

starting over

Many of us who have been in prison for a long time recognize that we have a lot of angry, frustrated, and conflicted feelings about people, life, and the choices we've made. We're rarely told how to deal with these feelings in any constructive way. For many of us, we've tried some religious practices, but they're not working. We're still caged in by those feelings.

Centering Prayer can help. It's an ancient type of silent prayer sometimes called meditation or contemplation that helps us access the anger, pain, and frustration that are locked deep inside, and actually transform them into something more useful and liberating. This type of meditation can change our perspective on life and allow us peace of mind. For many, it gives deeper self-knowledge that helps when we **go before the Parole Board.**

"Centering Prayer allows me to deal with all those events and memories that I have chosen to avoid, especially the painful and shameful ones. I find as I deal with them, little by little, they lose their power over me." –D.D.



People have been praying in this way for centuries, but it is different from what we may think of as prayer. It is not the type of prayer we are used to, like praying out loud or asking for something or even giving thanks. It is moving deep within ourselves, in silence, saying nothing, asking nothing, just to be in the presence of the Mystery that knows us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

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Prison Contemplative Fellowship (PCF) cooperates closely with the **Contemplative Outreach Prison Outreach Service Team (COPOST)**:

contemplativeoutreach.org/prison-outreach-homepage

You can write a single letter to **PCF's** address and we will forward your letter to **COPOST** if appropriate based on your requests.

Ask for the free book
**Finding God Within:
Contemplative
Prayer for
Prisoners**

Do you have a
tablet with **Edovo?**
Look for both **PCF**
and **COPOST** by
searching for
"centering prayer."



"Centering Prayer has given me an experience of freedom. I will forever be changed. I have found who I am." –N.B.

"In a world of noise, confusion and conflict it is necessary that there be places of silence, inner discipline and peace. In such places love can blossom." –Thomas Merton

locked up



and free

This pamphlet is intended to be a hand of hope reaching out to those struggling under the weight of incarceration. It's created by people who have "done time" themselves as well as by the friends and family of those incarcerated.

If you feel like it's "not for you" right now, please don't throw this away. Set it aside. Maybe your cellie or bunkie will pick it up. Maybe you'll come back to it. The choice is yours.

"As a man who has been incarcerated for nearly 24 years, I can say that Centering Prayer has allowed me to build a closer relationship with God in a setting of peace, trust, support, and fellowship." –M.B.

a different kind of prayer



After decades of being tossed up in the mix of prison hustles, getting into conflicts with Correctional Officers, and being constantly tested by the predatory and dehumanizing nature of prison, we have found that by practicing meditation daily, we have gained the ability to stay focused and relaxed when the place gets hectic. Instead of rising to the bait and winding up in the hole, we now have the ability to slow down our natural reactions in any situation and choose our actions according to what is in our best interest. In this practice we not only survive but we flourish. We understand that silent prayer surprisingly gives us a wider perspective of who we really are and what is actually going on around us.

"Don't let the silence scare you. It's an experience that will fill your life with warmth and Godly love as you recognize your true self." –H.L.

This prayer without words allows us to deal with our deepest thoughts and judgements about ourselves, especially our sense of self-loathing. It works whether we have a relationship with God or no relation at all. We don't have to have a religious background, or call God Jesus, Allah, Father, Brahman, YHWH (Yahweh), another name, or no name. It works for anyone who is willing to put forth the effort to practice it.

Some kinds of meditative prayers have you focus on something (like your breathing or a mantra) and others on being aware of your thoughts and emotions. Those work for some people. Centering prayer, however, is a kind of surrender. It's all about the intention of letting go. Let go. And keep letting go. Just consent to the presence of God within us--whatever that looks like.

sacred word

When we close our eyes to meditate, it is natural and normal for all kinds of thoughts to fill our minds. We can't stop these thoughts, but we can stop paying attention to them. We let them come and let them go. We don't resist them and we don't hang onto them. It's like watching TV at our bunk and someone comes to talk to us; the volume on the TV stays the same, but we don't hear it because our attention has changed. We have thoughts, but we aren't paying attention to them.

Here is the secret: Before we begin, we choose a word, a simple word of one or two syllables, that reminds us of our intention not to get attached to our thoughts. Words like...

peace, love, life, be here, let go.

As thoughts come, we repeat our sacred word silently a few times and let the thoughts go by. We call this our **sacred word**, not in a religious way, or like a mantra, but sacred in its meaning to us.

fruits



As we start this inward journey, sometimes we may find ourselves getting discouraged as we get in touch with buried feelings of anger, grief, lust, fear, maybe even remembering traumas we forgot about long ago. This kind of emotional "dumping" is a sign that the process is working. It helps us recognize hidden motives that influenced our decisions. Often these complicated emotions and memories appear outside of prayer time. This is simply the deep transformation of our spiritual journey taking place.

Sometimes the fruits of Centering Prayer are subtle, such as slowly finding it easier to not judge others, to just let others be who they are without wanting to change them. Healing comes differently for each one of us.

how to do centering prayer

"If you don't do it correctly, it doesn't matter... It's your intention that counts, and the relationship is with God, and God sees that you're trying hard to do a nice job, the best you can, however much you're stumbling." –Thomas Keating

Most practitioners of Centering Prayer find that 20 minutes (or more) twice a day, if possible, is helpful to "fill your reservoir." Times prior to count or chow might work well. Don't give up if you find it hard at first; it's called a practice for a reason! There is no "recipe" or formula to follow, and no wrong way to grow in intimacy with God-as-you-understand-God. Even so, here are a few guidelines that have proven helpful for many:

- 1 Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
- 2 Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
- 3 When engaged with your thoughts*, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
- 4 At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

* Thoughts in this case include body sensations, feelings, images, memories, reflections, plans, ideas, opinions, spiritual experiences--anything that takes us away from our intention to consent.

"It is easy to identify with the content of our minds--this is all part of the accumulated self, the layers we've been building for our entire lives. So, be patient. The healing may not happen all at once" –M.P.