

**Spiritual Exercises**

**For**

**A Healthier Life**

**&**

**Spiritual Fitness Assessment Tool**

**Some Sample Pages**



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# Spiritual Exercises for a Healthier Life

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## **An Introduction to Spiritual Exercises**

*“Spend your time and energy in training yourself for spiritual fitness. Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important for it promises a reward in both this life and the next. This is true and everyone should accept it.” 1st Timothy 4:7-9 (NLT, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition)*

Spiritual Exercise might be defined as any belief or intentional behavior that helps one become more like God, draw closer to Him, know Him better or that follows the principles or commandments of God. In most translations of the Bible, the word godliness is used in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:8 instead of spiritual exercise. The more we become like God, the more spiritually fit we will be and the more we will experience a full life. That’s what God wants for each of us, to live a life full of joy, peace, kindness and love. This is what Jesus had in mind when he told us in John 10:10 that he came to give us a full and abundant life. In addition to having an eternal life, which we can have if we believe in Jesus, we can have a truly wonderful life on earth before we die if we live according to the principles that God lays out for us in the Bible. Part of having a full life is being healthy. When we enjoy good physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health we are better able to do the type of things that we want to do and enjoy doing. We are better able to use the gifts and talents that God has given us. Our life is more meaningful.

Much has been written over the years about spiritual exercises. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, wrote an influential book titled *Spiritual Exercises* where he wrote about his struggles to grow closer to God and of the benefit of certain behaviors. When practiced, these activities would help him grow in his faith. Scientific research is showing that when people practice certain spiritual behaviors that are associated with their faith, their health is positively impacted. Many of the behaviors that have been identified in this research can be considered spiritual exercise. Activities like praying, believing in God, attending church, socializing or fellowshiping with others of a like faith and serving others in need have all been shown to have a positive impact on health. The medical community recognizes the significance of the faith and health connection. According to a poll of doctors by the American Academy of Family Physicians, 99% of physicians say that religious beliefs can make a positive contribution to the healing process. This is, perhaps, the tip of the iceberg.

God inspired the writers of the Bible to write about his principles. God loves us and his principles were intended for our good. They were intended as a guide to help us make decisions and to know His will for our life. Read a contemporary version of Psalms 119 and you’ll understand the benefits of following the guidelines set out for us by God. The writer says in verse 93 that his joy and health were restored because he followed God’s principles. Verse two tells us that when we obey his principles we are happy! Throughout the bible God reveals his principles which are a form of spiritual exercises. When we incorporate well defined principles of physical fitness into our exercise routines, we become more physically fit and healthier. A regular exercise program that includes cardiovascular activity, resistance training and flexibility exercises will help us to be more fit. When we eat a variety of foods in moderation and accompany that with physical activity, we are better able to control our weight. When we incorporate God’s principles into our life, we can become more spiritually healthy, and this improved spiritual health can impact on our physical and emotional health.

There are numerous spiritual exercises that, if practiced, will improve one’s spiritual health.....

Outlined in this booklet is a brief summary of Spiritual Exercises that one might consider practicing regularly to grow in their faith. In turn, it may impact favorably on one’s emotional and physical health. I am not aware of research that has been conducted which demonstrates that if a person practices any or all of these exercises they will experience improved health, however, these practices are based on Biblical truths. They are included in God’s guidebook that He has given us to live by. The research does clearly show however that there is a strong relationship between many of these attitudes, beliefs and practices and

health and well being. For each exercise I have provided relevant scriptures, a little about the research and the relationship that might exist between that spiritual exercise and health, and some considerations for practical application.

Most of the scriptures quoted in this booklet are from the New Living Translation (NLT) version or translation of the Bible. Many of those come from the first edition of the NLT which is the version I usually read and study. Scriptures that are not from the NLT are generally from the New International Version.

## ***Spiritual Exercises Related to Your Attitudes and Beliefs***

### ***Believe in God***

*What the Bible Says:*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. Romans 5:1-2

The Lord says, I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on thee, I will answer, I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue them and honor them. Psalm 91:14-15

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35

And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. Hebrews 11:6

*What the Research Says:*

Belief and having faith in God gives us hope and provides us a framework for living life. Those who have made a choice to believe that God sent His son Jesus to die for our sins and to give us eternal life have an additional measure of hope and peace. When we believe what we read in the Bible and live in the faith that flows from this belief, our faith and the hope it provides grows even deeper. Medical researchers who explore the faith and health connection provide an explanation of how these beliefs affect health.

"The medical research is clear that the deeper your true spiritual faith, the more likely you are to have a better mental and physical health outcome. You are much more likely to cope well with illness and to recover from disease." (Walt Larimore, M.D., *God's Design for The Highly Healthy Person*)

"The implications of simple faith for health and illness are intriguing. Whether or not God or the spiritual dimension is objectively real or true, and regardless of one's religious affiliation, attendance, worship, or belief, merely thinking or affirming that one is religious or spiritual, or simply having faith or trust in God, a higher power, or the tenets of a religion, may benefit our health and well-being. The reason is that religious faith can produce hope.... The consequences of hope for well-being are significant... Any resource that can provide hope merits consideration as a potentially protective factor against physical and emotional illness. One such resource is religious faith... For the devout believer, (Holy) scriptures represent powerful promises that, taken apart, they become self-fulfilling prophecies. Mere faith in God's existence may be

enough to promote health and can prevent or even cure illness. Independent of all the other health-giving factors discussed in this book, hope and expectation seem to be capable of miracles. This is amply supported by both scientific evidence and theory. There is a faith factor in health." (Jeff Levin, Ph.D., *God, Faith, and Health, Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection.*)

*What You Can Do:*

Belief in God is a choice we must make. To Believe in God you need to get to know Him. To know Him, I suggest you begin to read the Bible. You might consider buying a copy of the New Living Translation version of the New Believer's Bible. It is designed to help the new Christian read, study, and understand the Bible and has a section titled Knowing God. Visit [www.needhim.org](http://www.needhim.org) to read about who God is and about His love for you. You may also consider visiting with a pastor at a local church to receive some direction in getting to know God and in how to come to believe in Him.

### ***Spiritual Exercises Related to Your Relationship With God***

#### ***Believe in & Receive God's Love***

*What the Bible Says:*

For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. Romans 5:5, 8

We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. 1 John 4:16

"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

*What the Research Says:*

When we believe that God loves us, it provides the very important ingredients of hope and optimism that are important for good health. Jeff Levin, Ph.D. writes in his book, *God Faith and Health, Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection* that "Feeling loved by God or a higher power was associated with greater self-esteem, higher levels of self efficacy or sense of mastery, less depression, less physical disability, and greater self-rated health."

*What You Can Do:*

God is love. Having this belief is critical to the contribution of one's good health. It is important to believe that God looks after us and wants the best for us. He wired us in such a way to believe the truths in the Bible that He inspired men to write. The verses above are representative of others that speak to the love God has for us.

It is equally important to experience God's love in our day-to-day lives. This comes when we consciously attribute the good things that happen to us to God working in our life. It comes from recognizing that He works through other people and circumstances. It comes from reading His Bible and learning about His nature and character. We can experience His love when we spend quiet time alone with Him in prayer, meditation and reflection. The peace and joy that we can have resulting from obeying His commandments

and abiding in His presence are an aspect of His love. The other fruits of the spirit mentioned in Galatians 5 are also an expression of His love for us. When we experience His love sufficiently and it fills us, we'll want to give that love away to other people. When we do this, we are fulfilling one of the most important commandments of God... and our lives, including our health, will be better off for it.

## ***Cry Out to God***

### *What the Bible Says:*

I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the LORD. Psalm 40:1-3

Some were fools; they rebelled and suffered for their sins. They couldn't stand the thought of food, and they were knocking on death's door. "LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, snatching them from the door of death. Let them praise the LORD for his great love and for the wonderful things he has done for them. Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and sing joyfully about his glorious acts. Psalms 107: 17-22

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Matthew 5:4

The eyes of the LORD watch over those who do right; his ears are open to their cries for help. Psalm 34:15-16

Give your burdens to the Lord and he will take care of you. Psalm 55:22

So humble yourselves before God. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor. James 4:7-8, 9-10

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy! I look to you for protection. I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until the danger passes by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me. He will send help from heaven to rescue me, disgracing those who hound me. My God will send forth his unfailing love and faithfulness. Psalm 57:1-3

Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures. Proverbs 2:2-4

### *What the Research Says:*

The work of Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University Medical Center shows that there is a negative relationship between people who plead for direct intercession by God and illness/sickness. In other words, there is a correlation between a pleading approach and negative health outcomes. He suggests, in his book, *The Healing Connection*, that it may be that these people are more tuned into their own will for their life than God's will for their life. Jesus gave us an example on crying out to God when He was at the Garden of Gethsemane and soon to be sent to death on the cross. He prayed to God, "Not my will but yours be done." Matthew 26:39. Koenig's research shows that those people who were willing to trust in God, no matter what their circumstances, and were willing to work with God in a collaborative coping form, had significantly better mental and physical health.

### *What You Can Do:*

The Bible makes it very clear. God tells us to cry out to Him. When we cry out to God, we can put our troubles and situation in His hands. He wants us to tell Him the concerns we have about our life, including aspects of our life concerning our health. When we cry out to God, it comes more from our heart than our minds. More than anything else, God wants our heart... our whole heart. Crying out to Him, in complete dependence on Him, is what He wants from us. Once we cry out to Him in a genuine way, then we must trust that He hears us and will act on our prayers.

So how do you cry out to God? Certainly, it is a very personal thing. When I know there is something that I want to tell Him about in a 'crying out' way, I try to get to a deep place within my heart... not just pray to Him from my head. Before I pray to Him I often turn on worshipful music. I ask God to help me speak to Him from my heart. Many times I pray I do not get on my knees. During times I cry out to God, I do kneel as that brings me to an even more humble state. Sometimes I talk a walk in a park and make this time of 'crying out' a more sacred time, a more special time. Do whatever helps you pray to Him from a deeper place within you. Remember, it is your heart that He wants more than anything.

## ***Spiritual Exercises Related to How You Practice Your Faith***

### ***Forgive***

#### *What the Bible Says:*

Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4:23

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13

When our heart is troubled and weighed down with all that comes from holding resentment, it affects much of how we live life and our health. When we turn to God and ask Him to forgive us from our sins, "He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong." 1 John 1:9

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32

Jesus was asked by Peter, one of his disciples, how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. "Seven times?" he asked. Jesus responded, "No! Seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:21-22

#### *What the Research Says:*

When we harbor resentment and bitterness toward other people our spiritual, emotional and physical health can be impacted upon in a negative way. Anger that comes from holding on to these negative emotions can lead to health problems. In the book *Anger Kills*, the authors, Redmond and Virginia Williams refer to numerous studies that indicate that on-going anger can lead to heart disease. Don Colbert, M.D., in his book, *Deadly Emotions*, writes that when chronic anger is present, the body has a steady drip of the hormone cortisol. This excessive presence of cortisol can cause the immune system to become confused and to attack itself, causing autoimmune diseases. This increased level of cortisol can also contribute to diabetes, weight gain, bone loss, impaired memory and other health problems. He writes in this book, "If you choose not to forgive someone, I guarantee that your toxic, deadly emotions of resentment and hatred will continue to poison your system in ways that are just as dangerous as your taking in a literal poison."

Not only will your body suffer, but your mind, spirit, and your general emotional well-being will suffer." In *The Healing Connection*, Harold Koenig, M.D., writes "The research indicates those who can't get past these hurt and angry feelings of spiritual discontent may soon be in big trouble in terms of their emotional and physical health."

#### *What You Can Do:*

Forgiveness is a spiritual exercise that we must learn to practice if we are to be whole and healthy. Perhaps no other spiritual exercise can be as beneficial to our health as forgiving someone who has hurt us by their actions or by what they have said to us.

If you know of someone who is still holding on to resentment and anger from a past hurt, love them. Pray for them and ask if you can pray with them. Ask them if they'd like to talk with you about their circumstances. If you are carrying unforgiveness in your heart, know that it is a process to get rid of any resentment that may be there. It is an act of your will to forgive. You must make a conscious choice to pardon someone who has offended you. That's where it begins. When you are ready, consider getting down on your knees and telling God that you have made the choice to forgive. Cry out to Him and ask Him to help mend your heart. Get to know God better by spending time with Him. Experience His love and receive His forgiveness for your sins. If you are unable to do this on your own, ask a close friend, a pastor or another professional to help support you as you walk through this healing process.

Recognize that you are really hurting yourself when you choose not to forgive. And you are not able to be all that God intends you to be when you continue to harbor resentment and bitterness. Your emotional, spiritual and physical health will continue to be affected. This will, in turn, impact on how you're able to use the special gifts that God has given you to make a difference in this world. Your life will not be as full and abundant as God wants it to be.

We all will experience major hurts in our lives. Take time to reflect on whether you could be healthier by forgiving someone who has hurt you or by receiving the forgiveness that God has for you. It's only when we rely on God's unending love and the strength that he gives us that our hearts can begin to heal in a genuine way through forgiveness.

#### ***In Closing***

The spiritual exercises addressed in this booklet are a few of the principles and disciplines of the Christian faith that, if regularly practiced, will help you grow deeper in your faith. As this occurs, your emotional health should be positively affected. Your emotional health will in turn have a direct impact on your physical health. The more emotionally and physically healthy you are, the more likely you will be better able to use the special gifts and talents that God has given you to make a difference in this world. (2 Peter 1:8) As you are able to do that, God will be smiling and glorified.

I will close this booklet with two prayers for you taken from scripture. May you be in good health - spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Dear friend, I hope all is well with you and that you are as healthy in body as you are strong in spirit.  
3 John 2