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Program Overview & Introduction

YOUR PATH to Less Stress, More Serenity, Health, and God is a free self-help program designed for you to follow on your own schedule. It expands on the ideas presented in the book *Pilgrimage: A Doctor's Healing Journey* by Donna Chacko, M.D. While it is recommended that you read the book, it is not a requirement to benefit from or follow this program. This program offers information, tips, and inspiration that will help you find and follow your own path to better mind, body, and spirit health. You can read and work on the exercises all at once but I recommend experiencing the program across four weeks.

What You Need To Know Before Starting

It's vital to appreciate the difference between your goals and your plans. **Goals** are long-term targets, such as: lose 30 pounds, stop worrying so much, be less stressed, be more patient. This is what you are aiming for. Savor the image of how you will look and feel when you reach your goal—then store it away deep in your mind and heart.

Turn instead to your **plan**, the short-term changes/steps/plans/practices that you will need to start moving toward your goal. It is your plan and your choice of specific steps that will move you forward on your path towards your ultimate goal.

Individual Action Plan (IAP) and Being S.M.A.R.T.

I will speak of your Individual Action Plan (IAP). This is a written list of specific steps you will take to reach your goal. Each step must be S.M.A.R.T., that is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Based. This will be described in more detail later on. In each session, you will be asked to write an IAP targeting the topic being covered. I suggest you work with

each lesson for one week, then evaluate your progress before beginning the next lesson.

Let's take an example of dealing with stress since that topic is covered in the first lesson.

Say that your long-term goal is to stop feeling so stressed all the time. Your IAP will be your plan to make that happen. You decide to add 10 minutes of quiet prayer each day first thing in the morning and set your alarm for earlier to make this possible. You will sit in the living room since no one else is up at that time. You will pray (specify your type of prayer). Next week you will reflect on your progress, see how you feel, and decide if this was a good step for you and if you will continue the same or modify the plan.

Here's How To Prepare Yourself:

- ✓ Obtain a notebook or journal.
- ✓ Prayerfully reflect on what drew you to this program. Ask God to be with you each step.
- ✓ Write in your notebook three things you hope to achieve during this program.
- ✓ Make time. To get the full benefit of this program, I recommend a lesson/week and devoting a minimum of 30 minutes/day. Plan your schedule now. Decide when and where you'll study, listen, write, and pray. You might have to give up some screen time or sleep.
- ✓ Be ready to experiment with different ways of thinking, praying, eating, or exercising. Invite your spouse or friend to join you. A God-buddy!

One more thing . . . I am here to offer support. However, if you are experiencing severe anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts, please seek professional help or call 911 if you're experiencing a medical emergency or dial 988 for the suicide prevention helpline.

Remember, you are not alone. We walk with the Lord. Please email me at dc@serenityandhealth.com with any insights, concerns, or questions you have. I am honored to accompany you on your journey. May God bless you.



Donna

LESSON 1: The Mind-Body-Spirit Connection and Stress

Opening Prayer

“O most loving and merciful God, what a comfort it is to know you are with me now and always. I fervently thank you for being here—with all of us. You know our needs, pains, weaknesses, failures, and blind spots. Help us to be open to your will and receptive to your healing touch. Give us the courage to be honest and to trust you with everything. With my fellow pilgrims, I pray all these things in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.”

Starting the Journey

In my book [Pilgrimage: A Doctor's Healing Journey](#), I share what I learned from my own life and from my patients during my decades of practicing medicine. Much of the suffering I encountered could have been avoided. I learned that we have much more power over our health than a doctor does during a 15-minute clinic visit. I also learned new ways of being

with God that have helped me to be more whole, happy, and healthy.

I am called to share all this, but most importantly, I'm here to accompany you as you find and move ahead on your own path to better health of your body, mind, and spirit. Let's get started, shall we?

Journal Exercise—Do This Now

Take out your journal or notebook. What drew you to this program? Are you unable to motivate yourself to eat healthier or to exercise? Are you sick of being tired, in pain, stressed, or anxious? Do you feel far from God or unable to stick to a prayer routine?

Think specifically of the ways in which you want to feel better: feel rested, be more patient, enjoy exercise, lose weight, pray more, etc. Imagine how this change will feel and describe that as well. Take time for this exercise. Pray. Reflect. Write down everything you're thinking. I'm not asking you to write down your goals or your action steps—that comes later—for now just visualize the new you, the one who is calmer, sleeping better, enjoying prayer time, feeling more energetic, or whatever you are imagining. Hang on to that image.

Mind-Body-Spirit Connections

Our three parts—mind, body, and spirit—are all connected. Sometimes the parts get tangled. For example, when you stay angry and resentful, your body knows it, in ways such as elevated blood pressure or via tense, hurting muscles. When you are distant from God and unsure about the meaning of your life, you might feel restless, anxious, tired, or maybe sad, depressed, and unable to sleep. If you suffer from illness, pain, difficulty walking, obesity, or insomnia, you may find yourself worrying, anxious about the future, or perhaps even angry about your fate. Understanding these three parts—mind, body, and spirit—and their

connectedness will help you to heal.

Stress Versus Stressors And The Role Of Your Mind In Creating Stress

Stress is a huge topic because most Americans report having too much of it in their lives.

Stress changes your body in ways that cause or contribute to many ailments such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity. There are some key terms you need to understand:

A **stressor** is anything real or psychological that can cause stress. Your experience of stress is totally dependent on your interpretation or evaluation of the stressor. An event that stresses me may not stress you because we interpret the event differently depending on the sum of all our life experiences. If you were traumatized by a dog when you were two years old and I was not, you, as an adult, will react very differently than I will to a large, barking dog. Remember this—the scary event (stressor) deep in your mind from the past doesn't even have to be real—it could be an imaginary fear or a distorted memory from your unconscious, but the effect is the same.

Stress is your nonspecific (and sometimes unrecognized) response to a stressor when your mind considers it to be a threat or danger—real or perceived. It is crucial to distinguish acute stress from chronic stress. If your heart is pounding as you gasp in relief after barely missing another car as you changed lanes on the highway—that is acute stress. Chronic stress is caused by exposure to continual or frequent stressors, such that your body has no time to recover from the stress reaction. The stress may be so much a part of your life that you don't even recognize it as stress. Examples of chronic stress include enduring an abusive relationship, living week to week with insufficient income, long-term caregiving of your family member, working long hours at a job you hate, and—as we all know—adjusting to

living through and beyond a pandemic.

Stress response is the body's neurophysiologic automatic response to a stressor deemed by your mind to be a real threat. It consists of a series of instantaneous changes in the body: central nervous system (altered thinking, memory, attitude); motor system (tense muscles, jaws clenched); autonomic nervous system (an increase of heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and oxygen use; the rise of sugar and adrenaline).

A relaxation response is caused by changes in the body that reverse the physiological and chemical changes of the stress response. It can be elicited by certain behaviors, like prayer, deep belly breathing, walking, or enjoying music. *This response is the antidote to stress!*

Journal Exercise—Do This Now

Take out your journal or notebook.

- Write down 2-3 things that frequently stress you out. Examples: traffic, your kids or partner, your job, money problems, health issues, worrying about the future, etc.
- Write down 2-3 things that you already do to help reduce these stresses in your life. Are there other things you think you could do to make it better?

How Chronic Stress Ruins Your Health

Heart attacks, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, depression, and anxiety are just some of the diseases brought on or worsened by chronic stress.

It's critical to recognize that the stress and trauma we faced as children impact our health as adults. Much research is being done on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and how their effects continue to affect us in terms of health, wealth, and happiness in adulthood.

In addition to the negative health effects, being stressed all the time just doesn't feel good. I will describe specific practices which, if you do them, can help you reduce your stress, improve your health, and just feel better overall.

The Serenity Prayer

Any negative experiences we might have experienced in childhood were not in our control. Some things we worry about as adults are also beyond our control. This prayer offers grace and guidance: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I recommend memorizing it and saying it regularly.

Journal Exercise—Do This Now

Take out your journal or notebook.

- Describe how and where you feel stress in your body. Practice recognizing these early signs of stress—like a clenched jaw, tense shoulders, pressure in your chest, etc. Recognizing these signs early will help you spot when stress is building in your body and remind you to act to reduce the stress reaction. You could take a few slow breaths, say a prayer, or reframe the situation in your mind—this means thinking of it from a fresh angle. *Maybe that slow driver is a new and inexperienced driver—I won't honk.* I like to use a special short prayer when I start to notice stressful feelings or sensations in my body. I simply say, "My Lord and My God" and hand the stress to Him. He doesn't mind. I'll share more about this prayer practice in the next lesson.
- Recall a specific stressor you noted during the last few weeks, like an annoying co-worker, your spouse being late yet again, or your teen mouthing off at you. How did you react? What did you do about it? Think of techniques you could practice or

different ways of thinking about the stressor that might help you to respond differently and experience less stress. Write down some ideas.

- Have you experienced major stress over something, such as a work assignment while others seemingly react to the same stressor with little stress? Why do you think that is? Try not to criticize yourself as being less smart or capable than anyone else. I used to do this while working in the clinic and, of course, only stressed myself out more. Could you be irritable because of exhaustion or lack of sleep? Ask God for peace and go easy on yourself. Remember, we all have different backgrounds and life circumstances.

Activity

Try these stress-reducing activities!

1. **Deep belly breathing.** Put aside just three minutes to take slow easy breaths, feeling your abdomen expand outwards with each inbreathe and pull inwards with each long expiration.

- Watch this [detailed video on the diaphragmatic breathing process](#), which shows how useful it is to practice while lying down.
- See a [beautiful 3-D view of the anatomy of deep belly breathing](#).

If you printed out this program, visit SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources for quick links.

2. **Hand massage.** Gently massage the hand of your partner or your own hand or foot for 2-3 minutes. Use oil or hand lotion. Slowly and gently, starting at the tip of each individual finger or toe, massage all the surfaces in all directions as you move up to the wrist or ankle. Visualize the muscles, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and bones working together beneath

the skin. Savor how this feels.

3. **Body scan meditation.** These practices help our minds reestablish contact with our bodies. A simple body scan consists of lying down comfortably, calming yourself, and then focusing your mind, in a slow and systematic fashion, on the different parts of your body. Become fully aware of every sensation emanating from each body part. In guided body scans, which are particularly helpful, the meditator listens and follows verbal instructions.

- [20-minute guided body scan](#). Try it in the evening to wind down before bed.
- [In this video, Dr. Elisha Goldstein demonstrates the 3-Minute Body Scan](#)
- [A 3-Minute Body Scan Meditation to Cultivate Mindfulness](#)

If you printed out this program, visit [SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources](https://serenityandhealth.com/path-resources) for quick links.

What Do You Think?

How did these practices feel? Did you note any softening of your body or quieting of your mind? All of these activities will elicit a relaxation response and reduce your stress.

Journal Exercise—Create Your Individual Action Plan

Take out your journal or notebook. Let's review the steps.

- First, decide on and write down your general goal. Select a goal related to your mind or to stress, like “I want to stop worrying all the time” or “I want to reduce my stress—I know it's making my (headaches, blood pressure, diabetes, irritability, etc.) worse.”
- Second, create your Individual Action plan (IAP). Think about your lifestyle and circumstances and come up with one or two small and very specific steps you could

take now that will put you on the path towards your goal. The activities described above are examples of things you could do—quiet prayer, breathing exercises, or walking are great first steps.

Write down that small step you will take during the coming week to help you reduce your stress or whatever goal you selected. The step must be small, explicit, and specific (when/how long/how often/where). For example, I will take three slow breaths every time I'm sitting behind the wheel of my car before I drive away; or, after lunch at work, I will slowly walk around the block; or, I will write one positive thing in my journal every night and say the Serenity Prayer; or, I will pray every single morning for 2 minutes asking for God's grace to help me surrender my stresses and problems to Him. Are you willing to set an alarm to get up 5 or 10 minutes early for daily prayer? Prayerfully decide what step you want to take, write it down, and then try very hard to do it. If you miss a day or two, just begin again and keep on praying. This is how your transformation will begin.

- Decide when you will regularly review your plan and assess how you did. I encourage you to review your progress weekly— Sunday as part of a Sabbath routine works well. Maybe you messed up and weren't able to accomplish your plan. If so, select a smaller step for the coming week. Or, maybe your plan was too easy and you can step up your game. If you are like me, especially at the start, you may need to add a reminder on your phone or calendar.

Closing Prayer

“The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their afflictions. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the

troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all. He watches over all his bones; not one of them shall be broken.” — Psalms 34: 18-21

LESSON 2: The Link Between Your Faith and Your Health

Opening Prayer

“O most loving and merciful God, what a comfort it is to know you are with me now and always. I fervently thank you for being here— for all of us. You know our needs, pains, weaknesses, failures, and blind spots. Help us to be open to your will and receptive to your healing touch. Give us the courage to be honest and to trust you with everything. With my fellow pilgrims, I pray all these things in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.”

How Are You Doing?

How did your Individual Action Plan (IAP) work out? If you didn't follow through, maybe your plan was too broad or vague to tackle, such as “I will pray more” or “I will add more quiet time to my life,” or maybe you just weren't ready. Ask for God's help, recruit a friend or family member, and start again with your IAP, choosing a step(s) you are pretty sure you can accomplish. Success with small steps is a potent motivator.

Journal Exercise—Reflection

Take out your journal or notebook.

Record your thoughts about your IAP from the previous lesson. What were your successes and how did you feel? What did you learn about yourself? Were there unanticipated obstacles? Have you thought about how to deal with them in the future?

What Does Your Faith Have To Do With Your Health?

We do not choose to believe in God or practice a specific religion in order to reap health benefits. Yet living a life according to God's will, caring for our Temples, and enjoying a faith community all contribute to better health. We cannot demand or expect these benefits, but we often receive them. *Trusting God is the ultimate stress buster!*

Knowing that our purpose in life is to do God's will gives powerful meaning to our lives, a satisfying structure upon which to build our days. As someone once wisely said, "Direction is peace." It's true—we gain peace by knowing we are on the right path, the path to God—even when the way is rocky or confusing. Purpose, direction, and meaning—all increase our ability to deal with stress and feel more satisfaction in life. Research has also shown that participating in a faith community (or any close community) is a major predictor of better mental and physical health!

St. Augustine said that "Our hearts are restless until they rest with Thee." I think of this type of restlessness as discomfort or suffering that only Our Lord can heal. We connect to God and rest with Him through prayer.

Types of Prayer

We pray to adore God, ask for help for ourselves and others, express thanksgiving, tell God we are sorry and ask forgiveness, or give praise. There are many types of prayer:

- Vocal (quiet or silent; spontaneous, memorized, or read; solo or group)
- Discursive meditation (prayerfully dwelling on sacred themes, such as parts of Jesus' life or the Bible)
- Contemplation (receptive prayer without words or feelings; often called meditation)

Reflection

Do you have your own daily prayer routine? With life's changes and your own spiritual growth, this routine will change and deepen—but you must start with *some* dedicated time even if it is brief. Trusting Jesus with some of your time each day is a critical step in your journey to oneness with God. I will review two specific types of prayer, their relation to the health of body, mind, and spirit, and their transformative impact on my own life.

Prayer Type 1: Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is one type of pre-contemplative prayer (or Christian meditation) that is solidly based in the Christian tradition. It is a prayer that is beyond thoughts, words, or emotions, and a surrender to the loving will of the Father; or, a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus; or, my favorite description, as a surrender to God's presence. Father Thomas Keating wrote extensively about Centering Prayer.

- The practice, history, and instructions on how to do it are beautifully described on the [Contemplative Outreach website](#), and I ask you to go there now. You will find the 4-step guidelines.
- Furthermore, I found listening to this [video by Thomas Keating](#) to be most helpful.
- I've also [blogged about meditation](#) and had a fascinating [Pop-Up Conversation](#) "Christians Do Meditate," with contemplative writer and spiritual director Carl McColman.

If you printed out this program, visit [SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources](https://serenityandhealth.com/path-resources) for quick links.

Do This Now

Study the links above and learn the four guidelines of Centering Prayer so you will be

prepared to proceed with the Activity below.

Activity

Now is the time to practice Centering Prayer. You should have read the guidelines so you understand how to let your wandering thoughts float by without judgment. You need your sacred word. Set your intention: to say yes to the presence and action of God or to surrender to God's presence. Find a quiet spot. I recommend using a timer or a Centering Prayer app. Today we will start with five minutes, so set your timer or app accordingly. Sit up straight, breathe easy a few times, say your intention, and then begin.

How did it feel? Don't be surprised if your mind was running in all directions and you didn't feel holy peace. No matter. You did it. You trustingly surrendered this special time to God!

Here Is What Happened With Me

Over the years I have struggled with a too-busy brain that was always thinking, planning, scheming, and worrying. It interfered with concentration and especially with listening. When I first heard about Centering Prayer, it appealed to me because somehow I knew I needed it. Practicing it for even two minutes was difficult. But, I persisted, and gradually increased my time. I now relish my usually-twice-daily Centering Prayer time, distractions and all. I feel closer to God, have grown more trusting, and have been rewarded with a calmer less-reactive mind.

Centering Prayer differs from the common forms of meditation because of its intention but is similar in its dedication to silence. High-quality research on meditation has demonstrated benefits to health and wellness, summarized in the book *Altered Traits* by Daniel Goleman.

Prayer Type 2: On-The-Go Prayer

St. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). Throughout the years, holy men and women have suggested how to do this. You might have heard of the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” a short, often repetitive prayer. I personally connect the secular concept of mindfulness with frequent prayer during the day. I call this connection God-centered mindfulness and use my own on-the-go-prayer, “My Lord and My God” to make it happen. Saying this prayer often during the day has dramatically affected my thinking and always brings me back to God.

Here’s how it works. Each time a negative or positive thought or feeling comes into my awareness, I say “My Lord and My God.” I say it if I start to feel judgmental, irritated, impatient, or anxious. Or, if I feel joy, gratitude, or relief. I recently said my prayer when cars were blocking the intersection as I tried to turn left, again when I was irritated with someone who kept me on the phone longer than I wanted, and also when I made judgments about another’s odd clothing choice. I say it when I find myself worrying about loved ones and for joyful things—like smelling a fragrant rose in my garden. I no longer have to try to remember to say this prayer. Now the words mysteriously pop into my mind at the onset of any thought or feeling—positive or negative. I’m reminded to turn to God and stay in the moment. This happens dozens of times daily, repeatedly reminding me to pause, take a breath and say my prayer. It helps me to thoughtfully respond to stressors instead of mindlessly reacting to them. Try it and let me know what happens. The automatic part

doesn't start immediately. It takes time. But, please persist. It can be life-changing. You'll feel closer to God and more at peace.

More About The Stress Connection

An on-the-go prayer habit will help you deal with stress. The prayer will remind you to pause, take an easy breath, and turn to God and the present moment. You will be more mindful—which is much better than being stressed, reactive, worrying, or ruminating. Keep trying it until it becomes automatic! You will feel better and God will be very pleased.

Journal Exercise—Do This Now

Take out your journal or notebook. Select a word, phrase, or brief prayer for your on-the-go-prayer and write it down. Add reminder notes on your computer, car dashboard, or refrigerator. Sit quietly and remember the things that stress you out. Practice saying your prayer silently, over and over.

Reflection Questions

Is God important to you? Important enough to surrender some of your precious time to Him? Most of us have at least some discretionary time that we choose to spend on social media, the internet, reading, TV, news, visiting with friends, exercising, etc. What about you? Where can you find some time for prayer? What about getting up 15 minutes earlier? Where will you pray? Are you comfortable being seen by your family members praying? If not, how will you adjust? All prayer is magnificent, but Centering Prayer is particularly important because it provides the sacred silence we so desperately need.

Do you feel distressed by all the activity in your brain? Like worrying, resentment,

comparing, pressure, sadness, grief, guilt, or anticipatory anxiety. What bothers you most? Think about how you can recognize these feelings as soon as they start, so you can say your on-the-go-prayer. Look for cues in your body. Be on high alert for anxiety expressing itself as negative thoughts or bodily symptoms like chest tightness.

Does your faith guide your decisions, actions, and goals? If the honest answer is no, why not? God won't always give you specific answers, but if you give Him time and space and have the intention of doing His will, you will be doing His will. You will then have a path to follow for all phases of your life. Can you apply this to your life?

Activity

- Enjoy sacred silence right now. Practice deep belly breathing for three minutes.
- Repeat your experience of Centering Prayer, setting the timer again for five minutes.
- Record your reaction to these experiences and reflection questions in your journal.

Journal Exercise—Individual Action Plan (IAP)

Again, remember . . . to see a change, you must make a change.

So far we have talked about stress reduction techniques (such as breathing, body scans, and better ways to think about stressors) and the link between our health and our faith. I've mainly emphasized Centering Prayer and on-the-go prayer—what I call God-Centered Mindfulness. You may have other spiritual practices that are meaningful to you.

Take out your journal or notebook. Now's the time for you to write this week's IAP. What steps will take on your continued path to serenity, health, and God? You may already know, but if not, here are some ideas:

- I will set my alarm 15 minutes earlier each day in a prayerful surrender of my sleep time. I will sit in the corner chair and pray my favorite prayer or practice Centering Prayer or read the bible or any combination that calls me.
- I will continue with a breathing practice every time I sit in the car; before I drive off I will enjoy three slow deep breaths.
- Every night I will remind myself of my on-the-go prayer, review in my head or journal how it is going, and pray for Jesus to help me make this an automatic habit.
- Every Tuesday I will walk in the park for 30 minutes before I go home.

Closing Prayer

“The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their afflictions. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all. He watches over all his bones; not one of them shall be broken.” — Psalms 34: 18-2

LESSON 3: Eating, Habits, and Goals

Opening Prayer

“O most loving and merciful God, what a comfort it is to know you are with me now and always. I fervently thank you for being here— for all of us. You know our needs, pains, weaknesses, failures, and blind spots. Help us to be open to your will and receptive to your healing touch. Give us the courage to be honest and to trust you with everything. With my fellow pilgrims, I pray all these things in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.”

How Are You Doing?

No matter what happened, it was a success because you are here! You stuck with the program and likely tried something different. And, I'll bet you are turning more to God for help. Thomas Merton says our desire to please God does indeed please Him—no matter if we mess up. We can just start again. Know that God is pleased and is walking with you.

Reflection

For some of you, this week about eating habits may be difficult. More than most topics, this brings up feelings of shame and failure for some. Lessons/Weeks 1 and 2 are critical preparation for this week. I hope by now you have a better understanding of stress in your life and are committed to a prayer practice. If you have had a difficult relationship with food, your weight, and your self-image, just know that God loves you as you are and is with you.

Journal Exercise

Take out your journal or notebook. List three concerns you have with your eating and weight. Write down your long-term goals and how reaching them would improve your life.

Activity

Say now: “God loves me just as I am. He knows I am trying. He is walking with me right now.” Know that your identity is that of God’s beloved. It is not what the scale says.

Introduction

The previous lessons provide preparation for what is ahead. So, if you have not taken any steps or made your Individual Action Plans (IAP), I strongly encourage you to do that now.

I will first cover information, such as nutrition and diet. Then I will introduce the more

challenging issue: How to turn that knowledge into action and healthy habits.

Eating

You don't have to be a nutrition expert to eat a healthy diet. But it helps to know a few basics. I share with you my very practical, simple approach to healthy eating and will give you references along the way.

First, don't get hung up on the ongoing arguments about which diet is best—Keto, Atkins, South Beach, Paleo, Mediterranean, etc. **You don't need a diet.** You need to develop a habit of eating healthy, tasty food, starting now and continuing for the rest of your life.

Six Recommendations

These recommendations are based on vast research on diets and health worldwide.

- 1. Eat more fruits and vegetables, especially ones with deep blue, purple, and green colors.** My number one eating recommendation is for you to keep track of your servings of fruits and vegetables every day and be sure you eat at least five servings.
- 2. Cut back on meat.** Decide what is reasonable based on your habits at present. Less or no red meat? Meat three times a week? Meatless Mondays? The data is irrefutable that too much meat consumption harms our health and the planet.
- 3. Be sure you eat legumes** (black beans, chickpeas, lentils) **a minimum of three times a week.** World epidemiological studies suggest that eating beans is the best

dietary predictor of longevity! Read [Five Reasons We Should Eat More Beans](#).

4. **Avoid (or reduce) unhealthy choices**, especially meats with nitrites, sugary drinks, processed food that comes in boxes, french fries, purchased cakes/cookies/snacks, and fast food. Try to follow Michael Pollan's timeless advice: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." He is referring to real food that looks like food, not edible food-like substances that come in a bag or box.

5. [Follow the plate method](#). Use a plate that measures 10 inches and follow this method: 1/2 the plate is full of fruits and vegetables, 1/4 with a protein (such as fish, meat, soy), and 1/4 with a whole grain carb. The [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health website](#) is full of practical information.

6. **Calorie count and labels**. It is helpful to have a general idea of where your calories come from. Remember that fat has more than twice as many calories per gram as carbohydrates and proteins. **1 gm fat=9 cal, 1 gm carb=4 cal, and 1 gm protein=4 cal**. The [NIH National Institute on Aging describes how to read food labels](#). The most important parts are the # of servings, the calories per serving, the added sugar, the fiber, the fat, and the protein. The lower the sugar and fat, the higher the fiber and the protein, the better. If you take in more calories than your body needs, you will gain weight over time. It's probably a good idea to have a general idea of [your estimated caloric requirement](#), which runs from 1600-3000cal/24 hours, depending on your age and activity level—mine is 1800 cal/day. Knowing this may influence your decision to order NY cheesecake pancakes at IHOP (920 cal) or a fancy

Frappuccino at Starbucks (some more than 500 cal).

It's important to stress how food and eating have changed in modern times and how these changes greatly contribute to obesity. The type of food has changed, carefully engineered by the food industry to have the perfect blend of salt, sugar, and fat that makes us crave it more. It would not be recognized as food by our ancestors. In addition, food is readily available almost 24/7—for example, we snack at most meetings we attend at work, school, or church. Plates and serving sizes have increased. We need to be aware of what we are up against—food is everywhere. It is cheap, tasty, and designed to be addicting.

Further Reading:

For a quick overview, see [3 Truths to End All Confusion About a Healthy Diet](#) by Dr. David Katz, author of *Truth About Food*.

The following are useful references and most contain recipes as well:

- [American College of Lifestyle Medicine](#), a True Health Initiative
- [Blue Zones](#)
- [Forks Over Knives](#)

You can watch two of my Pop-Up Conversations, which deal with issues around eating—learn from [Coach Tate](#), private coach, and [LK Paden](#), YMCA.

If you printed out this program, visit [SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources](#) for quick links.

Journal Exercise

Take out your journal or notebook. Completing a food log is an excellent way to start your

evaluation process. We frequently eat automatically and are not aware of how many calories we consume. A variety of free printable food logs are available online. You can keep track for a week or day, or in a smaller way, such as how many servings of fruits and veggies you have a day.

Which suggestions discussed so far seem practical to you? What is the eating habit you most want to change?

Keep reading to learn how to turn these thoughts into habits.

Habits And Goals

Much of eating is mindless. Eating from the bag of chips. Foraging in the kitchen when one is bored or upset. So, how do we mindfully build healthy eating habits?

- Concentrate on the doable small-step actions in your Individual Action Plan (IAP). Then relish the success from achieving them or coming close. This good feeling will motivate you. Your long-term goals (curing your pre-diabetes, losing 30 pounds, becoming a vegetarian) should NOT be your focus. Celebrate each successful step as you create healthy habits that will last a lifetime as you get to your goal.
- What cues lead you to eat? Boredom, stress, watching TV, your sister-in-law's visits?
- Change the cues or the environment to help you change your habits. (See below.)
- Plan how to reward yourself for new and healthy habits. Make goals with a partner and encourage and praise each other. Promise yourself a non-food treat if you are successful for a week. Savor how it feels to go to bed without a full, bloated stomach.

Reflection

Is your weight or diet unhealthy? Do you think about this often? Is this problem

long-standing? Why do you think that is? Turn to God and rest in His loving arms. Hear Him reassuring you: “You are not stupid, weak, or lacking in discipline. I am with you every step.” The shift in food culture/industry is a major contributor to unhealthy eating and obesity in society. With God’s help, you can take steps in a healthier direction.

To Do

Devote a few minutes to prayer. Open your heart to Jesus and ask for His help in writing your IAP. What habits do you need to change? Is it more prayerful surrender to His will? Or, specific changes in what, how, when, where, and with whom you eat? Whether you’re obese, skinny, or hiding some type of disordered eating, God loves you unconditionally, and so do I.

Journal

- Take out your journal or notebook. If you’re overweight, obese, or recognize your diet could be more healthy, list three cues or triggers that lead you to poor eating. Examples: Seeing snacks in the cupboard; watching TV and snacking after dinner; eating on the couch; eating treats at work; boredom; stress.
- Think about and write down possible ways to change the cue or the environment. Ideas: limit your purchase of snacks or place them in an inconvenient/inaccessible place; replace some of TV time with other habits such as listening to music, working on a puzzle, reading in another room, or going for a walk. Have healthy snacks such as fruit, veggies, and nuts ready to snack on when you’re stressed or upset. Pre-plan non-eating behaviors such as chewing gum, drinking tea, doing word games, phoning a friend, taking a bath, and especially saying a preselected prayer, such as your on-the-go prayer. Join a hiking group and meet healthy eaters to encourage and inspire you.

- Get a calendar for tracking the progress of your steps.
- Consider finding an accountability partner. Call a friend, relative, or neighbor right now. The right social media group might work for you.
- Jot down a limited food log, even now before you write your IAP. Write down everything you ate yesterday and today. A complete and honest food log listing everything you ate or drank for a week will tell you a lot.

Again, remember: To see a change, you must make a change. Be sure to start with something very easy so you can be successful in completing your plan. It is succeeding at these first small steps that will help you move ahead on your path.

Reflection

Stress reduction, mindfulness, and prayer are your biggest assets when it comes to creating healthy eating habits for life. You cannot spend too much time learning, understanding, and carrying out these practices— the foundation of a successful IAP. Please look over Lessons/Weeks 1 and 2, the references I provided, or contact me if you need clarification.

Journal—Individual Action Plan

Take out your journal or notebook. Write down one step (at the most two) that you want to take to improve your eating habits. Remember that your plan must be easy, specific, and explicit as to time, place, and frequency. Reevaluate your progress weekly.

In the sections above, I offered some ideas. Two steps that have helped me a great deal are 1) counting my servings of fruits and veggies every day and aiming for a minimum of 5 servings; 2) after dinner and my oatmeal cookie, I floss and then brush with my electric toothbrush—my cue to stop eating for the evening. What steps might work for you?

Closing Prayer

“The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their afflictions. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all. He watches over all his bones; not one of them shall be broken.” —Psalms 34: 18-21

LESSON 4: Why and How to Fit Exercise Into Your Daily Life

Opening Prayer

“O most loving and merciful God, what a comfort it is to know you are with me now and always. I fervently thank you for being here— for all of us. You know our needs, pains, weaknesses, failures, and blind spots. Help us to be open to your will and receptive to your healing touch. Give us the courage to be honest and to trust you with everything. With my fellow pilgrims, I pray all these things in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.”

How Are You Doing?

That was a lot of material, right? Did you write an Individual Action Plan (IAP) and try to follow it? Did you reevaluate your progress and adjust the IAP as needed? Just as small steps are key, re-evaluations and readjustments are equally important.

Reflection

Do you feel more hopeful that you can create change? I hope you're feeling empowered to step toward a life that is more holy, happy, and healthy . . . one little step at a time. If you are not sure, pray, share your doubts with God and your faith community—or with me, and, above all, keep trying to move ahead with tiny, doable steps. And, always remember that

God's love does not depend on your weight or your habits—it is unconditional.

Introduction to Exercise Habits

As I did with the section on eating, I will begin with some facts and then move to the challenges of actually maintaining a regular habit, in this case, an exercise habit.

Why We Should Exercise

The benefits to physical and mental health are astounding! These benefits vary depending on the type: cardio (aerobic) vs. strength training (weight or resistance training) vs. stretching, but I will speak about exercise in general.

There are [many health benefits of regular exercise](#) including longer lives, reduction of cardiovascular disease and strokes, less cancer (colon, breast, and others), disease prevention or reversal (Type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome, osteoporosis), fewer falls, relief of depression and anxiety, improved mood and sleeping quality, and healthy weight. If you printed out this program, visit [SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources](https://serenityandhealth.com/path-resources) for quick links.

Exercise reduces stress and increases resilience, our ability to cope with stress. Google “Physical Fitness: a Pathway to Health and Resilience” for a nice review about this.

There also are immediate rewards. You feel great after exercising, with a better mood and more energy. Exercise also lubricates the joints. If I choose exercises that don't stress my knees, my arthritis is improved. I always stride out of the gym with happier knees than when I entered. This lubrication works way better than anti-inflammatory meds.

I knew all these things but still didn't begin a regular exercise program. For years.

Why We Don't Exercise

Do these excuses sound familiar?

- I have no time.
- It is too expensive to join a gym, sign up for a team, buy the equipment, etc.
- My neighborhood is not safe for walking or running.
- It's boring. I don't like it. It's not fun. It's just one more thing I have to do.
- I have no incentive to spend my time and money when I see no immediate benefit.
- I can't walk because my knees hurt, and I hurt my back at the gym, so what can I do?
- I am so heavy that I am embarrassed to exercise outside or in a gym.

I have said or heard all of these. I was guilty of not getting serious about a personal exercise program until I had major difficulties walking. I just "didn't have time."

Do This Now

Stand up tall. Stretch your arms up in the air. Move your body any way you like for several moments. Breathe. Smile while you do this.

Journal Exercise

Take out your journal or notebook. Sit down and write down your obstacles to exercise. Why can't you start? What has caused you to quit past exercise programs? Did you notice any short-term benefits from exercise? Is there any type of exercise that's fun for you? Is there anyone who could be your exercise buddy? Is getting healthy truly important to you?

Increasing Your Exercise

Here is a list of ideas to get you started and address the challenges listed above.

- Fit in a little fitness where you can. Take the stairs; do floor exercises during commercials; run in place while the microwave is on; walk briskly for 5-10 minutes during your lunch break; spend 2-3 minutes stretching after waking up; go for family walks; choose a far-away parking spot; stand at your desk; pace while on the phone.
- Workout online. YouTube provides many free, quality workouts for you to choose from. I recommend [Faithful Workouts](#). It has a free Facebook Group you can join.
- Buddy up. Find a family member or friend for a regular daily or weekly walk.
- Sign up for a weekly exercise class at the “Y” or community center. Bonding with others in Zumba, Aikido, or yoga will help motivate you.
- Participate in [Parkrun](#), a terrific international program that offers free timed walks or runs on Saturday mornings in many neighborhoods. Or join a hiking group near you.
- Swim. At one point, walking caused me pain. Swimming was my road to recovery. Publicly easing back into exercise was a gratifying, albeit humbling, experience!
- Teams. Did you ever enjoy team sports? There are teams available for all ages. A lady in my neighborhood who is my age is still playing on her soccer team. Talk about a way to incentivize exercise!
- Go to the gym. I never went to gyms and found them intimidating—until my body complained with pain and worsening osteoporosis. [Finally, I signed up with a personal trainer](#). In 2020, I transitioned to a combination of home weight training and walking. I use a corner of a room where I spread out my yoga mat and use the few hand weights that I own. I continue to see improvements and feel stronger. I can finally do 20 squats after building my strength over the last five years.
- Tailor it to your body. Avoid anything that hurts. Use a variety of types of exercise to avoid pain or causing overuse injuries. Mix it up. Start light and short. Go slow.

If you printed out this program, visit [SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources](https://serenityandhealth.com/path-resources) for quick links.

Journal Exercise—Your Individual Action Plan (IAP)

Take out your journal or notebook. Record your exercise action plan. What small step can you accomplish? Your plan must include a specific action with details: when, where, what, how long, and how often? How will you overcome common obstacles?

Keep Praying!

Personal growth takes time. Longer than four weeks, that's for sure. But, this is a start. I hope the program offered new ideas and encouraged you to try different approaches. Prayer is a critical part. Whether you're making progress with your IAPs or not so much, stay faithful to your daily prayer routine, regardless of type or length. Keep trying your on-the-go prayer.

Activity

As we reach the end of this program, take 10 minutes now for a quiet prayer of your choice. Be open to God's will; savor His presence. Reflect on all the things for which you are grateful.

My Reflection

God doesn't care about your weight or your muscles. He cares that you and I are trying to better follow His will, love others, use His gifts and talents, and cherish the beautiful temples He has made for us. Trust God. Enjoy the peace. Take tiny steps and you will make progress.

Closing Prayer

“The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their afflictions. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all. He watches over all his

bones; not one of them shall be broken.” —Psalms 34: 18-21

What's Next—Keep Going!

Resources

If you benefited from this program, consider telling a friend! They can get it for free by signing up at SerenityandHealth.com/yourpath. They will also be subscribed to Donna's blog newsletter for monthly tips and inspiration related to mind-body-spirit health.

If you borrowed a copy of Donna's book *Pilgrimage: A Doctor's Healing Journey* and would like to own it or gift it to a friend or reading group, [go here for purchase options](#).

If you need more inspiration, consider watching some of the [Pop-Up Conversations](#) Donna has held with authors, spiritual leaders, healers, and others who focus on the mind-body-spirit connection and faith.

If you would like Donna to speak at your church or other gathering or to have her attend a discussion of her book *Pilgrimage: A Doctor's Healing Journey*, please email dc@serenityandhealth.com

Visit SerenityandHealth.com/path-resources for quick links to any of the resources mentioned throughout this program, including videos, articles, blog posts and more.

About Donna Chacko, M.D.

Donna promotes the health of body, mind, and spirit through her website (serenityandhealth.com), her blog, and programs at her church in Maryland. She is the

author of the award-winning book *Pilgrimage: A Doctor's Healing Journey*.