

Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Stress and Anxiety: Theoretical and Empirical Support

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Objectives

- Compare and contrast contemplative prayer and mindfulness meditation for managing stress and anxiety
 - Theoretical foundations
 - Core concepts
 - Mechanisms of change
 - Techniques for each approach
- Identify the emerging research on contemplative prayer for Christians with stress and anxiety
- Explore areas for future research on the use of contemplative prayer for Christians with stress and anxiety

Introduction

“Unless a person says in his heart, ‘I alone and God are in the world,’ he will not find rest” Abba Alonius

“It is not possessing something that is harmful, but being attached to it” Abba Zosimas

The Explosion of Mindfulness

- In the 21st century, mindfulness-based interventions have had a significant impact on clinical psychology
- Examples
 - Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)
 - Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
 - Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)
 - Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)
 - Compassion-focused therapy (CFT)
- Sometimes referred to as “third wave” or “acceptance-based”
- Balance acceptance and change in the therapy room
- Mindfulness addresses the recurrent nature of psychiatric disorders

The Basic Ingredients of Mindfulness

- A few basic ingredients
 - Focusing on one aspect of awareness
 - Staying rooted in the present moment
 - Practicing non-judgment
 - Relating to thoughts and feelings with compassion, distance, and flexibility
- Vehicle through which to promote acceptance of the inner world
- Clients can use mindfulness to anchor themselves to the present moment (rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future)
- Although mindfulness has more recently been “secularized,” it has its roots in the Buddhist tradition

Nonattachment and Mindfulness

- Nonattachment has been operationalized in the clinical psychology literature in recent years by drawing from Buddhism
- Mediating variable that helps to explain the link between mindfulness and various mental health outcomes
- Defined as “release from mental fixations” (Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010)
- Involves being in the moment without clinging to or pushing away either positive or negative experiences
- Nonattachment mediates the relationship between mindfulness and psychological variables, such as distress and life satisfaction (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Sahdra, Ciarrochi, & Parker, 2016)

A Brief History of the Contemplative Tradition

- Around the third century, Christians began moving to the desert to cultivate a deeper union with God, rejecting societal emphases on wealth and material possessions
- In the desert, monks would frequently recite the Psalms in an effort to focus on God, pivoting away from perceived temptations from demons
- Similar to Jesus' temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), these monks used short phrases in scripture to combat temptations and unite with God (Harmless, 2004; Paintner, 2012)

A Brief History of the Contemplative Tradition

- Shortened phrases led to the Jesus Prayer (i.e., “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”), as well as other *apophatic* forms of prayer (Harmless, 2004; Paintner, 2012)
- As an example from the 14th century, in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the anonymous author suggests that some Christians get to a point where they long to reach out to God in love, rather than knowledge, placing all of their thoughts beneath a “cloud of forgetting” during contemplative practice
- Using a single-syllable prayer word (e.g., “God,” “love”), contemplatives look up to God, who exists beyond a dark, dense cloud, letting go of all other cognitive efforts to know him

The Desert in the Contemplative Tradition

- For early desert monks, the desert represented a stripping away of material possessions in order to cultivate a deeper union with God—a “desert psychology” (Laird, 2006)
- Rather than relying on societal comforts, these desert monks would let go of efforts to mask or numb inner pain
- Instead, they would attempt to endure the inner and outer world, yielding to God’s presence and relying entirely on him for life (Chryssavgis, 2008; Paintner, 2012)

The Cell in the Contemplative Tradition

- Within the contemplative tradition, the “cell” is a small room that monks lived in, representing the place they got to know the inner world through watchfulness (*nepsis*)
 - “Go sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything”
- In the cell, wherein monks would battle tempting thoughts (*logismoi*), God was with them so they could patiently endure with a sense of hope (*hupomone*) (Chryssavgis, 2008; Paintner, 2012)

Detachment in the Contemplative Tradition

- The Christian tradition has its own version of nonattachment
 - “Detachment is an act of spiritual freedom. It is also the virtue of habitually choosing out of freedom not compulsion, fear, or routine” (Lonsdale, 2004, p. 234)
 - “Correcting one’s own anxious grasping in order to free oneself for committed relationship with God” (Miles, 1983, p. 111)
- Detachment synonyms in Christianity: self-forgetfulness, humility, self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-renunciation (Lonsdale, 2004)
- Jesus is the perfect example, yielding to the Father’s will to fulfill his earthly mission

Detachment in the Contemplative Tradition

- John Calvin even discussed detachment within “The Rules of Right Prayer” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
 - “We are to rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind, itself a wanderer, is borne about hither and thither, drawn away from heaven, and pressed down to earth. I mean that it ought to be raised above itself that it may not bring into God's sight anything our blind and stupid reason is wont to devise, nor hold itself within the limits of its own vanity, but rise to a purity worthy of God”

Ingredients in Contemplative Prayer

- The Jesus Prayer in the East (Johnson, 2010)
 - Focusing the attention on God (*proseuch*)
 - Remembering God (*mneme theou*)
 - Remaining watchful over the inner world (*nepsis*), including tempting thoughts (*logismoi*)
 - Cultivating a still, peaceful inner state (*hesychia*)
 - Indirect way of relating differently to negative thoughts via repeatedly pivoting to God (Ware, 2000)
- The *Cloud of Unknowing* in the West (Knabb, Vazquez, Wang, & Bates, 2017)
 - Using a single-syllable prayer word to focus on God
 - Detaching from everything else by gently placing all other thoughts and feelings beneath a “cloud of forgetting”
 - Cultivating “humble detachment”
 - Surrendering repetitive negative thinking, including worry and intolerance of uncertainty, to God, over and over again

Ingredients in Contemplative Prayer

- Puritans even had their own similar form of short prayer—*ejaculatory prayer*
 - “Short, spontaneous outreaches to God prompted by everyday events” (Bremer, 2012, p. 198)
 - “Ejaculatory prayers [are] as arrows in the hand of a mighty man...Happy is the man that has his quiver full of them” (Bremer, 2012, p. 198)
 - “Unto which prayers there is not required that we should use our voice or gestures of the body which are used in set prayers...but sudden and short ejaculation...a darting unto the Throne of Grace” (Wakefield, 1959, p. 68)

Possible Biblical Inspiration for Contemplative Prayer

- The Jesus Prayer
 - Instances in the gospels wherein individuals asked Jesus for mercy (see, e.g., Luke 18:38)
 - “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)
- The *Cloud of Unknowing*
 - “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not earthy things” (Colossians 3:1-2)
 - “The LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud...[at Mount Sinai]’” (Exodus 19:9)

Instructions in Contemplative Prayer

- Jesus Prayer
 - “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”
 - Breath in with first half, and out with second half
 - First half is about inviting God in, and the second half is about letting go
 - Try to recite about 100 times in 20 to 30 minutes
 - Focus on the meaning, rather than repetition
 - Since “mercy” (*eleos*) can also mean olive oil (used for healing in ancient times), compassion, and empathy, view the Jesus Prayer as a way to ask Jesus to help you soothe the inner world with compassion and empathy
- *Cloud of Unknowing*
 - Recite the prayer word (“Lord,” “God,” “love”) as a way to focus on God
 - Place all else beneath a “cloud of forgetting”

Possible Mechanism of Action in Contemplative Prayer

- Cultivating an attitude of surrender, detachment, and trust before God when relating to difficult stress- and anxiety-related thoughts and feelings
- Gently pivoting from a preoccupation with thoughts and feelings to God's presence
- Anxiety: catastrophizing about tomorrow's uncertainties; contemplative prayer helps Christians to accept uncertainty and let go of worry, given their eyes are focused on God's providential, soothing care
- Stress: environmental demands seemingly exceed Christians' ability to handle them; contemplative prayer helps to first focus on God's presence, including his providential care, followed by a commitment to living out Jesus' teachings

Christian Psychotherapy and Contemplative Prayer

- The desert and the cell symbolize acceptance, enduring inner pain because God is present
- Christian clients can learn to endure psychic pain because they are cultivating an awareness of God's active, loving presence—God offers strength and hope during moments of stress and anxiety
- Christian clients are tempted in their symbolic cell, but can endure because of God's loving, sovereign presence
- The vehicle through which acceptance and union with God can be cultivated is contemplative practice, rather than mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness Versus the Contemplative Tradition

- Buddhist mindfulness meditation
 - Focus on one thing in the present moment (with the breath or the senses)
 - Non-judgmentally shift to the point of focus when the mind has drifted
 - “Clinging,” “attachment,” “desire,” and “permanence” are sources of suffering that are to be relinquished in order to accept how things are
 - Since the self is an illusion, *no-self* is cultivated to achieve oneness
- Contemplative prayer
 - Focus on God in the present moment (with a single-syllable prayer word or the Jesus Prayer)
 - Pivot from inner or outer preoccupations to God when the mind has wandered
 - Central goal is not to ameliorate suffering through letting go of a separate self, but a deeper union with God
 - Healing the darkened *nous*, corrupted due to sin

Prioritizing Epistemologies

- As an alternative to mindfulness meditation (i.e., operationalizing Buddhist psychology and using the scientific method for validation), Christian psychologists can start with a Christian worldview, using the scientific method to investigate distinctly Christian theories and interventions (Roberts & Watson, 2010)
 - With this approach, contemplative Christianity can be used as a starting point, drawing from the Bible (i.e., divine revelation) and the rich contemplative heritage (e.g., the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*) in order to design, administer, and test Christian approaches to treatment

Prioritizing Epistemologies

- I've been emboldened as a *Christian* in my reading of the mindfulness literature, in that authors and researchers are increasingly drawing from Buddhist writings as they design new interventions (Grabovac, Lau, & Willett, 2011)
- If this is so, why can't Christian psychologists build and test theory based on the contemplative literature, which offers an astute, well-developed psychospiritual understanding of the human condition?
- Why start with the mindfulness literature, somehow "Christianizing" Buddhist meditation?

Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

Contemplative Prayer for
CHRISTIANS with
CHRONIC WORRY

An Eight-Week Program



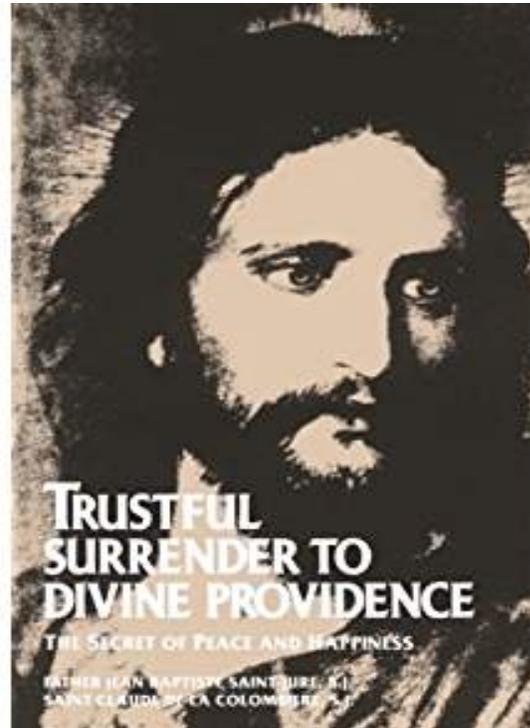
Joshua J. Knabb
and Thomas V. Frederick

Foreword by Siang-Yang Tan



Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

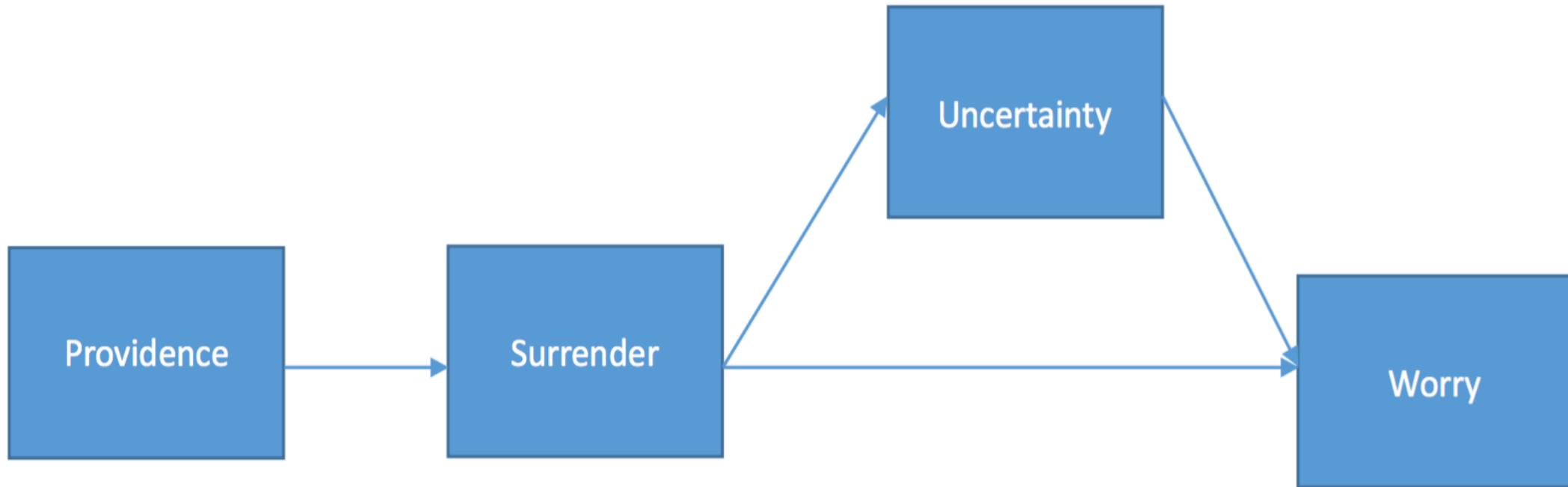
- My inspiration for this three-part study (and subsequent workbook) came from my reading of *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence*



Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

- In this Jesuit writing from over 300 years ago, the author made the point that peace and happiness are possible if Christians can learn to surrender to God's protective care, trusting in his infinite power, goodness, and wisdom
- The author argues that, reminiscent of a parent who trusts a surgeon to remove a tumor from his or her child's body, Christians can learn to trust that God is active and present from moment to moment, even in the midst of suffering
- This specific understanding is consistent with the Jesuit contemplative tradition in general, which teaches Christians to "find God in all things"

Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program



Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

- Among both a college ($N = 209$) and community ($N = 99$) sample, I found support for an overall model fit, with uncertainty mediating (partially and fully, respectively) the relationship between surrender and worry
- Therefore, I designed an eight-week manual—drawing from the contemplative literature—to help Christians with chronic worry tolerate uncertainty by learning to surrender to God’s providence via daily contemplative practice

Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

- Week 1: Explain the model for the program
- Week 2: Introduction to contemplative prayer
- Week 3: The Jesuit tradition and the “Prayer of the Senses”
- Week 4: The Jesus Prayer
- Week 5: Centering Prayer
- Week 6: Continue with Centering Prayer
- Week 7: The Welcoming Prayer
- Week 8: A brief version of contemplative prayer

Contemplative Prayer for Christians with Chronic Worry: An Eight-Week Program

- Results revealed large effects pre- to post-treatment for intolerance of uncertainty, worry, depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as medium effects for positive views of God's providence and surrender as a form of religious coping ($N = 13$)
- In the debriefing session, many of the participants reported that surrendering to God's providence through daily contemplative prayer changed their life, helping them to let go of their pursuit of worry

Other Recent Studies—The Jesus Prayer

- I recently conducted a randomized controlled trial on a two-week online contemplative prayer program for Christian college students with self-described daily stress (Knabb & Vazquez, 2016)
- Participants were randomly assigned to a Jesus Prayer group ($n = 44$), which involved reciting the Jesus Prayer for 10 minutes per day (based on an audio recording), or a wait-list group ($n = 42$)
- Results revealed within and between group differences after a two-week period of time
- On a scale measuring perceived stress, a medium (almost large) pre- to post treatment effect for the Jesus Prayer group emerged, with no significant difference among the wait-list group

Other Recent Studies—The *Cloud of Unknowing*

- In a more recent study, I attempted to operationalize the *Cloud of Unknowing*, exploring “humble detachment” as a variable that mediates the relationship between surrendering to God’s providence and repetitive negative thinking among Christian college students (Knabb, Vazquez, Wang, & Bates, 2017)
- “Humble detachment”
 - “A detached, flexible, humble ability to (a) let go of the tendency to clutch or push away a preoccupation with inner experiences and the self, and (b) pivot from a preoccupation with the self and inner experiences to a more transcendent awareness of God’s active, loving presence”
- Humble detachment mediated the relationship between surrendering to God’s providence and repetitive negative thinking (rumination and worry) among college students
- We are currently developing a manualized preventative program for Christians with repetitive negative thinking, using the teachings of the *Cloud of Unknowing*

Future Directions

- Scale development
- Randomized trials
- Preventative programs
- Some possible concepts to further develop
 - *Nepsis, hesychia*, detachment, “desert psychology” (Laird, 2006), and compunction
- Overall, we need additional researchers to operationalize the contemplative literature as a Christian-sensitive alternative to Buddhist mindfulness meditation
 - Core aims are different—union with God versus no-self

Contact Information

- For additional questions (or for the PowerPoint slides), please contact me at jknabb@calbaptist.edu

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