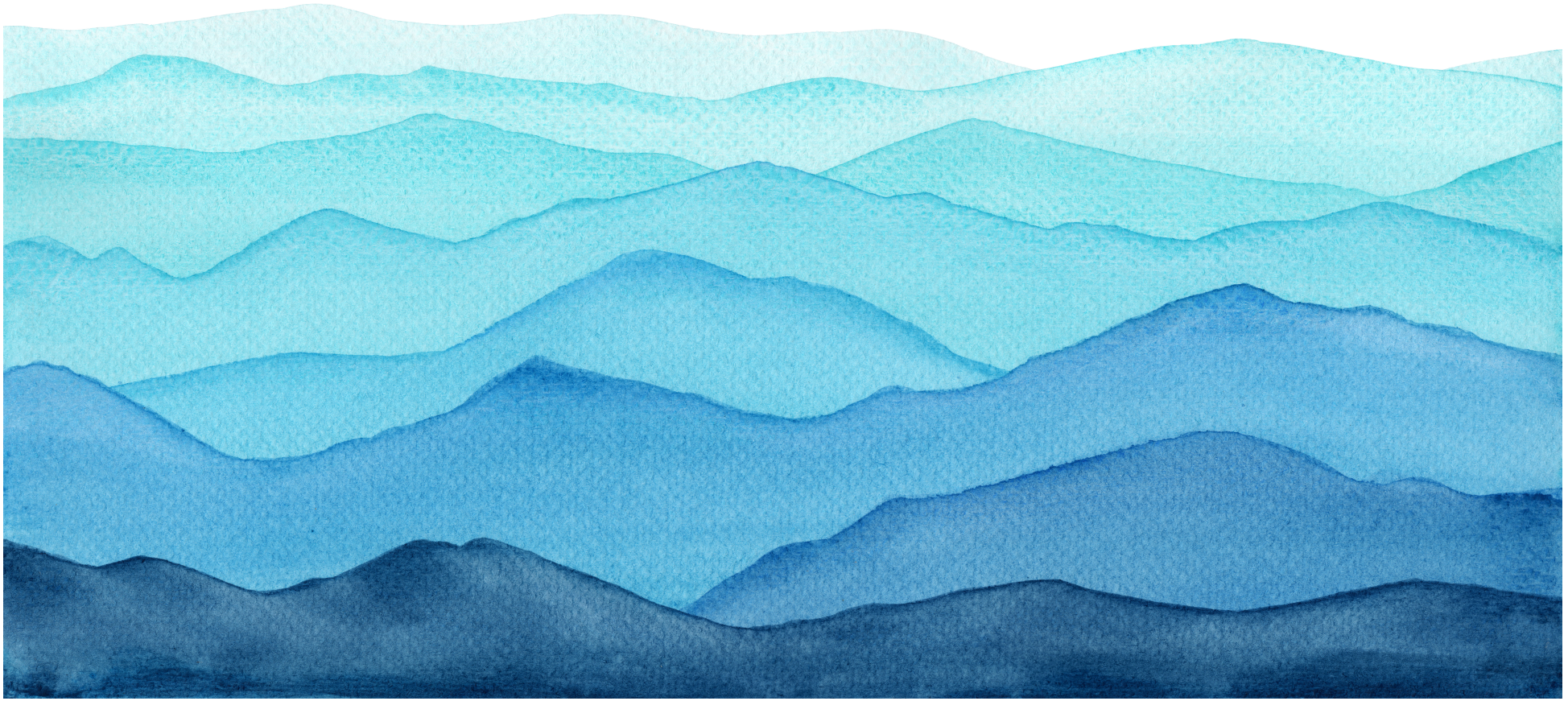
BUILDING YOUR QUIETING REFLEX

When you become aware of a stress reaction building up from a particular stressor, a long-standing worry, a new problem, or from a simple annoyance. Take 1- 3minutes. Assume a relaxed position. Abdominal Breathing. Go into the silence.

- Inwardly gaze, to look at it the stressor
- While looking at it, smile inwardly (with God, ask for assistance)
- Inhale an easy slow natural breath
- While exhaling slowly, sense letting go of any tension in jaw, tongue, facial muscles, shoulders while you are imagining a warm wave flowing from head to toes (leave it in God's hands for while).

Eventually, this will become a reflex – an automatic habit. Try it each and every time you feel stressed (even if it's a dozen times a day if you have to).

IMAGERY & APPRECIATION



IMAGERY

How we “imagine” ourselves has a significant influence on how we act, think, and feel.
Top athletes improve their game by imagining a perfect performance before a competition. Stroke victims have been shown to regain greater function when their rehabilitation includes positive imagery.

- Safe place imagery to invoke a sense of comfort, nurturance, and an experience of safety (into God’s arms, in a place God created).

- Idealized-Self Imagery to support behavior change by imagining ourselves the way we desire to be (Examen).

APPRECIATION

- Appreciation is a central component of M-B therapy in reducing the effects of stress.
- Propensity for negativity – built in survival
- Need 5 positive to offset 1 negative
- Negative experiences to immediate into long term memory
- Positive experiences tend to stay in short term memory
- Importance of savoring - hold it for 10-20 seconds to move it into long term memory -

THE EXAMEN

The Examen is a prayer of graced awareness in reflecting upon encountering God's presence and action in our everyday: to see the day as it was through the eyes of Christ; to discern the Holy Spirit's leading direction for us; and to respond to the Father's loving invitation for renewal and rejoicing.

1. Review (Awareness)
2. Reflect (Insight)
3. Respond (Reappraise)
4. Gratitude (Disposition)
5. Commitment (Hope)

JESUITS OF SOUTH AFRICA EXAMEN

The Daily Examen is a prayerful experience of God. Experience alone does not teach us much, it is when we reflect on our experience that we really begin to learn. The Examen can help us see God's hand in our daily-lived experience. It's a simple prayer that has the capacity to transform our lives by helping us become more aware – of the gifts.

Step 1 Preparation

- Slow your mind and calm your body and gently relax into God's presence. Imagine God welcoming you.

Step 2 Review the Day with Gratitude

- Ask God to show you the day through God's eyes. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God.
- Notice any joys and delights, and focus on the day's gifts.
- Look at the day, look at the work you did, look at the people you interacted with. What did you receive from them? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

Step 3 Review the Day Again Notice Your Feelings

- Notice moments when you were fully alive, times when you felt at peace, joyful, happy, comforted, whole, your best self, and moments when you feel close to God. Allow some of these moments to come to mind. These are times of consolation.
    - Pick a moment that you feel **most grateful for** and stay with it, savor it.
    - Notice how God is drawing you to more of those experiences. Take some time to give thanks to God.
- Now remember anything that you are **less grateful for**. Experiences that caused you to feel drained of energy, frustrated, irritated, angry, sad, alone, isolated, unaccepted, fragmented…less than your best self.
    - Bring these memories before God; ask God to bring you the healing you need.

Step 4 Choose one feature of the day and pray from it

- Asked the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling - positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person, or moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may seem something that's rather insignificant. Look at it.
- Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart. Whether it be intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude

Step 5 Look Forward to Tomorrow with Hope

- Look forward to tomorrow. Ask God to give you grace for tomorrow's challenges.
- Pay attention to the feelings that surface as your survey what is coming up. Are you doubtful, cheerful, apprehensive, full of delightful anticipation?
- What do you think you particularly need for tomorrow, strength, energy, patience, courage? Asked for that gift.

http://www.jesuitinstitute.org.za/

SELF-CARE
FOR EMBODIED SOULS

8 POWERS OF THE SOUL

Two spiritual powers related to knowing and loving

- Intellect
- Will

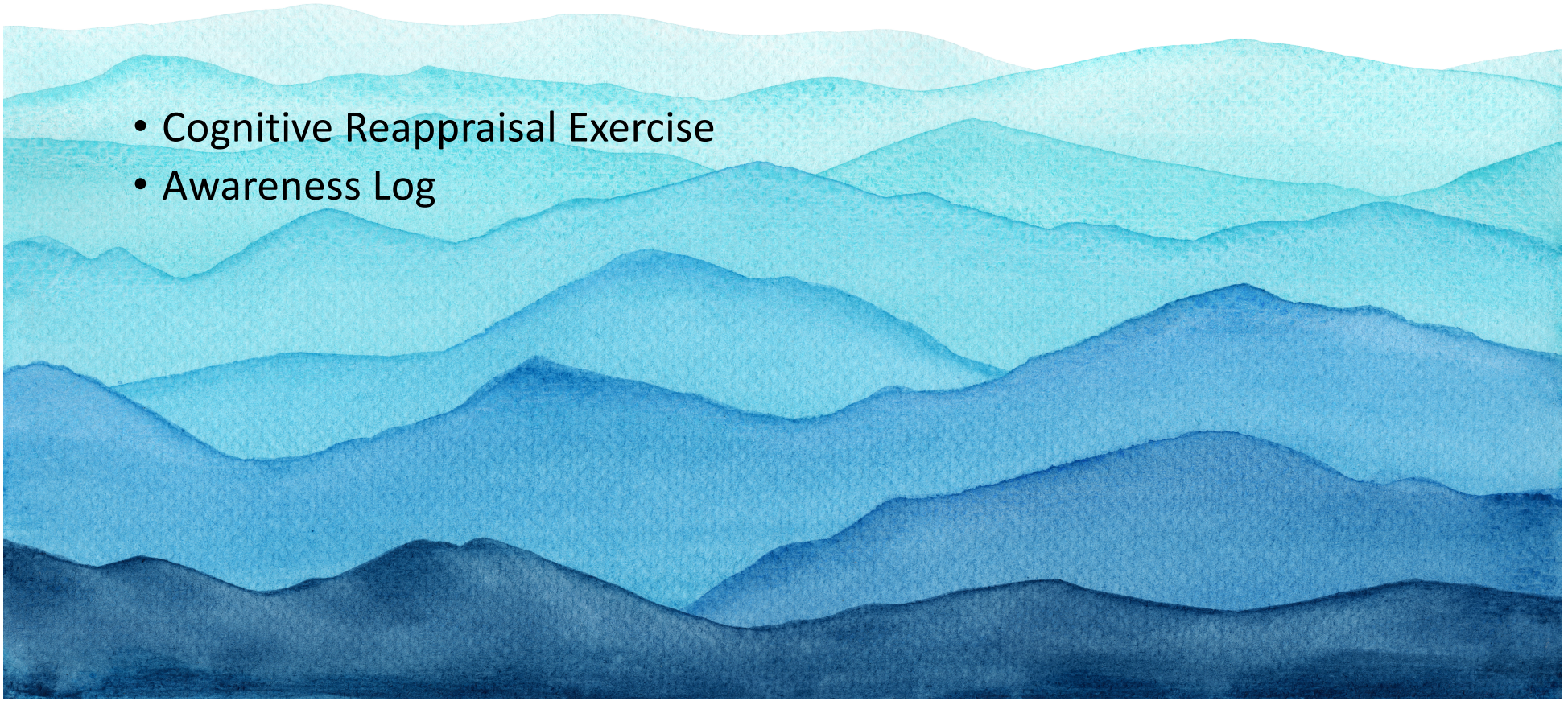
These five operations below are shared with Animals who have a Sense Soul

- Locomotion
- Sense Cognition
- Sense Appetite

These three operations are shared with the Vegetative or Plant Soul

- Self-Nutrition
- Development
- Reproduction

COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL



- Cognitive Reappraisal Exercise
- Awareness Log

AWARENESS & COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL LOG

Stressor/Stressful Event: _____

Physical Signs (Sensations)	Behaviors	Emotions/Feelings (with their Underlying Beliefs are reflected in Thoughts)	Automatic Thoughts (Notice these thoughts typically focus on what you don't want, the thoughts are maladaptive if they do not serve you well)	Cognitive Distortions (are a product of core beliefs that are negative)	Adaptive Desirable Positive Emotions & Feelings	Adaptive Desired Positive Thoughts – Beliefs (Intentionally focus on what you deeply want, what you desire when in RR)

Stress Responses:
The first 5 columns correspond to Stress Warning Signals and Stress Activating Responses.
Notice how Negative Emotions and Feelings are linked to Cognitive Distortions that have deep unique Conditioned Maladaptive Beliefs.

COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL EXERCISE

Approaches

- Problem-Solving
- Acceptance

Coping Key:

- Negative, Irrational Thoughts (thought that don't served you) = Thought Distortions in need of Cognitive Reappraisal and Restructuring
- Negative, Rational Thoughts that represent what's under your influence = Approach is Problem-Solving
- Negative, Rational Thoughts that represent what you cannot influence = Approach is Acceptance, then look to find or create positive meaning

CALLED TO PRAY

LORD, when all who serve in the medical field awake today give them hope to know their gifts will make a difference.

As they enter their place of work give them courage to step beyond the self and fight to heal those around them.

When they encounter suffering patients and colleagues grant them the compassion to recognize the shared humanity of the person before them.

When they are tired and overwhelmed give them the strength and wisdom to do the next right thing in front of them.

Celebrate with them the lives they have saved & console them when they sorrow over those they could not heal.

Let our prayers of love and support enfold them in Your Graces.

Let them feel Your Presence and find rest in You. Amen.

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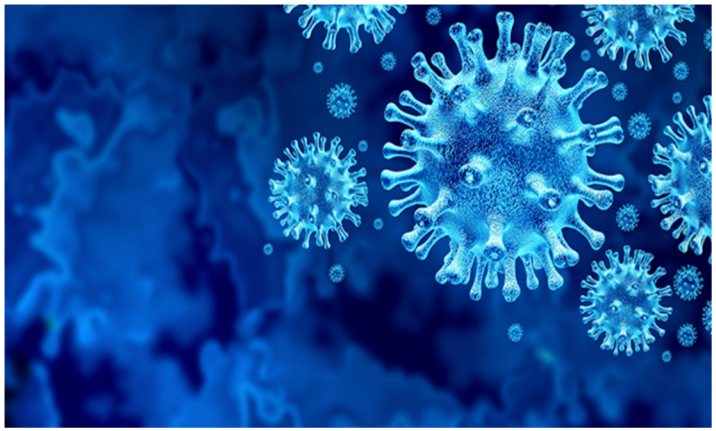
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