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**slconnect**  
Resources for Healthy Life & Ministry

# MANAGING STRESS

## Mindfulness and stress relief

**S**ome stress in life is good, says Sr. Pat Parachini, SNJM, a spiritual director and formator at Saint Luke Institute, because it stimulates personal growth.

The challenge is when stress becomes distress, when it is completely overwhelming and affects our ability to function effectively in daily life.

Dr. Phil Gloninger and therapist Martha Keys Barker, who have served on the clinical staff of Saint Luke Institute, both recommend mindfulness to reduce and prevent distress.

Ms. Keys Barker notes, "Stress is not only what happens to you, but also what you tell yourself is happening to you. There are things a person can't change that are distressing. Sometimes, however, the story we tell ourselves about a situation intensifies our stress, despair, self-criticism and blame."

Mindfulness is about paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally, says Dr. Gloninger. "Hold whatever is happen-

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## Prayer and spiritual life in times of distress

**I**n the midst of distress, many people find it difficult to pray and may even question if their distress is a sign they are not faithful enough.

"We are an incarnational religion. Jesus assumed flesh and body and lived the life we lived. He made our life sacred. That includes our human emotions," says Sr. Pat Parachini, SNJM. "Distress is an emotion. It is what you do with that emotion to allow God to walk through it."

As a spiritual director and a member of the spiritual formation team at Saint Luke Institute, Sr. Pat works with priests and men and women religious who often are in distress. She says it is

important to recognize the connection between mind, body and spirit and to accept your vulnerabilities.

She notes that there is not one way to pray when feeling stress. A person needs to find the approach that is the most comfortable given his or her relationship with God.

She recommends, during times you are not stressed, to develop a practice of understanding how God speaks to you. Seek to develop a daily discipline of quiet and receptivity to God.

She says, "Prayer is an act of humility. You acknowledge you need someone

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## Accepting a situation gives space to respond

**Mindfulness, continued**  
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ing without judgment or criticism,” he says. “Say ‘This is how I’m feeling,’ not ‘I shouldn’t be feeling this way.’ That creates resistance and stress.

“Put yourself in a place to respond. Recognition and awareness help you be able to respond and not be swept away by toxic thoughts.”

“Accepting reality doesn’t mean we approve of something as it is,” adds Ms. Keys Barker. “It means we aren’t fighting against it. Not accepting will not make it go away. Accepting a situation gives a person the space to focus on how to respond.”

Ms. Keys Barker recommends an approach developed by researcher Marsha Linehan: distract yourself, do things that are self-soothing to your senses and help improve your feelings at the moment.

Many people find it difficult to do things they find enjoyable while in a painful situation or experiencing grief, but “throwing yourself into something proactively

and interrupting stressful thoughts” can be helpful, she says.

Engage in a sport, help another person, or watch a pleasant play or movie. Other ways to relax: bake, light a scented candle, listen to music, take a slow walk or pet an animal.

Seek a larger context and purpose for things that happen to you. How might your experience help you relate to another person or provide new insights to connect with someone else who has the same experience?

Pray. Take a short vacation or even an hour break to do something pleasurable.

Ms. Keys Barker also recommends consciously practicing the idea of acceptance through an “accepting posture”: sit with your hands open, breathe deeply and gently smile. Your physical posture helps send a message to your brain that things will be all right.

“Accepting things means you often have more energy to deal with a situation. Focus on what you have control over, on your choices and what will make you more resilient,” she says.

**God is our refuge  
and our strength,  
an ever-present  
help in distress.**

*- Psalm 46:2*

## Five tips for managing anxiety

**M**ichael Pollard, LCSW, a member of the clinical staff at St. Luke Consultation Center in St. Louis, Missouri, says an important way to battle panic or rising anxiety is to find practical ways to relax.

He offered the following tips:

- Slow yourself down. Focus on bringing yourself back to the present moment.
- Repeat a calming word or phrase – perhaps the name of a loved one or a short prayer.
- Practice deep, diaphragmatic breathing.
  - Put your hand on your stomach and

breathe in slowly through your nose – feel your stomach extend against your hand.

- Exhale through your mouth – feel your stomach muscles draw inward.
- As you breathe in and out, notice the temperature of the air – feel its coolness as you inhale, its warmth as you exhale.
- “Ride the wave” of the panic – don’t fight it. Breathe deeply, slow yourself down, be aware it is happening, and know that it will end.
- Try to objectify the panic and see it as something that is happening to you, not something happening within you.

## Reduce distress with these prayer techniques

**Prayer**, continued from page 1

besides yourself.”

Some of the prayer techniques she suggests:

*Lectio divina.* Choose a passage in Scripture. Pause and stay with that passage to let it speak to you.

*Meditation.* Give yourself three periods of 20 minutes each week to be still, sit and open yourself up to God.

Focus on your breathing. Instead of trying to control, let go so the Holy Spirit may work within you. If a distraction keeps coming to you, welcome it. God may be asking you to focus there.

*Journaling during prayer.* In Sr. Pat’s experience, people often grow calmer when journaling during rather than after prayer, even if they simply write one word or sketch an image.

*Dialogue with God.* When feeling stressful emotions, write a dialogue with God: “God, I don’t know what to do.” Then write what you think God would say. This can help put you in God’s presence when grappling with difficult issues.

*Catholic poetry or music.* Contemplative words and music, or sounds of nature and water can be very calming.

*Intentional prayer.* Bring your feelings to prayer. Focus on your breathing and allow your emotions to surface; such as feeling anger toward another person. Recognize you are not alone in feeling this way and there is nothing wrong with having feelings. God is holding them for you.

*Journal of gratitude.* When life is very stressful, write down one thing you are grateful for in the present.

## 6 Stress-Reducing Foods

“The most important thing to do from a nutrition standpoint when stressed is to manage your food environment,” says Fran Johnson, RDN, LD, behavioral health nutritionist at Saint Luke Institute. She recommends six super-foods to diminish stress:

- Nuts
- Salmon (can be thinly sliced, smoked pieces)
- Raw vegetables, such as red pepper strips or broccoli, and dip
- Whole grains, such as cereal, oatmeal or an English muffin
- Dark chocolate
- Black or green tea



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## CONNECTIONS

for healthy life and ministry

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Editor

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<p><b>When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Coping with Perfectionism</b> Thursday, March 15, 2018, 1-2 p.m. ET Maja Triantafilou, M.A., LPC</p>	<p><b>Mindfulness and Healthy Relationships:</b> Thursday, April 26, 2018, 1-2 p.m. ET Martha Keys Barker, LCSW-C</p>

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