

Contemplative Prayer Exercises

The following exercises are things that we can do with our bodies and minds to help us quieten down and connect with Jesus.

Listening Exercise (adapted from *Praying in Lent* by Donal Neary, SJ)
Sit in your chair, upright but comfortable, with your back supported. Now just notice the sounds that you can hear: Sounds far away. Just hear them. Don't even try to name them. Notice fainter sounds, then sounds which are nearer. Just listen, become aware of them. And the sound of your own heartbeat, faint, but your own rhythm of life. And the sound of silence in your place of prayer, the silence within yourself. Listen like this for a few minutes.

Breathing Exercise (adapted from *God of Surprises* by Gerry W. Hughes, SJ)

This exercise involves concentrating all your attention on the physical feelings of breathing in and breathing out, without deliberately changing the rhythm of your breathing.

Focus attention on feeling the cold air entering your nostrils and the warm air when you exhale. At first you may become self-conscious about your breathing and find it becomes irregular, but this does not, as a rule, continue. If it were to do so, and you find yourself becoming breathless, then this exercise is not for you at present.

Most people find that on doing this exercise their pattern of their breathing changes, the breaths becoming deeper and slower, and they begin to feel drowsy. In itself, it is a very good relaxation exercise, but if you care to use it for more explicit prayer, then let the inbreathing express all that you long for in life, however impossible it may seem in practice, and let the out-breath express your surrender of everything to God, all of your life with its worries, sins, guilt and regrets.

It is important to do this without self-judgment, whether of approval or disapproval. Keep your attention fixed on your desire to hand over all these worries about self, and do not clutch at them as if they were a treasured possession.

Body Exercise (adapted from *God of Surprises* by Gerry W. Hughes, SJ)

Sit in your chair, upright but comfortable, with your back supported. Let your body relax (without slouching), with your feet on the floor in front of you and your hands at rest on your thighs or joined in your lap.

Close your eyes, or fix them on some point in front of you. Now let your whole attention focus on what you can feel in your body. You may start at your feet and work upwards, letting your attention dwell, perhaps only for a few seconds, on whatever part of the body you can feel, shifting attention from one part of the body to the other, although the longer you can hold attention on one part, the better. Your attention is on what you are feeling, not on thoughts about feeling. If you are uncomfortable, or itch or want to move position, just acknowledge the discomfort, assure yourself that it is all right and, without moving, continue to focus attention on what you can feel in the body.

The mind rarely leaves us long in peace to do this, but begins to demand attention with comment and questions: *This is a waste of valuable time. What has this to do with prayer? Is this some kind of Hindu thing? What is the point of it?* Deal with the questions and comments as you dealt with the itch; acknowledge them, then return to feeling the body.

You can, if you like, move into more explicit prayer by repeating to yourself St. Paul's phrase, *In him I live, and move, and have my being.*