



# HUMAN FLOURISHING COACHING 101



LIGHT UNIVERSITY



# **HUMAN FLOURISHING COACHING 101**

## **Course Details**

### **Welcome to the Human Flourishing Coaching 101 Course**

We're glad you're here. This course is designed to equip you as a coach. You will learn what it means for someone to flourish, why it matters, and how to guide others toward sustainable, whole-person growth. Each lesson follows a consistent structure with concise overviews, plain-language teaching, and practical tools you can use right away. Scripture and research are included where helpful, with links to original sources for further exploration.

To support your learning, transcripts are available on the right side of the video player. These can help you review key concepts, check details, or quote accurately in coaching sessions.

To get the most out of this training, set a regular rhythm for study and reflection. A short session each day or a few focused blocks each week will serve you better than occasional cramming. Choose a quiet space, bring a notebook or open a document, and keep your materials in one place. Early on, identify one coaching domain or client challenge you want to improve. That focus will help you apply the material with purpose and clarity.

Engage the content actively. Pause the videos when something stands out. Jot down a key insight or a step you could use in conversation. The exercises are designed to be simple and repeatable, just like the tools you will offer others. After each lesson, ask yourself: What did I learn, and how can I use it to help someone else grow?

The written notes are a companion, not a transcript. They highlight main ideas and practical takeaways but do not include everything from the videos. Taking your own notes helps you capture what matters most for your clients and your context.

You will see links and citations along the way. These are provided to support deeper study or offer resources for coaching. Since they point to third-party sites, availability may change. Review them as needed and use professional judgment in how you apply what you learn.

Approach this course with curiosity and a coaching mindset. Practice what you learn, apply it in real conversations, and share insights with peers or mentors. Flourishing grows when understanding leads to action. You are being equipped to guide others in that direction.



# Human Flourishing Coaching 101

## Meet Your Guides



**Harold G. Koenig, M.D.**, is a psychiatrist on the faculty of Duke University. His ideas have been covered in Newsweek and other news media with regard to religion, spirituality and health, a focus of some of his research and clinical practice. Templeton Foundation has provided great financial support to his activities.

Featured In: HFC 101



**Tyler J. VanderWeele, Ph.D.**, is the Loeb Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard, where he directs the Human Flourishing Program. His research spans causal inference, religion and health, and the science of human flourishing. He has published over 500 papers and several books, including *Measuring Well-Being* (2021) and *A Theology of Health* (2024).

Featured In: HFC 102



**Byron Johnson, Ph.D.**, is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University and founding director of the Institute for Studies of Religion. A leading authority on religion, criminal justice, and faith-based organizations, he has authored over 250 articles and books including *More God, Less Crime* (2011) and *The Restorative Prison* (2021). He also co-directs the Global Flourishing Study, a \$43.4 million international research initiative with Harvard, Gallup, and the Center for Open Science.

Featured In: HFC 103



**Ron Hawkins, Ed.D., D.Min.**, is a Licensed Professional Counselor and currently serves as the Chair of AACC's Executive Board. With over 20 years of experience in mental health counseling, he is the former Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Liberty University.

Featured In: HFC 104

# Human Flourishing Coaching 101

## Meet Your Guides



**Todd Hall, Ph.D.**, is a licensed clinical psychologist and Professor of Psychology at Biola University, and a Faculty Affiliate of Harvard's Human Flourishing Program. His research explores relational spirituality, leadership, and human flourishing. He is the author of *Relational Spirituality* (2021) and *The Connected Life* (2022), and maintains a psychotherapy practice specializing in psychodynamic therapy.

Featured In: HFC 105



**Shaunti Feldhahn, MPP**, is a Harvard-trained researcher, best-selling author, and speaker who investigates practical truths about relationships at home and work. Her books, including *For Women Only*, *The Kindness Challenge*, and *Secrets of Sex and Marriage*, have sold over 3 million copies in 25 languages and are widely used in homes, counseling centers, and corporations worldwide.

Featured In: HFC 106, 107



**Paul White, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist, speaker, and leadership expert who “makes work relationships work.” He has been interviewed by the *New York Times*, *BBC News*, and other international publications. Dr. White is the coauthor of the best-selling book, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, which has sold over 550,000 copies (with Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The 5 Love Languages*).

Featured In: HFC 108



**Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.**, is Professor of Psychology at UC Davis and a leading researcher on gratitude and human flourishing. Author of over 200 publications and eight books, including *Thanks!* and *Gratitude Works!*, he is founding editor of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. His work has been widely featured in major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *NPR*.

Featured In: HFC 109, 110

# Human Flourishing Coaching 101

## Meet Your Guides



**Tim Clinton, Ed.D., LPC, LMFT**, is President of the American Association of Christian Counselors and Executive Director of the Global Center for Mental Health, Addiction, and Recovery. A licensed counselor and marriage and family therapist, he is a recognized leader on mental health and relationships, co-hosts Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and hosts The Road Forward television program. Dr. Clinton has authored nearly 30 books and reaches millions monthly through his media, writing, and teaching.

Featured In: [HFC 111](#), [112](#)



**Zach Clinton, Ph.D.** is a certified doctor in Counselor Education & Supervision from Liberty University. He currently serves full-time in a leadership role as Vice President of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Further quests include hosting 'The Built Different Podcast' where he has interviewed professional athletes, mental health advocates, and ministry leaders. He also serves as the President & Host of the Ignite Men's Impact Weekend that gathers nearly 5,000 men each year. A former Division 1 college baseball player and now chaplain of the Liberty University Baseball team, he is recognized as a growing authority and voice on performance and mental health for today's generations.

Featured In: [HFC 111](#), [112](#)

# Human Flourishing Coaching 101

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# 1

# Introduction to Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective

Harold G. Koenig, M.D.

## Notes

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## Lesson Overview

Flourish means living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. This lesson lays the foundation for coaching toward that state by uniting biblical theology and contemporary research on human flourishing. We define flourishing and its core domains, trace the primary pathways that lead to it, identify holiness as the essential "missing link," and summarize evidence showing how Christian faith relates to better outcomes across family, education, work, relationships, health, and longevity. You will learn how to translate this framework into practical coaching.

## What this chapter covers

- Course Goals and Vision
- Defining "Flourish" and the Six Domains
- Christian View of Flourishing
- Pathways that Lead to Flourishing
- Holiness: The Missing Link
- Evidence Across the Six Domains
- Coaching Applications
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Course Goals and Vision

This course equips you to understand what flourishing means for the Christian, to grasp the factors that lead to it, and to develop practical skills for coaching it in real life. The vision is to train and equip coaches to lead these efforts in local churches and to help create flourishing environments across the Body of Christ. The emphasis is knowledge, deep understanding, and skill so that discipleship and care result in people living well in every sphere of life.

## Defining “Flourish” and the Six Domains

**Flourish:** living in a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are going well.

Within research literature, human flourishing is described as doing or being well across broad domains of life. Building on that literature, this course works with six core domains: happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, mental and physical health, and financial and material stability. This multidimensional view enables both measurement and coaching, since each domain can be strengthened through everyday practices and community support.

Key academic sources include:

- VanderWeele, T. J. (2017), PNAS: [On the promotion of human flourishing](#).
- VanderWeele, T. J., McNeely, E., & Koh, H. K. (2019), JAMA: [Reimagining health—flourishing](#).
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2024), JEC: [Flourishing and the scope of medicine and public health](#).

## Christian View of Flourishing

A Christian account affirms the breadth of the research domains and completes them with theology. God’s intent is goodness in every part of life, so wholeness is present when life aligns with His design. Flourishing includes the physical and embodied, the rational, the affective, the free and capable of action, the social and relational, and the spiritual. When each is good, the person experiences bodily health, happiness, meaning, virtue, close relationships, and spiritual well-being as friendship with God.

*Physical:* The body matters to God, and care for the body supports every other domain. Research links religious involvement to better cardiovascular markers, lower inflammation, and greater longevity, which helps sustain service and vocation over time.

*Emotional:* Joy, peace, and contentment are cultivated as people live in God’s presence and within healthy communities. Syntheses of studies show consistent links between religious involvement and higher well-being as well as lower psychological distress in many contexts.

*Rational:* The mind seeks truth and meaning. Religious involvement is strongly associated with a sense of meaning and purpose in life, which stabilizes decisions and long-term direction.

*Moral:* Virtue develops through habits ordered by love of God and neighbor. Reviews report more forgiveness, altruism, and gratitude, and lower delinquency and crime among those who are religiously involved.

*Relational:* People are made for community. Religious involvement consistently predicts greater social support and stronger bonds, which buffer stress and sustain growth.

*Spiritual:* Relationship with God is the center that integrates all domains. Scripture sets the focus: “Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33), and “I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).



## Pathways that Lead to Flourishing

Research highlights four primary pathways that influence whether people flourish: family, education, work or employment, and involvement in a religious community. These pathways shape habits, relationships, and opportunities that build a life where things go well, and they reinforce each other across the lifespan.

- *Family*: Religious involvement is associated with less divorce, greater marital satisfaction, less spousal abuse, and lower infidelity, pointing to more stable family systems.
- *Education*: Studies from 2001 to 2010 found better performance and greater persistence among religiously involved students, with reduced dropout risk partly due to fewer risk behaviors.
- *Work*: Faith traditions encourage responsibility and service at work, corresponding to higher satisfaction, productivity, and positive attitudes toward employment.
- *Religious Community*: Regular participation is a strong predictor of mental, social, behavioral, and physical health. Some spiritual inclination is inherited, yet most is shaped by community and practice.

### Illustrative studies:

- Divorce risk was substantially lower among frequent service attenders in a large 14-year cohort of married women: Li et al., 2018, PLOS ONE ([link](#)).
- Genetic-epidemiologic work suggests about one third of spiritual inclination is inherited: Kendler et al., 1997, AJP ([link](#)).

## Holiness: The Missing Link

A key insight in this course is that the missing link on the pathway to flourishing is holiness. If the purpose of life is communion with God, then the true end is not bare happiness or even health, but a life set apart to God in thought, word, and deed. Holiness orders desire, reconciles relationships, and anchors daily choices in love. Without holiness, gains in any domain remain fragile. With holiness, change becomes integrated and durable.

This model involves *God's part* and *our part*. God's part is made possible by His love and atonement. Our part is a response of faith, intentional practice, and self-discipline that seeks the good of others.

## Evidence Across the Six Domains

### *Happiness and Life Satisfaction*

Systematic reviews through 2010 reported that about four out of five studies found a positive association between religious involvement and well-being or happiness, with negative associations rare and context-specific.

### *Meaning and Purpose*

Across dozens of studies, religious involvement is strongly related to a sense of meaning and purpose. The best designed studies uniformly show this connection.

### *Character and Virtue*

Evidence links religious participation with more forgiveness, altruism, and gratitude, and with lower delinquency and crime, indicating measurable moral and social benefits.

### *Close Social Relationships*

Religious involvement is associated with greater social support and stronger relational networks that buffer stress and promote resilience.

### *Mental and Physical Health*

Reviews report less depression and faster recovery among the religiously involved, with the most rigorous studies tending to show protective associations. Prospective work also shows lower suicide risk among frequent attenders and more negative attitudes toward suicide.

- Mortality and suicide example: frequent attendance linked to reduced suicide in large cohorts, e.g., JAMA Psychiatry 2016 (women's cohort; attendance and suicide) ([link](#)).  
Health behaviors differ as well: less alcohol misuse, lower illicit drug use, less smoking among the religiously involved, with randomized and experimental studies supporting some of these effects.

### *Physical Health, Inflammation, and Longevity*

Religious participation has been linked to better cardiovascular indicators and lower systemic inflammation. In older adults, more than weekly attendance predicted lower 12-year mortality and a lower likelihood of elevated interleukin-6 after adjusting for multiple covariates: Lutgendorf et al., 2004, *Health Psychology* ([PubMed](#)). The pattern aligns with broader evidence that attendance is associated with reduced all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality in large cohorts of women: Li et al., 2016, *JAMA Internal Medicine* ([link](#)). Across reviews, greater religious involvement relates to less heart disease, lower blood pressure, lower stroke risk, less cognitive decline, and fewer disabilities with aging.

### *Financial and Material Stability*

Early religious involvement is associated with higher school completion, which improves prospects for stable employment and independence. Christian beliefs about diligence, responsibility, and service tend to enhance job stability and productivity across the life course.

**Foundational resources:** *Handbook of Religion and Health* (2nd ed., 2012; 3rd ed., 2024) summarizes the evidence across behavioral, mental, social, and physical outcomes (publisher resources; 3rd ed. overview [link](#)). Many of the percentages reported in this lesson come from those systematic reviews.

## Coaching Applications

Coaching toward flourishing is whole-person work. Attend to the four pathways and six domains in practical ways.

- *Family*: Encourage shared rhythms of worship, communication, and service that stabilize marriage and parenting. The goal is a home environment where growth is normal and supported.
- *Education*: For students and adults, reinforce disciplined study habits, wise peer networks, and protection from risk behaviors that sabotage learning.
- *Work*: Frame work as stewardship and service. Emphasize reliability, truthfulness, and helping coworkers, which improves satisfaction and productivity.
- *Religious Community*: Help clients commit to regular participation in a church community where prayer, Scripture, sacraments, and service are normal. These rhythms anchor meaning, regulate stress, and build social support.

Finally, keep **holiness** at the center. Spiritual practices that align life with God's purposes integrate gains across domains. Jesus' promise of abundant life and His call to seek the kingdom first provide the theological aim for every coaching plan.

## Conclusion

Flourish is a state in which all aspects of life are going well. Research offers a helpful dashboard of domains and pathways, and Christian theology provides the center that holds them together, which is holiness in Christ. As you coach, bring the whole framework to bear: strengthen family, education, work, and community; cultivate habits that lift happiness, purpose, virtue, relationships, and health; and keep God's kingdom and righteousness first. The evidence and the Scriptures point in the same direction.

## Quick Reference Guide to Terms

**Flourish**: Living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well.

**Six Domains of Flourishing**: Happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, mental and physical health, financial and material stability.

**Pathways to Flourishing**: Family, education, work or employment, religious community involvement.

**Holiness**: Life set apart to God that orders desires, relationships, and choices. Identified here as the missing link for durable flourishing.

**Religious Community Involvement:** Regular participation in worship and congregational life that predicts mental, social, behavioral, and physical health benefits.

**Meaning and Purpose:** A clear sense of direction in life, consistently higher among those who are religiously involved.

**Social Support:** Practical and emotional help available through relationships; consistently higher among the religiously involved.

### Further Study

- Flourishing overview in science: PNAS 2017 ([link](#)); JAMA 2019 ([link](#)); JECH 2024 ([link](#)).
- Genetic and environment contributions to spirituality: Kendler et al., 1997, *AJP* ([link](#)).
- Divorce and religious attendance: Li et al., 2018, *PLOS ONE* ([link](#)).
- Inflammation and mortality in older adults: Lutgendorf et al., 2004, *Health Psychology* ([PubMed](#)).
- Attendance and mortality: Li et al., 2016, *JAMA Internal Medicine* ([link](#)).
- Evidence summaries: Handbook of Religion and Health (2nd ed., 2012; 3rd ed., 2024) ([overview link](#)).



# 2

## The Intersection of Faith, Science, and Flourishing: Building a Strong Foundation

Tyler J. VanderWeele, Ph.D.

### Notes

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### Summary

This lesson follows the HFC 102 presentation closely and integrates the full sequence of topics from the transcript and slides. It introduces the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, defines flourishing as living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well, and explains why a shared, multi-domain frame is needed. It presents a concise Flourishing Index and a Secure Flourishing Index, shows how individuals and communities can use these indices for reflection and improvement, and summarizes evidence from cohort studies and randomized trials. It then moves from individual practices to community and institutional pathways, considers policy implications, and extends the vision to community and societal flourishing, including current measurement efforts and global data.

### What this chapter covers

- Introduction to the Human Flourishing Program
- Defining Human Flourishing
- Five Domains and the Means-based Context
- Measuring Flourishing: The Indices and Items
- Using the Indices for Research and Reflection
- What We Learned During the Pandemic
- The Global Flourishing Study
- Evidence-based Individual Activities
- Community and Institutional Pathways
- Policy Implications
- Community and Societal Flourishing
- Expanding the Vision and Measures
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Introduction to the Human Flourishing Program

The Human Flourishing Program was founded in 2016 at Harvard University with two aims, the study and promotion of human flourishing, and the development of systematic approaches to synthesize knowledge across disciplines. The program is intentionally interdisciplinary. Its research staff has included psychologists, sociologists, education researchers, public health scientists, philosophers, theologians, and even a historian, all working together on flourishing. Over the years, the work has concentrated on six themes, the promotion of flourishing, workplace well-being, religious communities, meaning and purpose, family and relationships, and character formation. Partnerships have included Aetna, Delta Air Lines, Owens Corning, Levi, the World Bank, and others, as well as a philosophical project on the history of work and flourishing.

## Defining Human Flourishing

Flourish means living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good. Classical sources often use flourishing to translate eudaimonia, not merely happiness as a feeling, but an integrated state of well-being. Flourishing is an ideal. It is never perfectly attained in this life, and it is multidimensional. A person may be flourishing in some respects and struggling in others. This breadth matters because many disciplines aspire to a comprehensive vision in theory, yet practical work narrows to disease states, single mood ratings, or income. A whole-person lens resists that narrowing. For conceptual background, see *On the Promotion of Human Flourishing* (PNAS, 2017) and *Reimagining Health—Flourishing* (JAMA, 2019). [PNAS](#), [JAMA](#).

## Five Domains and the Means-based Context

Any reasonable account of flourishing includes five domains that people desire for their own sake, happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. These do not exhaust everything that matters, yet each is an end in itself and nearly universally desired. In later work, financial and material stability is treated as a means-based context that helps sustain the five domains over time. The rationale is practical, money is not an end, yet stability supports goods that are ends.

## Measuring Flourishing: The Indices and Items

To move from ideals to practice, the program assembled a brief Flourishing Index with two questions in each domain, drawn primarily from validated well-being measures. Two character items were newly developed with philosophers, using the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance as a guide. Responses use a 0 to 10 scale. The ten items are averaged for the Flourishing Index. Two additional items on financial and material stability form a Secure Flourishing Index when added and averaged with the ten, which is helpful for understanding the conditions that sustain flourishing over time. Psychometric evaluations indicate that the indices function reasonably well across cultures for research and descriptive use.

## **The 12 items, in the transcript order, suitable for workbook use Happiness and life satisfaction**

- How satisfied are you with life as a whole these days, 0 not at all satisfied to 10 completely satisfied.
- In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel, 0 extremely unhappy to 10 extremely happy.

## **Physical and mental health**

- In general, how would you rate your physical health, 0 to 10.
- How would you rate your overall mental health, 0 to 10.

## **Meaning and purpose**

- Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile
- I understand my purpose in life, 0 completely disagree to 10 completely agree.

## **Character and virtue**

- I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations, 0 not at all true of me to 10 completely true of me.
- I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later.

## **Close social relationships**

- I am content with my friendships and relationships, 0 completely disagree to 10 completely agree.
- My relationships are as satisfying as I would like them to be.

## **Financial and material stability**

- How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses.
- How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing.

## **How to read scores**

Report profiles by domain because dynamics differ across domains. The overall average is a convenient summary, but the domain pattern is more informative for planning. Use a uniform schedule for repeat measurement so individuals and groups can see change over time.

## **Using the Indices for Research and Reflection**

The indices support research and personal reflection. Individuals can consider where life is going well and where changes may help. Teams and communities can identify strengths and needs, track change, and decide where to invest effort. Staff at the program complete the questions regularly, and many workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods have adopted similar practices. People often report that the questions prompt deeper thought about purpose, relationships, and service, which can lead to concrete commitments.

## **What We Learned During the Pandemic**

In national United States samples, flourishing scores in January 2020 averaged about seven out of ten in most domains, with financial and material stability lower. In June 2020, during the pandemic, happiness and life satisfaction dropped substantially, as did physical and mental health, and financial stability fell as unemployment peaked. Meaning and purpose dropped a little, the character items were essentially stable, and close social relationships decreased less than expected, with other studies noting only small

changes in loneliness. Variation widened, which suggests the period was especially difficult for some, especially those living alone, while others invested more in family connection. By January 2022, overall scores had largely recovered to early 2020 levels, but a new age pattern had emerged. Scores increased with age across all domains, and the group aged 18 to 25 reported the lowest flourishing. That shift is a cause for concern and invites a policy response.

## The Global Flourishing Study

The Global Flourishing Study is a collaboration among the Human Flourishing Program, Baylor University, and Gallup, with partnership from the Center for Open Science. It follows more than 200,000 people in 22 countries with annual waves to map the distribution and determinants of flourishing. The first wave was released in 2024 as a public resource. Early insights include similar average flourishing for men and women in the aggregate, with country differences in the gender pattern. In many countries, flourishing now increases with age, not only in the United States. Richer countries tend to score higher on life evaluation and financial security, while poorer countries tend to score higher on meaning and purpose. The United States performs less well on social connection than many peer countries. These findings extend prior well-being research to a broader set of cultures and will support hundreds of analyses over time.

## Evidence-based Individual Activities

Several low-cost activities have randomized trial support, especially for happiness and health.

**Gratitude practices.** Listing three things you are grateful for and why, done several times a week for six weeks, improves happiness and reduces depressive symptoms, and can benefit sleep and self-reported health. [Emmons & McCullough, 2003.](#)

**Acts of kindness.** Planning and performing five kind acts on one day each week for six weeks increases positive emotion and connection. A concentrated day requires planning and effort, which may enhance effects. [Protocol example.](#)

**Character strengths exercises.** Identifying your top strengths and using each in new ways over six weeks improves well-being and reduces depressive symptoms. [Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson, 2005.](#)

**Self-guided workbooks.** David Burns' Feeling Good has randomized evidence for reducing depressive symptoms. Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic has trial support for anxiety. A brief REACH Forgiveness workbook tested in randomized trials across five higher-conflict countries increased forgiveness and hope and reduced depression and anxiety. [BMJ Public Health, 2024.](#)

A practice-oriented catalog is available in "Activities for flourishing: an evidence-based guide." [Guide.](#)



## Community and Institutional Pathways

Individual exercises help, but they do not fully address deeper domains such as meaning, character, and relationships. Long-term growth usually requires supportive communities and institutions. Using a public health lens that weighs population impact by prevalence and effect size, four pathways stand out, family, work, education, and religious community. Each is common in the population and, in longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or randomized designs, each shows sizeable effects on multiple flourishing domains. For example, religious service attendance has been associated with lower subsequent mortality, lower depression, and a large reduction in suicide risk in cohort analyses after extensive adjustment. A later cohort analysis linked attendance to lower incident hypertension. [JAMA Intern Med, 2016](#), [Am J Epidemiol, 2020](#). The point is not that everyone must pursue the same pathway, but that these settings are powerful contexts for habits, relationships, purpose, and virtue to take root.

## Policy Implications

If policy considers only income or only health, it can neglect happiness, purpose, character, and relationships. A flourishing lens widens evaluation. For example, cash assistance that unintentionally disincentivizes work may undermine the meaning, structure, and relationships that work provides. Supportive employment programs, especially for people with mental illness, can preserve income while maintaining the non-financial benefits of work. Similar reasoning applies to marriage support, access to effective teachers, educational equity, and protection for religious liberty, given the documented contributions of these pathways to multiple domains. The indices make it possible to track whether policies strengthen several domains at once.

## Community and Societal Flourishing

Flourishing and well-being are often used interchangeably, yet the words carry different nuances. Well-being can describe doing well even in a hostile environment. Flourishing suggests consonance with the environment, where conditions are conducive to growth. In this careful sense, community well-being is part of a person's own flourishing, both because it helps the person flourish and because members participate in the common good. The program is advancing measures of community well-being that include healthy relationships, proficient and caring leadership, supportive structures and practices, a sense of welcome, and a shared mission. These measures are being used in neighborhoods, schools, universities, workplaces, and cities, and are being linked with individual flourishing.

To study contextual drivers, the program uses the *SAGE* frame. S stands for solidarity, including social support and prosocial behavior. A stands for agency and freedom, including confidence in institutions. G stands for economic gain, often captured by GDP. E stands for environment, often matched to Sustainable Development Goal indicators. Linking these context measures to individual flourishing will clarify how community conditions shape personal outcomes and how community well-being is a constituent part of flourishing.

## Expanding the Vision and Measures

Several areas are being developed further. Spiritual well-being is central for many people, yet it requires tradition-specific measures, since Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities understand spiritual flourishing differently. The program is also building more comprehensive assessments for each domain, since two items per domain are useful for routine monitoring but cannot capture the richness of meaning, social connection, and character. Work on meaning distinguishes meaning from purpose, and work on social connection distinguishes instrumental support from the intrinsic value of relationships and the emergent goods of communities. A multi-year project is measuring different forms of interpersonal love.

The program is also incorporating *non-Western perspectives*, since balance, peace, and harmony are highly valued in Eastern cultures and appear to be universally desired. Measures of these values are now embedded in global data collection. Finally, work continues on contextualized flourishing, including flourishing at the end of life and in the presence of disability or cognitive impairment, where physical health may be low while meaning, relationships, and character take distinctive forms.

## Conclusion

Flourishing is the integrated good of a person's life. The Flourishing Index and Secure Flourishing Index give a shared language for reflection and research without losing sight of the whole person. Randomized trials suggest practices that help. Long-term communities and institutions shape habits, relationships, and purpose. Policy guided by flourishing will look beyond income and disease to include meaning, character, and relationships. A global data infrastructure is now in place to help cultures learn from one another. The next steps are simple, choose a cadence for using the indices, adopt a small set of practices, invest in the four community pathways, and learn together over time.

# Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Flourish

Living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. [PNAS 2017](#).

## Domains of flourishing

Happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships. Financial and material stability is treated as a means-based context that supports the other domains over time.

## Flourishing Index

Ten items, two per domain, each scored 0 to 10 and averaged to summarize current flourishing. Character items reflect cardinal virtues.

## Secure Flourishing Index

Twelve items, the ten core items plus two on financial and material stability, averaged to reflect conditions needed to sustain flourishing.

## Evidence highlights

Religious service attendance associated with lower mortality and lower risk of hypertension in longitudinal cohorts, with additional evidence for depression and suicide risk. [JAMA Intern Med 2016](#), [Am J Epidemiol 2020](#).

## Activities for flourishing

Gratitude journaling, acts of kindness, character strengths exercises, forgiveness workbooks, and simple embodied habits such as sleep and physical activity. [Emmons & McCullough 2003](#), [Seligman et al. 2005](#), [BMJ Public Health 2024](#), [Activities guide](#).

## Program resources

Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, overview and tools. <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu>.

# 3

## The Quest for Purpose and a Meaningful Life

Byron R. Johnson, Ph.D.

### Notes

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### Summary

Flourish means living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. This chapter presents a coaching-centered view of flourishing that links purpose, character, relationships, health, happiness, and the material stability that sustains them. It traces a path from criminology to the study of prosocial behavior and religious life as sources of meaning and good decision-making. It introduces the Global Flourishing Study, a five-year panel following more than 200,000 adults in 22 countries that represent approximately 64 percent of the world's population, and explains why open science, careful translation, and a broad index matter for culture-spanning work. Early patterns include a J-shaped age gradient with lower scores among young adults, complex links between adversity and later outcomes, limits of prosperity as a predictor of meaning and relationships, and a consistent association between religious service attendance and higher flourishing across countries. Case studies from a purpose-built town and a maximum-security prison show how place, story, and community design illuminate flourishing in both privilege and hardship. The final sections translate evidence into coaching practices, communities of practice, and policy questions that protect meaning, relationships, and character while pursuing material stability.

### What this chapter covers

- From Criminology to Flourishing
- The Global Flourishing Study: Scope and Design
- Open Science and Translation
- Early Patterns in the Data
- Adversity, Resilience, and Growth
- Religion and Spiritual Pathways
- Arts, Narrative, and Case Studies
- Communities of Practice and Institutional Partners
- Coaching Applications and Tools
- Policy Questions and Societal Flourishing
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms



## From Criminology to Flourishing

A narrow lens asks why some people harm others. A wider lens asks why most people act lawfully and often sacrificially. Meaning and purpose help explain why people choose the good. Years of research on generosity, gratitude, volunteering, and other-oriented behavior led to sustained study of religious life, civic engagement, and the habits that anchor a meaningful existence. Fieldwork in prisons, congregations, and neighborhoods repeatedly showed that purpose, belonging, and moral formation reduce harm and increase service. These insights converged with multi-disciplinary efforts to measure flourishing at scale and to identify practices and settings that sustain it.

## The Global Flourishing Study: Scope and Design

The Global Flourishing Study (GFS) follows 200,000+ adults in 22 countries over five annual waves. Countries included represent about 64 percent of the world's population. Samples are nationally representative and probability-based, and the panel design tracks the same persons across years so change can be studied rather than only differences. Partners include Baylor University, Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program, and Gallup, with support from the Center for Open Science and major funders. Interviews are intentionally concise for a panel study at about 22 minutes, with the core flourishing index embedded among a broader set of items. The design includes adherents of the world's largest religious traditions and those with no affiliation, which allows cultural comparisons.

## Open Science and Translation

Open science principles guide design and dissemination. Data, codebooks, and methods are released for replication and secondary analyses through public repositories after a simple application process. Translation spans nearly forty languages with forward translation, back-translation, and cognitive testing because wording drives validity across cultures. The study sits within a wider conversation about research integrity and reproducibility that has included large-scale reanalysis projects and record retractions in the scientific literature. Public repositories and project hubs offer materials for scholars, practitioners, and policy leaders. Resources: [globalflourishingstudy.com](https://globalflourishingstudy.com), [cos.io/gfs](https://cos.io/gfs), and [hfh.fas.harvard.edu](https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu).

## Early Patterns in the Data

With Wave 1 complete and subsequent waves underway, several high-level patterns stand out.

**Age gradient.** In many countries, flourishing increases with age, producing a J-shaped pattern in which young adults score lowest. The pattern raises questions about age effects and cohort effects and invites renewed attention to youth connection and purpose.

**Prosperity and limits.** Economic prosperity alone does not predict flourishing. Countries with high GDP score well on material stability and life evaluation but can lag on meaning and social connection. Several lower-income countries report stronger meaning and relational life, which signals that economic development must proceed without eroding purpose or relationships.

**Religious community.** Regular religious service attendance is one of the most consistently positive correlates of flourishing across countries and outcomes, a pattern visible in both demographic models and models that include childhood predictors. This aligns with cohort evidence linking attendance to lower mortality and lower incident hypertension among women in the United States. *JAMA Intern Med* 2016 and *Am J Epidemiol* 2020.

**Communication goal.** The aim is not to rank nations. The aim is to understand what helps people do well within their own contexts and to inform practical steps communities can take.

## Adversity, Resilience, and Growth

The GFS probes how childhood conditions shape adult flourishing. Retrospective questions about life at age 12 include parental warmth, household finances, health, and social exclusion. These are linked with panel data to create a synthetic longitudinal vantage.

- **Protective childhood conditions** such as warmth and stability predict higher adult flourishing.
- **Adverse conditions** such as abuse or feeling like an outsider predict lower flourishing, with effects showing up in mental health, relationship quality, and meaning.
- **Resilience and transformation.** Some subgroups that experienced hardship report higher volunteering and helping behaviors later in life, suggesting that suffering can be transformed into service. In specific settings, childhood deprivation is associated with lower self-reported adult pain, a pattern that may reflect coping or reappraisal. These findings are not uniform across countries but point to pathways that coaches and communities can nurture.

## Religion and Spiritual Pathways

Across cultures and traditions, involvement in religious community is consistently associated with higher flourishing across multiple domains. Likely mechanisms include social support and belonging, moral frameworks that sustain character and restraint, shared rituals that reinforce purpose, and opportunities for mentoring and service. The cross-national pattern converges with longitudinal health evidence that links frequent service attendance with reduced mortality and cardiovascular risk. The implication for practice is not to prescribe a creed, but to recognize that spiritual community is often a powerful setting for growth in meaning, virtue, relationships, and health. [JAMA Intern Med 2016](#); [AJE 2020](#).

# Arts, Narrative, and Case Studies

Flourishing is measured with indices, and it is also seen in story and place.

**A purpose-built town.** A creative community designed around belonging and walkable public space offers a picture of daily flourishing. Residents describe breathing deeply, safety, knowing neighbors, and practicing acts of love in ordinary life. Architecture, public rituals, and shared projects make relationship the norm rather than the exception.

**A maximum-security prison.** Inside Mississippi State Penitentiary, worship, mentoring, study, and service knit together a brotherhood across former gang lines and racial divisions. Men describe reconciliation, hope, and shared practices like meals, prayer, learning, and work. Meaning and relationship rise in an unlikely place, reframing what leaders assume is possible. A documentary premier is scheduled at the American Correctional Association in August 2025.

Arts and narrative activate the domains by engaging imagination and emotion. They make practices attractive and help communities move from aspiration to habit.

## Communities of Practice and Institutional Partners

Churches, NGOs, businesses, cities, and schools are translating evidence into practice. International organizations such as **World Vision**, **Compassion International**, and **International Justice Mission** are exploring applications. A **Flourishing Church** initiative is piloting congregational dashboards so leaders can see how members are doing across domains and whether practices are helping. Corporate and municipal dashboards are in development that link flourishing to belonging at work, safety, education, and civic trust.

A **community of practice** shares simple tools, common measures, and small, repeatable experiments. Groups compare notes about which activities move the needle in their contexts. Funders include the **John Templeton Foundation**, **Templeton Religion Trust**, **Templeton World Charity Foundation**, **Fetzer Institute**, **Paul Foster Family Foundation**, **Wellbeing for Planet Earth Foundation**, **Well Being Trust**, and the **David & Carol Myers Foundation**. Research teams at **Harvard**, **Baylor**, **Gallup**, and the **Center for Open Science** coordinate to keep methods transparent and learning cumulative.

## Coaching Applications and Tools

Coaching translates a big vision into steps that fit real lives.

**Step 1:** Map the domains. Invite a self-rating for happiness and life satisfaction, health, meaning, character, and relationships. If material stability is a current strain, include those items and plan supports. Ask for two sentences that explain each rating. This turns a number into a story.

**Step 2:** Surface purpose. Ask what the person most wants to contribute, and which relationships matter most this season. Name one pursuit that expresses purpose this week.

**Step 3:** Choose one practice per domain.

- For happiness and health, assign gratitude journaling or a sleep and activity routine. Gratitude increases positive affect and life satisfaction and can improve sleep and physical symptoms. [Emmons and McCullough 2003](#).
- For character, schedule one act of kindness and one strength-in-use exercise weekly. Using top strengths in new ways improves well-being and reduces depressive symptoms. [Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson 2005](#).
- For relationships, create a weekly ritual with a spouse, family member, or friend, such as a meal, walk, or call.
- For meaning, set a values-aligned goal with a weekly review.
- For forgiveness and emotional relief, consider a brief REACH Forgiveness workbook, which improved forgiveness and reduced depression and anxiety in a five-country randomized trial. [BMJ Public Health 2024](#).

**Step 4:** Leverage communities. Encourage participation in a faith community, service group, or small circle that meets weekly. Communities multiply effort and keep practices going.

**Step 5:** Review quarterly. Re-administer the index each quarter. Read the domain profile first, then the overall average. Celebrate gains, adjust activities, and identify one relationship to invest in next.

## Policy Questions and Societal Flourishing

A flourishing frame widens policy evaluation beyond GDP or single health metrics. Central questions include:

- Are youth gaining connection, purpose, and hope?
- Can economic development proceed without sacrificing meaning, relationships, and character?
- Are spiritual pathways to flourishing being neglected in public conversations?
- Are neighborhoods and workplaces protecting the environments and institutions that make mutual help and belonging possible?



Societal flourishing is more than the sum of individual scores. It includes **healthy social relationships, proficient and caring leadership, welcoming structures**, and a **shared vision** that people can articulate and practice. Measurement efforts for neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and cities are underway, often combining flourishing indices with local indicators of safety, trust, opportunity, and environmental quality. Open data and transparent methods allow cities, employers, and ministries to learn from each other rather than reinventing the wheel. Resources: [globalflourishingstudy.com](http://globalflourishingstudy.com), [cos.io/gfs](http://cos.io/gfs), and [hfh.fas.harvard.edu](http://hfh.fas.harvard.edu).

## Conclusion

Flourishing is a holistic state pursued for its own sake and sustained by practices and communities that honor purpose, character, relationships, health, happiness, and material stability. Large-scale evidence shows that meaning and belonging do not automatically follow from prosperity and that spiritual community often supports the very outcomes people seek. Story and place reveal flourishing in towns designed for belonging and in prisons transformed by reconciliation, which keeps hope realistic for coaches and leaders. The next step is simple. Use the index on a steady rhythm, choose one or two practices per domain, join a community of practice, learn from your own data, and keep purpose steady and relationships central.

## Quick Reference Guide to Terms

### Flourish

A holistic state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. Encompasses happiness and life satisfaction, health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close relationships, with material stability as a sustaining context.

### Flourishing Index

Ten items, two per domain for the first five domains, scored 0 to 10 and averaged to summarize current flourishing. Validated across populations.

### Secure Flourishing Index

Twelve items that add two questions on financial and material stability to reflect conditions needed to sustain flourishing over time.

### Global Flourishing Study (GFS)

A five-year, nationally representative panel in 22 countries that examines flourishing and its social, economic, spiritual, and health correlates. Built on open science principles with public data access. *200,000+ participants, 64 percent of world population represented.*

### J-shaped age pattern

A pattern in which flourishing scores for young adults are relatively low, then rise through mid and later life. Calls for investment in youth connection and purpose.

**Adversity and resilience**

Childhood hardship, abuse, and social exclusion generally predict lower adult flourishing, yet some individuals transform adversity into altruism and service.

**Religious community involvement**

Regular participation in services is consistently associated with higher flourishing across cultures, likely through social support, shared purpose, moral formation, and opportunities for service. Cohort evidence links attendance with lower mortality and better cardiovascular outcomes. [JAMA Intern Med 2016](#); [AJE 2020](#).

**Communities of practice**

Cross-sector groups that use shared language, common measures, and small experiments to improve flourishing in churches, schools, businesses, and cities.

**Program resources**

Human Flourishing Program at Harvard: [hfh.fas.harvard.edu](http://hfh.fas.harvard.edu). Global project hub: [globalflourishingstudy.com](http://globalflourishingstudy.com). Open repository: [cos.io/gfs](https://cos.io/gfs).

# 4

## A Theology of Suffering and Human Flourishing

Ron Hawkins, Ed.D., D.Min.

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### Summary

Suffering is universal and often threatens the very conditions that allow people to flourish. A Christian theology of suffering explains why life is hard, where God is in the midst of pain, and how trusting God through hardship strengthens resilience and supports the pursuit of a life in which all aspects are going well. This chapter brings together Scripture, classic Christian reflection, and insights from flourishing research. It considers the loss of shalom after the fall, the reality of spiritual warfare, the promise of abundant life in Christ, and three practices that build resilience over time: meditation on Scripture, prayer that flows from Scripture, and reflection that remembers God's faithfulness. Guidance is included for walking with people in pain without easy answers, and for cultivating hope that endures.

### What This Chapter Covers

- Why Suffering Challenges Flourishing
- Shalom Lost and the World as It Is
- Abundant Life and the Hope of Restoration
- Spiritual Warfare and the Need for Armor
- Practices that Build Resilience: Meditation, Prayer, Reflection
- Anchoring Truths for Flourishing in Suffering
- Wise Care for People in Pain
- Conclusion

## **Why Suffering Challenges Flourishing**

Flourish means living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. Suffering is the subjective experience of evil or loss, felt as the pain of the soul when something good is taken away, such as health, vocation, relationship, identity, or peace. Because it touches many domains at once, suffering poses a major challenge to flourishing. Yet the same experience that wounds can also invite a deeper return to God, strengthen fortitude, and reshape character for good. The task is to describe the world truthfully and then learn to live wisely within it.

## **Shalom Lost and the World as It Is**

The Bible's wisdom literature names the tension plainly. Ecclesiastes surveys a world where many things are not as they should be. The language of vanity and meaninglessness captures a life lived east of Eden, where the shalom of holistic well-being has been vandalized. Genesis narrates humanity's turn from trust to self-rule. Creative gifts are bent toward schemes, and the ripple effects reach every sphere. A Christian account of suffering begins here, not to crush hope, but to anchor hope in truth. We grieve what was lost and we refuse to pretend that pain is an illusion. We also refuse to concede the last word to loss.

## **Abundant Life and the Hope of Restoration**

Into this world Jesus speaks the promise of life, and life more abundantly. Abundance is not the absence of difficulty. It is the presence of God with his people, a gift received in relationship rather than a status achieved by technique. The New Testament's vision of blessedness echoes the Old Testament's shalom. Joy matters. Purpose matters. Relationships matter. Work and service matter. These are not small comforts; they are signs that a different order is breaking in. The promise of abundant life does not trivialize pain. It announces that suffering is not ultimate and that love can bear what it must while looking to the day when all things are made new.

## **Spiritual Warfare and the Need for Armor**

Biblical realism includes a cosmic horizon. Job's story opens a window on conflict that exceeds human sight. Suffering sometimes arrives through ordinary finitude and sometimes through opposition that is personal and evil. The call is not to master explanations, but to be made ready. Scripture instructs people to put on the whole armor of God: truth that holds, righteousness that protects, the good news that steadies every step, faith that extinguishes accusation, salvation that guards the mind, and the word of God spoken in prayer. Armor is provision for endurance, not an escape from the field.

# Practices that Build Resilience: Meditation, Prayer, Reflection

Resilience grows through steady, simple practices that deepen intimacy with God. Three practices receive special attention: meditation on Scripture, prayer shaped by Scripture, and reflection that remembers God's care.

## Meditation

Here, meditation means deep thinking on the truths God has revealed, for understanding, application, and prayer. The aim is not to empty the mind, but to soak the mind in what is true until it warms the heart and reshapes perception. A teabag left in hot water long enough to infuse the cup is a useful image. Over time, focused attention for love's sake forms new pathways of thought, strengthens trust, and makes proximity seeking toward God more natural. Meditation pairs well with memorization and with short periods of quiet that make room to receive.

## Prayer

Prayer is our side of the conversation that Scripture begins. The Lord's Prayer offers a reliable pattern. Begin with confidence in relationship, honor God's holiness, align desire with the kingdom and will of God, ask for daily provision as an act of dependence, seek and extend forgiveness, and ask for protection from temptation with deliverance from evil, ending with praise. When prayer flows from what God has already said, it moves beyond performance into honest communion. Calm often comes before answers, and strength often comes while the request remains open.

## Reflection

Reflection gathers memory so that grace is not forgotten. Scripture repeatedly commands remembrance because people forget the works of God. Deuteronomy calls Israel to recall deliverance. Joshua sets stones by the river for future telling. The psalms rehearse rescue so that present fear is not final. In practice, reflection means keeping a simple record of help received, doors opened, temptations escaped, and comforts given through the hands of others. This record becomes a treasury to consult when new trouble arrives. Remembering does not erase grief. It keeps grief company with truth and guards the heart from despair.

# Anchoring Truths for Flourishing in Suffering

Certain truths steady the soul when circumstances do not change quickly. First, suffering can become an invitation to return the will to God. Yielding love to the highest good reorders lesser goods and can transform the experience of pain into a place of growth. Second, surprise is normal. People are told not to be shocked by fiery trials, but to rejoice that their lives are being caught up into a larger story where glory will be revealed. Third, present suffering and future glory are not equal weights on a scale. The future outweighs the present decisively, and hope draws strength from that promised freedom. Fourth, followers of Christ are called to share in what is lacking in his sufferings, not to complete atonement, but to join his witness and love for the sake of others. Fifth, the pattern of Christ's own life teaches people how to make meaning of suffering. To know him includes the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. Sixth, love costs, and that cost is often borne as endurance on behalf of others. Even here there is comfort. God consoles his people so that they become a link in the chain of consolation for the next person who must walk a hard road. These truths do not minimize pain, they place pain within a frame that allows character, courage, and compassion to mature.

## **Wise Care for People in Pain**

Care begins with presence before perspective. Listen carefully for where a person is in the journey. Sit with them, pray when it is welcome, and resist the impulse to supply a quick reason for their suffering. Job's friends were most helpful when they were silent. Avoid shaming explanations that assign blame when Scripture warns against drawing straight lines between a person's pain and personal sin. When confession is needed, grace remains available, and cleansing is real. When deliverance is long in coming, invite the person to borrow your hope. Share short passages at the right time rather than long lectures before their heart is ready to hear. Remember that some are waiting for healing and some are being taught to endure with joy. In both cases, the sufficiency of grace is the ground beneath their feet.

## **Conclusion**

Suffering is unavoidable, but despair is not inevitable. A truthful account of the world explains why flourishing is difficult to obtain, yet it also explains why flourishing remains a worthy and realistic aim. God has not abandoned his creation. He calls people back to himself, opens doors of hope in valleys of trouble, and provides armor for the fight. Meditation keeps His voice near. Prayer keeps the relationship active. Reflection keeps memory warm. With these practices, and with the anchoring truths that Scripture supplies, people can learn to endure with courage, love with patience, and hope with eyes trained on restoration. In this way, a theology of suffering serves human flourishing rather than contradicting it.

## **Quick Reference Guide to Terms**

### **Flourish**

Living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well.

### **Shalom**

A biblical vision of comprehensive peace and well-being that is relational and communal, not only individual.

### **Abundant life**

Life in Christ marked by presence, purpose, joy, and love in the midst of difficulty.

### **Spiritual warfare**

Biblical language for personal opposition to God and his people that requires spiritual readiness and God's armor.

### **Meditation (Christian)**

Deep thinking on revealed truth for understanding, application, and prayer, aimed at intimacy with God.

### **Reflection and remembrance**

Practices that rehearse God's faithfulness so present fear is not final.

### **Resilience**

Capacity to endure hardship with faith, hope, love, and wise action, strengthened by steady practices of intimacy with God.



# 5

## Relational Spirituality

Todd Hall, Ph.D.

### Notes

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### Summary

Relational spirituality brings attachment science into spiritual formation so people can move from awareness of their patterns to real transformation. Early caregiving shaped internal templates about love, safety, and worth, which in turn produced protection patterns that once helped but now limit connection. Because brains and souls remain changeable throughout life, those patterns can be updated through new relational experiences with God and others. This chapter names the core wounds and unmet needs that tend to underlie anxious, avoidant, and fearful attachment tendencies, describes the cyclical protection patterns that keep each style going, and presents spiritual practices calibrated to each pattern. It then lays out a path to earned secure attachment through corrective relational experiences, along with a practical growth action plan that emphasizes steady routines, small wins, and supportive relationships. The closing sections point to resources and the vision of God as the ultimate secure base whose faithful presence makes change possible.

### What this chapter covers

- From Awareness to Transformation
- Core Wounds and Protection Patterns
- Anxious Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle
- Avoidant Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle
- Fearful Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle
- Spiritual Practices: How Change Takes Root
- Practices for Anxious Attachment
- Practices for Avoidant Attachment
- Practices for Fearful Attachment
- The Path to Earned Secure Attachment
- Your Growth Action Plan
- Resources and Next Steps
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## From Awareness to Transformation

Awareness of an attachment style is a beginning, not an end. Knowing that a person tends toward anxious, avoidant, fearful, or more secure patterns explains how early relationships created a blueprint for later relationships, but awareness by itself does not produce change. Change begins when core wounds and unmet needs are named with compassion, and when daily practices introduce new experiences that contradict old predictions about connection. Neuroplasticity makes this possible across the lifespan. The same learning capacity that encoded insecurity can encode security when people receive steady, attuned, and boundaried love and when they practice skills that regulate emotion and open the heart.

## Core Wounds and Protection Patterns

Every insecure pattern grows from legitimate wounds. Sometimes the story involves obvious harm. Often it reflects smaller disconnections that piled up: a busy caregiver who could not attune, an anxious or depressed parent, or a home that rewarded a false self. Protection patterns emerged as brilliant adaptations. Minimizing needs may have reduced rejection. Hypervigilance may have reduced surprise. Those protections kept connection possible in childhood. In adulthood they can become rigid, filtering attention through predictions such as “people leave” or “my feelings are too much.” Because perception follows prediction, people see what they expect and act in ways that elicit confirming responses. Healing begins when the wound and the protection are both honored, then gently revised through new experiences of presence, acceptance, and stability.

## Anxious Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle

Anxious patterns often grow from *inconsistent caregiving*. Love felt present and then absent, creating emotional seasickness and a constant fear of abandonment. Small distances register as rejection. Delayed responses can trigger panic. Independence in others can feel like a threat. The central unmet need is consistent emotional presence and reassurance that does not disappear when conflict or distance appears.

A cyclical protection pattern keeps this going. Anxiety about connection leads to excessive reassurance seeking. Others feel overwhelmed and pull back. The withdrawal confirms the fear that everyone will leave, which intensifies the anxiety and drives more pursuit. Naming this cycle creates an opening for new responses such as self-soothing, paced bids for connection, and asking for reassurance in clear, bounded ways.

## Avoidant Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle

Avoidant patterns tend to develop when *emotional unavailability* is chronic. Physical needs may have been met while feelings were ignored or shamed. The wound teaches that emotions are too much and needs are dangerous, so self-reliance becomes a shield. Closeness can feel engulfing. Other people’s emotions can feel overwhelming. Distance is maintained through busyness, intellectualizing, or fault-finding. The central unmet need is a safe space for vulnerability where feelings and needs can be expressed without judgment or intrusion, and where autonomy is respected even as connection deepens.

The cycle here begins with discomfort about closeness. Distance is created. Others feel shut out and stop trying. The quiet confirms that self-reliance is safer. Isolation deepens. The antidote is risking small acts of vulnerability and allowing others to remain present without rushing to withdraw or to fix.

## **Fearful Attachment: Wounds, Needs, and the Cycle**

Fearful patterns usually arise when caregivers are both a refuge and a threat. Affection alternates with anger or volatility. The template becomes “love is dangerous, but I need it.” The person fears both abandonment and engulfment, producing a painful push-pull. The unmet need is *stable, balanced connection* that honors boundaries and provides steady presence without suffocation.

The cycle involves pursuing and pushing away. Others feel hurt or overwhelmed and withdraw. The withdrawal lands as abandonment. Panic rises and pursuit starts again. The way forward is gradual stability: small doses of trusted connection that avoid extremes and build tolerance for closeness without losing self. In many cases, professional therapy is an important part of breaking the cycle.

## **Spiritual Practices: How Change Takes Root**

Spiritual practices are not mere rituals. They are relational experiences with God that can rewire predictions about love, safety, and worth. The attachment system learns through experience, not information. Practices should therefore fit the wound and the need. General instruction to “trust more” or “feel less” typically misses the mark. The goal is patient, targeted practice done with curiosity rather than perfectionism, so the nervous system records repeated experiences of faithful presence, regulated emotion, and boundaried intimacy.

## **Practices for Anxious Attachment**

**Centering prayer for internal security.** Sit in quiet for five to twenty minutes. Choose a simple sacred word such as “peace” or “held.” When anxious thoughts surge, return gently to the word. Over time the body learns that silence does not equal abandonment and that presence does not depend on performance.

**Scripture meditation on faithfulness.** Build a small set of verses that emphasize unchanging care. One example is Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Write the verse, speak it aloud, and visualize it until it settles beneath cognition into emotional memory. Keep a list to reach for when anxiety rises.

**Breath prayers for self-soothing.** Coordinate a short prayer with breathing. An historic pattern is the Jesus Prayer: inhale, “Lord Jesus Christ,” exhale, “have mercy on me.” A personalized version might be inhale, “God loves me,” exhale, “I am safe in his care.” Return attention when it wanders. This activates parasympathetic calm and pairs it with relational trust.

**Sacred solitude.** Practice brief solitude with God so that aloneness no longer equals abandonment. Begin with ten minutes, no agenda. Notice anxiety without picking up the phone or seeking reassurance. Learn that presence can be held within, not only borrowed from others.

## Practices for Avoidant Attachment

**Imaginative contemplation for emotional engagement.** Place yourself in a Gospel scene. Notice what you feel when invited, seen, or touched by Jesus. Suspend analysis. Allow emotion to register so that the bridge between head and heart grows stronger.

**Vulnerability in prayer.** Write honest letters to God. Put fear, need, and resistance into words without editing. Sit quietly afterward to notice that honesty does not end the relationship and that vulnerability does not erase autonomy.

**Corporate worship for connection.** Commit to embodied practices such as singing and communion where presence is shared. When the impulse to detach appears, return attention to the shared act and let belonging register without losing the sense of self.

Body-based prayer. Walk and pray. Scan for tension in jaw, shoulders, or chest. Breathe into those places while speaking simple prayers. Let the body become part of spiritual life rather than a place to avoid.

## Practices for Fearful Attachment

**Structured routine for stability.** Choose the same time, the same place, and a simple sequence, such as a psalm followed by a short reading from the New Testament. Repeat until the pattern feels familiar. Predictability tells a chaotic nervous system that connection can be safe.

**Breath prayers for regulation.** Use brief lines that name middle ground. Inhale, “Help me stay,” exhale, “right here with you.” Or inhale, “I can be close,” exhale, “and still be me.” Use the prayer when the push-pull begins.

**Gradual trust-building.** Share one real thing with God each day. It need not be the deepest wound. Let a small disclosure be received without overwhelm and without abandonment. Increase vulnerability slowly as confidence grows.

**Boundaried connection.** Set a timer for prayer and stop when it rings. Learn that intimacy can have boundaries, that connection can be chosen and ended without rupture, and that control of pace can make closeness feel safer.

# The Path to Earned Secure Attachment

Earned secure attachment means becoming stably secure even if early life was not. Transformation rests on three essentials. First, **awareness** of patterns and their origins. Second, **new relational experiences** that contradict old expectations, such as presence where abandonment was expected, acceptance where criticism was feared, and steadiness where chaos was predicted. Third, **consistent practice over time** so the brain updates its forecasts, and the soul learns to rest.

Corrective experiences come through secure-base relationships that blend comfort and challenge. A therapist, spiritual director, mentor, or friend who has done their own inner work can help. As steady love is internalized, it is passed on to others. Security begets security.

## Your Growth Action Plan

**Start where you are.** Choose compassion over self-criticism. Identify one change that would make the biggest difference now: self-soothing, vulnerability, or stability.

**Choose one practice for 30 to 60 days.** Put it on the calendar. Consistency shapes neural pathways more than intensity. Treat it like brushing teeth.

**Find your people.** Growth rarely happens alone. Seek a therapist trained in attachment, a spiritual director, a growth-oriented small group, or a mentor who embodies secure love. Begin with one safe relationship and build from there.

**Track small wins.** Keep a simple journal. Note moments when you self-soothed rather than seeking reassurance, stayed present rather than withdrawing, or chose stability over chaos. Let evidence of change accumulate.

## Resources and Next Steps

Tools exist to keep the work going. The Attachment Filter Matrix at [relationalspirituality.co](http://relationalspirituality.co) offers a visual guide for recognizing how a pattern colors work, friendship, marriage, and spiritual life. Additional resources expand on the intersection of attachment and spiritual formation and describe how to build a small growth community that practices these skills together. The emphasis is simple: transformation accelerates in community where people name patterns, practice new responses, and celebrate progress.

## Conclusion

Relational spirituality unites attachment science with spiritual practice so that people can heal the wounds that shape relationships with self, others, and God. The path begins with naming wounds and honoring adaptations, continues through targeted practices that calm and open the heart, and matures through corrective relationships that make security real. The vision is practical and hopeful. You are not broken. Wounds can heal. Each small act of awareness, each breath prayer, each honest disclosure, and each carefully timed boundary rewrites the story. Human love will fail at times, but God remains a perfectly consistent, fully attuned, unconditionally accepting, and wisely challenging secure base whose presence steadies change. As security grows, families, clients, congregations, and communities feel the difference. Healing becomes a blessing that multiplies.

# Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## **Relational spirituality**

An approach that integrates attachment science with spiritual formation so that experiences with God and others can revise internal templates of love, safety, and worth.

## **Attachment style**

A pattern of relating rooted in early caregiving. Four broad tendencies are discussed: secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful. Patterns are descriptive, not destiny.

## **Core wound**

A recurring pain point such as inconsistent love, emotional neglect, or chaotic care that teaches a person to expect abandonment, engulfment, or both.

## **Protection pattern**

The strategy that once safeguarded connection, such as minimization, hypervigilance, withdrawal, or pursuit. Helpful in childhood, limiting in adulthood.

## **Cyclical protection pattern (CPP)**

A self-reinforcing loop that keeps an attachment tendency going. Examples include reassurance-seeking that pushes others away or distancing that elicits withdrawal.

## **Centering prayer**

A silent, consent-based practice that trains the nervous system to rest in God's presence without grasping for reassurance.

## **Breath prayer**

A brief phrase paired with inhalation and exhalation to regulate emotion while expressing trust, for example "God loves me" on the inhale, "I am safe in his care" on the exhale.

## **Imaginative contemplation**

Placing oneself in a Gospel scene to notice emotions and receive hospitality without analysis, especially helpful for avoidant patterns.

## **Earned secure attachment**

Stable security developed later in life through awareness, corrective experiences, and consistent practice, even when early care was insecure.

## **Secure base**

A relationship that offers steady presence, acceptance, and wise challenge, enabling exploration and growth. God is described as the ultimate secure base.

## **Attachment Filter Matrix**

A visual tool for mapping how attachment patterns influence life domains and for choosing targeted practices. Available at [relationalspirituality.co](https://relationalspirituality.co).



# The Kindness Challenge: One Another's 101

**Shaunti Feldhahn, MPP**

## Notes

## Summary

Kindness is a transformational force that improves relationships, strengthens leadership, and enhances mental and physical health. Flourishing depends more on how a person treats others than on how that person is treated. Scripture anchors this call to lovingkindness: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32 (NIV). This chapter presents the key truth about kindness, clarifies why kindness is not the same as niceness, and introduces a simple training ground, the 30-Day Kindness Challenge, with three daily practices that reliably change both the relationship and the person practicing them. It then explains three types of transformation that kindness produces, offers implementation steps for individuals, teams, and churches, and closes with tools and a quick reference.

## What this chapter covers

- The key truth about thriving
- Kindness is not niceness
- The training ground: The 30-Day Kindness Challenge
- Evidence and outcomes
- Three types of transformation
- Practical guidance for leaders, coaches, and churches
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## The Key Truth About Thriving

Across two decades of nationally distributed studies and field experience, a single insight surfaces again and again: whether a person thrives in life, leadership, and relationships is more related to how that person treats others than to how that person is treated. Intentional kindness is the lever. Kindness measurably improves health markers, mood, and relationship quality, and it shifts cultures in homes, teams, and congregations.

Scripture frames the focus with a repeated call to lovingkindness toward one another, culminating in Ephesians 4:32. Practiced in daily life, this is not sentimental. It is transformational.

## Kindness is Not Niceness

Niceness keeps things pleasant and avoids discomfort. Kindness seeks the true good of the other person. It includes strength and boundaries. A kind response can confront a problem while preserving dignity. Leaders who confuse niceness with kindness delay hard conversations and often prolong harm. Leaders who practice real kindness tell the truth with grace, make wise transitions, and walk with people through change.

Kindness is most needed when least desired. The call to kindness does not remove boundaries where mistreatment is present. Boundaries can be set firmly while maintaining a posture of respect and compassion.

## The Training Ground: The 30-Day Kindness Challenge

Choose one person you interact with regularly. For the next 30 days, complete three daily practices.

1. **Positivity.** Say nothing negative to the person or about the person to anyone else. If constructive feedback is unavoidable, deliver it with a helpful tone and a clear path forward.
2. **Praise.** Each day, identify one specific, sincere thing to affirm. Tell the person directly, and also tell someone else. This retrains attention toward what is excellent and praiseworthy and helps appreciation make it out of the mind and into words.
3. **Kindness.** Do one small act of kindness or generosity. Offer timely attention, make a helpful gesture, or remove a burden. Small, repeated actions change how both parties think and feel.

These steps are simple enough for use at home, at work, and in church settings. Groups can run the challenge together while each participant focuses on one person. Tools, reminder emails, and a “Kindness Quotient” self-assessment are available at [jointhekindnesschallenge.com](https://jointhekindnesschallenge.com).

## Evidence and Outcomes

Participants who completed the 30-Day Kindness Challenge and were surveyed before and after reported large changes. In the program data, *89 percent* reported that the relationship improved. A majority also reported feeling more love and appreciation by the end of the month, even when they had not told the other person they were doing the challenge. Kindness helps the recipient, and it changes the giver.

Findings from the broader research literature align with these observations. Reviews and books summarize links between kindness and health through pathways that involve oxytocin, nitric oxide, cortisol, dopamine, and serotonin, with observed effects on blood pressure, immune function, stress, mood, and pain. See Fryburg's review in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine (2022) and Hamilton's synthesis in *The Five Side Effects of Kindness* (2017, 2021 editions). ([SAGE Journals](#), [Google Books](#), [hayhouse.com](#))

For practical application, Feldhahn's *The Kindness Challenge* outlines the same three daily practices tested in field programs and offers examples and templates for use in homes, workplaces, and congregations. ([Shaunti Feldhahn](#), [Amazon](#), [Focus on the Family Store](#))

## Three Types of Transformation

Kindness produces change through a sequence of focus, expression, and action. These build on one another.

### 1. Transformational focus

What a person focuses on becomes what that person sees. Selective attention is powerful. In classic inattention blindness experiments, observers miss even obvious events when focused elsewhere. In relationships, a focus on irritations amplifies them, while a focus on strengths brings those strengths into view. The praise step forces attention toward what is excellent and praiseworthy, which often reveals much that was previously overlooked. ([PubMed](#))

A practical note from program experience: most people overestimate how often they praise others. When the challenge begins, they discover that sincere daily affirmation takes intention. That intention is precisely what shifts perception.

### 2. Transformational expression

Words shape emotions. Complaining and venting may feel relieving, yet research indicates that venting anger tends to increase anger and aggressive responding. Changing speech patterns changes internal state. Replacing negative talk with truthful affirmation reduces irritation and helps the nervous system settle. ([SAGE Journals](#), [U-M Personal Web Server](#))

This does not forbid talking about hard things. It reframes how and why people share. Share to seek wisdom, prayer, or problem-solving, not to escalate emotion.

### 3. Transformational action

Behavior reshapes beliefs. Small daily acts of kindness build a habit of generosity that alters assumptions about the other person and about the relationship. The challenge also exposes subtle patterns of unkindness that people often miss, for example sarcasm, eye-rolling, or exasperation. Naming and replacing these micro-behaviors interrupts negative cycles.

# Practical Guidance for Leaders, Coaches, and Churches

Start with one person. Choose a relationship with frequent contact. For first-time participants, focus on only one person to keep the training intense and revealing.

**Decide whether to tell the other person.** When spouses choose to do the challenge together, mutual awareness can be positive. In other cases, begin without announcing it. If the person knows you are “on day 12,” affirmations may be discounted.

Coach the three daily practices.

- **Positivity:** eliminate negative comments and gossip.
- **Praise:** offer one concrete affirmation daily and tell a second person what you noticed.
- **Kindness:** do one small daily act that removes a burden or offers timely attention.

**Use simple supports.** Encourage participants to subscribe to 30 days of reminder emails and to take the Kindness Quotient self-assessment to identify common patterns of negativity. Resources are available at [jointhekindnesschallenge.com](http://jointhekindnesschallenge.com) for individuals, groups, and churches.

**De-brief weekly.** Ask: What did you notice yourself wanting to say that you chose not to say. What did you notice that you praised. What small act did you do. What changed inside you.

Teach kindness with boundaries. Kindness does not require passivity. Where there is harm or chronic disrespect, set clear limits and seek help while maintaining a posture of respect.

**Normalize the science.** Share one or two findings that make the practice compelling. For example, kindness practices correlate with reduced stress hormones and improved mood, and viewing or engaging in kind acts can increase positive affect. Provide references for those who want to read more. ([SAGE Journals](#))

**Point to Scripture.** The biblical call to kindness runs through the “one another” commands, including Ephesians 4:32. Use Scripture to set the heart posture, and use the daily practices to train attention, speech, and action.

## Conclusion

Kindness is a simple practice with profound effects. It is stronger than niceness and wiser than passivity. It can warm a marriage, stabilize a team, and strengthen a church. It transforms the person who practices it as much as the relationship where it is aimed. Begin with one person. For 30 days, say nothing negative. Each day, praise one true thing. Each day, do one small kind act. The pattern is clear. Focus changes what you see. Words change how you feel. Actions change how you think. Lovingkindness, practiced steadily, becomes a way of life.

# Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Kindness

Seeking the true good of another person with compassion and strength. Distinct from niceness, which keeps peace on the surface.

## 30-Day Kindness Challenge

A month-long training ground with three daily practices: no negative speech, one daily affirmation shared with the person and with someone else, and one daily act of kindness. Designed for homes, workplaces, and churches. Tools at [jointhekindnesschallenge.com](http://jointhekindnesschallenge.com).

## Positivity

The daily commitment to avoid negative comments to or about the focus person, while giving necessary feedback with a constructive tone.

## Praise

A daily, specific, sincere affirmation spoken to the person and repeated to another person to train attention toward what is praiseworthy.

## Act of kindness

A small daily action of generosity such as timely attention, removing a burden, or providing help.

## Transformational focus

The attentional shift that occurs when you look for strengths. What you focus on is what you will see.

## Transformational expression

The emotional shift that occurs when speech changes. What you say changes how you feel. Venting tends to sustain anger. (SAGE Journals)

## Transformational action

The cognitive shift that occurs when repeated actions build new mental associations. What you do changes what you think.

## Kindness and health

Research that links kindness with lower stress, better mood, and improved physiological markers such as blood pressure and immune function. See Fryburg 2022 and Hamilton 2017/2021. (SAGE Journals, [hayhouse.com](http://hayhouse.com))

## Program outcomes

Before-after surveys of challenge participants reported high rates of relationship improvement and increased feelings of love and appreciation among the practitioners.

## Selected sources for further reading

- Feldhahn, S. The Kindness Challenge (2016). WaterBrook. (Shaunti Feldhahn)
- Fryburg, D. A. "Kindness as a Stress Reduction–Health Promotion Intervention." American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine (2022). (SAGE Journals)
- Hamilton, D. R. The Five Side Effects of Kindness (2017/2021). (Google Books)
- Stambor, Z. "A key to happiness." APA Monitor (2006). (American Psychological Association)

# 7

## The Kindness Challenge: One Another's 102

Shaunti Feldhahn, M.P.P.

### Notes

### Summary

Kindness is a calling, not a convenience. Scripture commands kindness in ordinary days and in hard seasons, and the research behind the Kindness Challenge shows that steady kindness changes relationships and the one who practices it. This chapter organizes the “one another” teachings into two themes, kindness in difficult circumstances and active care for burdens, then translates both into simple practices for individuals, teams, and churches. The first half addresses two common objections, that most people already believe they are kind, and that difficult people do not deserve kindness. A thirty-day training plan answers both objections with three daily practices that increase praise, reduce negative speech, and add one small act of generosity. The second half presents a parallel community of care that any church can build, with three tiers of helpers and a care coordinator who guides people to the right level of support. The result is a culture that treats kindness as strength, builds lay capacity for presence and listening, and serves the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health of the whole body.

### What this chapter covers

- Why This Matters Now
- Biblical Foundations for One Anothering
- Two Clear Callings
- Common Objections and a Better Frame
- The 30-Day Kindness Challenge: A Training Ground
- Kindness With Strength and Boundaries
- Caring For Emotional and Mental Health in the Church
- The Church Care Strategy: A Parallel Community of Care
- Implementation Steps for Pastors, Coaches, And Teams
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms



## Why This Matters Now

Emotional and relational distress is common and rising. A large share of people, roughly 30-40%, will face significant emotional or behavioral health challenges at some point in life. Helpers and institutions feel the strain, which means practical steps that regular people can take have unusual value. The aim is to put simple tools in ordinary hands so that care scales beyond offices and appointments and into daily relationships in homes, workplaces, and churches.

## Biblical Foundations for One Anothering

The New Testament includes many “one another” commands that group into two streams. One stream calls for lovingkindness and restraint, for example love one another, be kind and tenderhearted, bear with one another, be at peace with one another, do not grumble against one another, and do not speak evil against one another. A second stream calls for active support when life is heavy, for example bear one another’s burdens, comfort one another, care for one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, build one another up, exhort and admonish one another, and walk in the light together. These streams supply the structure for this chapter, a foundation for kindness when it is hard, and a framework for communal care when needs are many. Scripture anchoring for kindness includes Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

## Two Clear Callings

Two complementary callings emerge from Scripture and practice.

1. **Have Kindness With One Another, Regardless Of The Situation.** The commands to forgive, to bear with one another, to live in harmony, and to show hospitality do not come with an exemption for difficult people or inconvenient moments. The call is to treat others as we would want to be treated, especially when we are hurt or exhausted.
2. **Care For One Another’s Mental, Emotional, Physical, And Spiritual Health, Especially In The Church.** The burden bearing texts point beyond sermons and programs to relationships where presence, prayer, encouragement, and practical help are normal. Churches can cultivate this kind of care as a shared ministry rather than a task reserved for a few.

## Common Objections and a Better Frame

Two objections arise quickly.

**Objection 1:** I Am Already Kind To Everyone. Most people value kindness and assume they practice it. Yet everyday unkind habits often slip by unnoticed. Eye rolling, sarcasm, backchannel complaints, and a negative explanatory style quietly sabotage connection. The kindness practices below expose the blind spot and retrain attention and speech so kindness becomes a daily reflex.

**Objection 2:** Some People Do Not Deserve Kindness. Jesus places the Golden Rule inside the context of mistreatment and enemies. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you ... Do to others as you would have them do to you ... be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” This is not a sentiment. It is a command with teeth. Treat others the way you wish they were treating you, including in hard situations. Kindness is not weakness. It seeks the true good of the other, which includes truthful words and wise limits.

## The 30-Day Kindness Challenge: A Training Ground

Choose one person you interact with regularly. For the next thirty days, practice three daily steps. This plan has been used by hundreds of thousands of people and thousands of churches.

1. **Positivity.** Say nothing negative to the person or about the person to anyone else. If corrective feedback is unavoidable, give it with a constructive tone and a clear path forward. Negativity escalates irritation, while constructive speech reduces defensiveness and keeps dignity intact.
2. **Praise.** Each day, notice and name one specific thing you can sincerely affirm. Tell the person, and tell someone else. This trains attention to see strengths that have been present all along, and it shifts the atmosphere around the relationship.
3. **Kindness.** Do one small act of generosity. Offer timely attention, remove a burden, or give practical help. Small acts, repeated daily, reshape habits and assumptions.

**Outcomes.** Before and after surveys from program participants report substantial benefits. A large share saw the relationship improve, and many felt more love and appreciation by day thirty. The pattern is consistent across settings, homes, workplaces, and churches. The practice changes the practitioner as much as the relationship.

**Safety Note.** Do not use this plan to endure coercion or abuse. In relationships marked by control, manipulation, or danger, seek help. Practice kindness toward someone else in your life while a mentor, pastor, or clinician helps you set boundaries and find safety. Scripture’s call to kindness still stands, and in these cases kindness takes the form of clear limits and protective wisdom.

**Tools.** Templates, a brief assessment, and optional reminder emails are available at [jointhekindnesschallenge.com](http://jointhekindnesschallenge.com) for individuals, small groups, and congregations.

## Kindness With Strength and Boundaries

Kindness pursues what is truly best for the other person. That includes honest conversation and clear limits when harm persists. A kind leader calls a colleague to account with dignity, offers specific steps toward change, and names fair consequences if behavior does not change. A kind spouse sets limits around destructive patterns while refusing to repay pain with contempt. A kind friend refuses to gossip and replaces complaint with prayer and help. The posture remains the same, steady presence, truthful words, and practical love aimed at the person’s good. Boundaries protect safety and make real change possible.

# Caring For Emotional and Mental Health in the Church

People often turn to clergy first. In many communities a large share of those who face mental health challenges seek help from pastors or church staff before contacting clinicians. At the same time, pastors and counselors describe an overwhelmed system.

Many leaders report that mental health issues are common in their churches, while only a minority say they have a clear and effective response process. The gap is an opportunity. The task is not to replace clinical care. The task is to increase capacity for care in the body so that pastors and professionals can focus on the most acute needs and so that people with ordinary grief and discouragement are not left waiting alone.

## The Church Care Strategy: A Parallel Community of Care

A simple model helps churches match needs to care.

**Triangle Of Need.** At the top are acute crises, for example severe depression, active substance dependence, suicidality, psychosis, or couples in immediate collapse. In the middle are functional but significant struggles, for example persistent anxiety, depression with daily functioning, or relationships under strain. At the bottom is ordinary life pain, for example grief, discouragement, conflict, and seasonal stress.

**Triangle Of Care Providers.** At the top are pastors and licensed professionals. In the middle are trained helpers, for example Celebrate Recovery leaders, marriage mentors, grief group leaders, Stephen Ministry teams, and peer support groups. At the bottom are lay listeners, ordinary people with a good ear and a faithful presence who can meet for coffee, sit in the waiting room, pray, listen, and encourage.

**What Often Happens Now.** Everything funnels to the top. The result is an overwhelmed system and people quietly slipping away when specialized help is the only path offered.

**What Needs To Happen.** Acute needs go to professionals and to pastoral care. Functional but significant struggles go to trained helpers. Ordinary pain goes to lay listeners and small groups. This layered approach increases capacity without sacrificing quality. Most churches already have something in the trained helper tier. The biggest gap is organized lay care. Only a minority of churches have a formal lay listening network even though leaders strongly affirm its value.

**Care Coordinator.** A care coordinator sits in the middle and directs people to the right tier. In a smaller church this may be a volunteer with wisdom and time. In a larger church this may be a part time or full time role. The coordinator protects pastors' calendars, keeps a warm handoff to clinicians, equips trained helpers, and recruits and supports lay listeners. Churches that repurpose a few volunteer hours to this role often see immediate gains in responsiveness and peace.

**Why This Works.** People receive timely presence and encouragement. Pastors and clinicians focus where their gifts are decisive. Members learn to bear one another's burdens in daily life. The system becomes sustainable.

# Implementation Steps for Pastors, Coaches, and Teams

## For Pastors and Elders

1. **Name The Callings.** Teach the two callings, kindness when it is hard and care for whole person health in the body. Anchor the vision with the one another scriptures and with Luke 6. Invite the church to practice together.
2. **Appoint a Care Coordinator.** Identify a wise, steady person to oversee triage and pathways. Clarify decision rights, privacy practices, and referral boundaries.
3. **Map What Exists.** List current pathways, for example Celebrate Recovery, grief care, marriage mentors, prayer teams, small groups, clinician partners. Identify the gaps, especially organized lay listening.
4. **Launch A Lay Listening Team.** Recruit people with presence and empathy. Offer a few hours of basic training in listening, boundaries, confidentiality, and referral. Pair each listener with a small group leader or a trained helper for support.
5. **Build Clinician Partnerships.** Keep a short list of local counselors, psychiatrists, and coaches who understand your church and accept your referrals. Set expectations for communication and follow up.
6. **Set a Rhythm.** Choose a quarterly rhythm for the 30-day challenge across the church. Tell stories of change, celebrate small wins, and refresh the invitation.

## For Coaches and Care Staff

1. **Use The Kindness Challenge.** Guide clients and teams through the thirty day plan. Debrief weekly. Track where praise and small acts shift the tone of the relationship.
2. **Teach Skills.** Practice scripts for constructive feedback that keep dignity intact. Practice phrases that convert gossip into prayer or problem solving.
3. **Measure And Reflect.** Invite brief self-ratings on kindness habits at the start and end of the month. Ask for two sentences that explain each rating so numbers become stories.
4. **Plan Boundaries.** Help clients set a kindness plan that includes clear limits where patterns are harmful. Kindness can include saying no and seeking help.
5. **Connect To Community.** Point clients to small groups, mentors, and service teams where kindness becomes a shared rhythm.

## For Teams and Small Groups

1. **Pick One Person.** Each participant chooses one relationship for the month.
2. **Share Weekly.** Meet for fifteen minutes to answer three questions: what did you not say, what did you praise, what small act did you do.
3. **Celebrate Progress.** Mark small wins. If a day is missed, resume the next day. Keep the focus on practice, not perfection.
4. **Extend The Habit.** After thirty days, choose a new person or keep the practices with the same person for another month.

## Conclusion

Kindness is a simple practice with profound effects. It is stronger than niceness and wiser than passivity. It can warm a marriage, stabilize a team, and strengthen a church. It transforms the person who practices it as much as the relationship where it is aimed. Begin with one person. For thirty days, say nothing negative. Each day, praise one true thing. Each day, do one small kind act. The pattern is clear. Focus changes what you see. Words change how you feel. Actions change how you think. Lovingkindness, practiced steadily, becomes a way of life.

## Quick Reference Guide to Terms

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### 30-Day Kindness Challenge

A month-long training ground with three daily practices: no negative speech, one daily affirmation shared with the person and with someone else, and one daily act of kindness. Designed for homes, workplaces, and churches. Tools at [jointhekindnesschallenge.com](http://jointhekindnesschallenge.com).

### Positivity

The daily commitment to avoid negative comments to or about the focus person, while giving necessary feedback with a constructive tone.

### Praise

A daily, specific, sincere affirmation spoken to the person and repeated to another person to train attention toward what is praiseworthy.

### Act Of Kindness

A small daily action of generosity such as timely attention, removing a burden, or providing help.

**Transformational Focus**

The attentional shift that occurs when you look for strengths. What you focus on is what you will see.

**Transformational Expression**

The emotional shift that occurs when speech changes. What you say changes how you feel. Venting tends to sustain anger. Share to seek wisdom, prayer, or problem solving.

**Transformational Action**

The cognitive shift that occurs when repeated actions build new mental associations. What you do changes what you think.

**Church Care Strategy**

A layered model that matches needs to care: professionals and pastors for acute crises, trained helpers for significant struggles, lay listeners and small groups for everyday pain.

**Care Coordinator**

A central guide who directs people to the right level of care, supports helpers, and keeps warm handoffs to clinicians.

**Lay Listener**

An ordinary person trained for presence, listening, prayer, and encouragement who offers timely support within healthy boundaries.

# 8

## Showing Appreciation

Paul White, Ph.D.

### Notes

### Summary

Appreciation is a person-to-person practice that strengthens relationships and helps organizations function with less friction and more focus. Money and formal recognition have short term effects, while authentic appreciation speaks to who people are and how they prefer to be valued. This chapter adapts the five love languages to work, ministry, and everyday life as the five languages of appreciation, words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, tangible gifts, and appropriate physical touch. It explains common misconceptions, clarifies how appreciation differs from recognition, summarizes organizational benefits, and gives concrete, role specific ways to show appreciation across generations and cultures. Tools include the Motivating by Appreciation Inventory and team profiles, along with a simple three step plan to start somewhere with someone. Scripture frames the call to act with love in ways the recipient can receive.

### What This Chapter Covers

- From Love Languages to Workplace Appreciation
- What Appreciation Is and Is Not
- Five Common Misconceptions
- Why Appreciation Matters for Flourishing Organizations
- The Five Languages of Appreciation in Daily Work
- Tailoring Appreciation Across Roles, Ages, and Cultures
- How to Find Out What People Value
- Who Communicates Appreciation
- Implementation in Churches, Ministries, and Volunteer Teams
- Next Steps for Leaders and Teams
- Faith Integration
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms



## From Love Languages to Workplace Appreciation

The five love languages helped millions understand how people express and receive love. The same insight applies at work, with friends and family, and in ministry settings, when appreciation is given in the way that matters to the recipient, it lands. Collaboration between Dr. Gary Chapman and Dr. Paul White produced the Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace, now used by major corporations, government agencies, schools, health systems, and churches. The aim is authentic appreciation that sustains relationships, not going through the motions or handing out novelty rewards.

### What Appreciation Is and Is Not

Employee recognition and appreciation are not the same. Recognition is typically organizational and performance based, often designed and delivered from the top through programs and policies. Appreciation is personal, given peer to peer or across roles, and affirms the person as well as contributions. Both can coexist, but only appreciation reliably helps people feel valued. Many recognition schemes overemphasize points, prizes, and public ceremonies, which miss what a large share of people actually want.

## Five Common Misconceptions

**Misconception 1:** Money is Enough. Pay and bonuses matter in the short term, yet they are weak satisfiers of feeling valued. Motivation to hit targets and the experience of being appreciated are different issues. People may produce well and still feel known only for output.

**Misconception 2:** Recognition Equals Appreciation. Most organizations have recognition programs, yet employee engagement and retention problems persist. Program mechanics often center on performance and hierarchy, while appreciation centers on people and relationships.

**Misconception 3:** The Goal is to Make People Feel Good. Positive emotion is welcome, however the goal is a healthy, well functioning organization with less friction and more constructive energy. Appreciation acts like oil in an engine, reducing heat and wear so the system works smoothly.

**Misconception 4:** Appreciation Equals Words. More than half of employees do not prefer words as their main appreciation language. Relying only on praise misses many people and can even frustrate those who prefer concrete help.

**Misconception 5:** Only Managers Should Do It. People want to be valued by supervisors and by colleagues. Appreciation should flow in every direction, top down, peer to peer, across departments, and even toward leaders who are often overlooked.

A practical warning follows from these misconceptions. Seventy nine percent of employees who quit report that lack of appreciation was a key factor, so indifference is costly.

## Why Appreciation Matters for Flourishing Organizations

When people feel truly valued and appreciated, morale improves, turnover decreases, irritability and petty conflict shrink, collaboration rises, productivity increases, customer satisfaction rises, and profitability improves. These gains come partly from reducing the hidden costs of churn, disengagement, and territorial habits. Appreciation does not replace performance standards, it creates the relational climate where standards can be met without constant friction.

## The Five Languages of Appreciation in Daily Work

Not everyone feels appreciated in the same way. The five languages are the same in name as in personal life, yet they look different at work.

**Words Of Affirmation:** 44 Percent Choose This Language. Use specific, timely, and sincere words. Personal, one on one thanks for concrete help, brief praise in front of the team, and short written notes all count. About forty percent of employees do not want to be recognized in front of large groups, so know your audience before planning public ceremonies. Generational differences matter, for some, speed of response carries more weight than a handwritten note.

**Quality Time:** 26 Percent Choose This Language. Time signals value. Older employees may prefer focused attention with a supervisor, younger employees often prefer time with peers, for example coffee, a shared meal, or a game after work. Clarify whether the person wants to talk about work or not during that time.

**Acts Of Service:** 21 Percent Choose This Language. Helpful action speaks louder than praise for many. Ask how you can help on time limited projects or in service surges, then do the task their way. Small things make a day go better, answering a few calls, making copies, covering the desk, or showing a shortcut. Tips include ask first, push past the reflexive I am fine to discover the real need, and carry out the help as the recipient prefers.

**Tangible Gifts:** 9 Percent Choose This Language. Small, personal, and thoughtful gifts tell people they are known, a favorite coffee, a gluten free slice for the teammate who needs it, a magazine tied to a hobby, a low value gift card to a beloved spot, or even a helpful link that supports a new interest. Avoid one size fits all corporate trinkets and gifts that ignore health needs. Person to person is the rule.

**Appropriate Physical Touch:** Less Than 1 Percent Choose This Language In United States Data. In many workplaces the only appropriate expressions are spontaneous celebrations that are brief and clearly welcome, for example a high five, a fist bump, or a congratulatory handshake. Cultural norms differ by country, and the recipient always determines what is appropriate.

## **Tailoring Appreciation Across Roles, Ages, and Cultures**

People differ by role and preference. Many librarians and administrative staff dislike being called on stage for large group recognition, while sales teams may enjoy it. Younger employees tend to prefer fast, specific feedback and peer companionship, while some older employees value focused time with a supervisor. Cultural norms vary, especially around physical touch. The guiding principle remains the same, match the act to the person.

Public words are not always best, and silence is rarely interpreted as praise. A brief text within a day or two can mean more than a delayed formal note. When helping, do it their way rather than reorganizing their piles in your style. These practical touches make appreciation feel authentic rather than performative.

## **How To Find Out What People Value**

Asking someone how to appreciate them often yields vague answers, and observing at work provides few data points. Knowing the language is not enough, specific actions within that language matter, for example a lunch to talk about work versus a lunch to not talk about work. The Motivating by Appreciation Inventory identifies a person's primary and secondary languages, least valued language, specific actions that matter to them, and from whom they prefer certain actions. Team or department profiles help colleagues appreciate one another in ways that fit.

## **Who Communicates Appreciation**

Everyone. Appreciation should flow in every direction, leaders to teams, teams to leaders, peers across departments, and partners who support one another's work. This approach reduces the pressure on managers to be the sole source of appreciation and fits how people actually want to be valued, especially younger employees who prioritize collegial connections.

## **Implementation In Churches, Ministries, and Volunteer Teams**

The same principles apply outside business. Ministry teams, volunteers, and congregations thrive when appreciation is personal and frequent. Recognition structures still have a place, however the day-to-day climate changes when people know how their teammates like to be encouraged, when they help one another during crunch times, and when small gifts are tailored to people rather than policies. Appreciation helps retain volunteers, supports staff resilience, and honors the whole person, not only their output.

Across industries, organizations as diverse as hospitals, schools, construction firms, municipalities, military units, and multinational companies have used these tools to build healthier climates. The breadth of use reflects simplicity and transferability, the languages are easy to understand, remember, and do.

# Next Steps for Leaders and Teams

**Start Somewhere With Someone.** Choose a colleague or volunteer you want to encourage. Identify one specific thing to appreciate, a contribution or a character strength. Decide how and when to communicate it in the language most likely to fit. If you do not know their preferences, start with specific words delivered privately and promptly.

**Build A Shared Practice.** Read *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* with your team. Have each person take the inventory, then share a group profile and discuss what to try for one month. Practice short, frequent actions, for example weekly one on one praise, a rotating coffee drop, a fifteen-minute peer coaching slot, or a two person relief shift during peak times.

**Measure What Matters.** Track small indicators, fewer petty conflicts, faster help during crunches, quicker thanks after handoffs, and note who has not received appreciation recently. Use these signals to keep attention on people rather than just processes.

## Faith Integration

The call to appreciate others fits a larger spiritual frame. Treat others as you would want to be treated, Luke 6:31. Love not only with words or speech but with actions and in truth, 1 John 3:18. Appreciation becomes a practical way to demonstrate love through actions that the recipient recognizes as love, not only the actions the giver prefers to give.

## Conclusion

Authentic appreciation is simple and powerful. It moves attention from outputs alone to persons, from programs to relationships, from assumptions to specific, timely, and fitting actions. When appreciation flows in every direction, teams work with less friction, fewer distractions, and greater resilience. Start small and be specific. Choose a person, choose one language aligned action, and do it soon. Build a shared rhythm with tools that reveal what people value. Over time, people feel seen, collaboration grows, and the whole system functions better.

## Quick Reference Guide to Terms

### Appreciation

Person to person communication that affirms value and cares for the person, not only their performance, across words, time, service, gifts, and appropriate touch.

### Recognition

Organizational programs that reward performance, often top down and ceremony based. Helpful for goals and milestones, different from appreciation.

## **Five Languages of Appreciation**

Words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, tangible gifts, appropriate physical touch. The preferred mix varies by person, role, generation, and culture.

## **Preference Distribution**

Approximate first choice preferences observed in large samples, words 44 percent, quality time 26 percent, acts of service 21 percent, tangible gifts 9 percent, physical touch less than 1 percent in United States data.

## **Public Recognition Caution**

About forty percent do not want to go on stage for large group praise. Consider team sized settings or private thanks.

## **Acts Of Service Tips**

Ask first, push past the initial I am fine, do it their way. Small acts during deadlines and service surges have outsized impact.

## **Motivating By Appreciation Inventory**

An assessment that identifies a person's primary and secondary languages, least valued language, specific actions, and preferred givers, with team profiles for group use.

## **Start Somewhere with Someone**

A three step plan, pick a person, name what to appreciate, decide how and when to deliver it in a fitting language, then repeat.

## **Biblical Anchors**

Luke 6:31 and 1 John 3:18 frame the call to act with love in practical ways that the recipient can receive.

# Gratitude 101

**Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.**

## Notes

## Summary

Gratitude is a way of seeing and responding that helps people notice the good, recognize its sources, and act in ways that strengthen relationships. Over the past twenty years, randomized trials and cohort studies have linked gratitude to higher positive emotion, better sleep, stronger relationships, resilience during stress, healthier behaviors, and even lower mortality in older adults. This chapter defines gratitude in two steps, surveys key findings, explains how gratitude works through attention and connection, addresses common objections, and provides practical exercises for individuals, coaches, and communities.

## What This Chapter Covers

- Why Gratitude Matters Now
- What Gratitude Is: A Two-Step Definition
- The Scope of the Science
- Core Benefits Across Life Domains
- Why Gratitude Works: The ARC Model
- Myths and Objections: The Four Ps
- Foundational Practices You Can Start Today
- Gratitude in Times of Suffering
- Coaching and Community Applications
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Why Gratitude Matters Now

Gratitude has been praised by philosophers and faith traditions for centuries. In recent decades, scientific work has tested those claims in experiments and large cohorts. Findings point to a practical conclusion. Gratitude helps people notice present goods, counter habitual negativity, and connect with others in life giving ways. These gains are valuable in ordinary seasons and under strain. ([Greater Good](#))

## What Gratitude Is: A Two-Step Definition

Gratitude can be described in two steps.

1. **Affirm the good.** Acknowledge that there is good in the world and in life today.
2. **Recognize the sources.** Identify where the good came from, which often includes other people and, for many, God.

Gratitude does not deny pain. It is a disciplined perception that makes room for gifts that might otherwise be taken for granted. Gratitude can appear as a brief emotion, a practice, and a disposition. Dispositional gratitude varies across people and can be measured with the GQ-6, a short questionnaire that captures how often and how deeply a person feels grateful. Four useful facets are frequency, intensity, span across life areas, and density or how many givers are recognized for a single gift. ([ppc.sas.upenn.edu](#), [UCSD Pages](#))

## The Scope of the Science

Modern research on gratitude accelerated in the early 2000s with randomized trials that compared counting blessings to counting hassles or neutral events. Participants who listed blessings on a regular schedule reported higher positive emotion, better life evaluation, and small physical benefits during the practice period. Replications and extensions have appeared in multiple countries and samples, including students, workers, and patients, with follow up assessments that show sustained gains for many participants. ([Greater Good](#), [PubMed](#))

## Core Benefits Across Life Domains

**Emotional well-being.** Gratitude practices such as journaling increase positive affect and life satisfaction, and they can reduce daily stress and depressive symptoms during the practice period. These results have been observed in multiple trials that contrasted blessings with hassles or neutral listing. ([Greater Good](#))

**Sleep.** Higher gratitude relates to better sleep quality and duration, less time to fall asleep, and fewer daytime problems, partly because grateful thoughts before bed reduce negative pre-sleep cognitions. These associations remain after personality controls. ([PubMed](#), [Greater Good](#))

**Relationships.** Grateful people report greater satisfaction with relationships and engage more in helping and forgiving. Paying attention to gifts naturally directs attention to givers, which strengthens social bonds. This mechanism appears throughout experimental and observational work. ([Greater Good](#))

**Resilience and mental health.** In a population-based study of U.S. veterans, higher baseline gratitude predicted lower incidence of major depression, generalized anxiety, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and suicidal ideation over follow up. ([PMC](#))

**Physical health and longevity.** In the Nurses' Health Study cohort of older U.S. women, higher grateful affect was associated with lower all-cause and cardiovascular mortality during follow up, even after extensive adjustments. The authors call for replication, but the signal is notable. ([PMC](#), [PubMed](#))

## Why Gratitude Works: The ARC Model

A simple way to summarize mechanisms is ARC.

**Amplify.** Gratitude keeps benefits vivid. People adapt quickly to good events. Brief reflection on gifts delays that adaptation and brings the good back into view. This attentional boost supports positive emotion and motivation. ([Greater Good](#))

**Rescue.** Gratitude helps rescue attention from the mind's negativity bias. It does not deny hardship. It gives the brain a competing focus so rumination and threat appraisal do not dominate the entire field of view. Effects on sleep illustrate this rescue function, where grateful thoughts are linked to fewer negative pre-sleep cognitions. ([PubMed](#))

**Connect.** Gratitude turns attention outward toward helpers and upward toward meaning. Recognizing interdependence strengthens social ties, which in turn support health and resilience. Connection is a consistent pathway in both experimental and cohort findings. ([Greater Good](#))

## Myths and Objections: The Four Ps

Questions about gratitude often cluster into four objections.

**Positivity.** Concern: gratitude is naive or ignores suffering. Reality: healthy gratitude coexists with lament. It is the choice to perceive present goods while acknowledging pain. Clinical and qualitative work shows gratitude helping people with illness or grief notice support and take the next step. ([Greater Good](#))

**Passivity.** Concern: gratitude will breed complacency. Reality: classic trials found that counting blessings increased reported goal progress in follow up assessments, which suggests that grateful reflection can energize action. ([Greater Good](#))



**Powerlessness.** Concern: gratitude keeps receivers in a one-down position. Reality: by shifting attention to resources and relationships, gratitude often increases agency, including help seeking and collaboration, especially in communities that practice thanks and mutual aid. ([PMC](#))

**Phoniness.** Concern: people feel pressured to appear grateful. Reality: the practices below do not require pretending. They invite honest observation and expression. Authentic gratitude usually follows the habit of noticing and naming. ([Greater Good](#))

## Foundational Practices You Can Start Today

The goal is consistency rather than intensity. Choose one or two practices and keep them simple.

**Counting blessings.** Once per day or several times per week, list up to five things you are grateful for. Include both ordinary and significant items, for example a good conversation, clean water, finishing a task, a supportive friend, a quiet moment. Keep entries specific and fresh. Classic trials found gains in mood, energy, sleep quality, and health behaviors during the practice period. ([Greater Good](#))

**Gratitude letters and visits.** Write a short letter to someone who helped you and, when possible, read it to them. Many participants report strong increases in positive emotion and connection following a letter or visit. This exercise appears in multiple positive psychology trials. ([Greater Good](#))

**Three good things.** Each evening, write three things that went well and why. This pairs gratitude with causal reasoning, which helps people notice contributing factors and reinforce helpful habits. Grateful reappraisal. When revisiting a difficult event, ask what gifts, growth, or supports were present despite the pain. This is not denial. It is a search for redemptive meaning that often coexists with sadness.

**Savor and say it.** When something good happens, pause and name it out loud or in writing to the person involved. Gratitude that is expressed strengthens relationships more than gratitude that is only felt.

**Gratitude before sleep.** Keep a notepad by the bed. List a few good things from the day and one person who helped you. This can reduce negative pre-sleep thoughts and support better sleep. ([PubMed](#))

**Habits that make gratitude easier.** Reduce multitasking during conversations, keep a running list of people to thank, and set small reminders on a calendar. Treat the practice like brushing teeth, brief and regular.

# Gratitude in Times of Suffering

Gratitude is often hardest when it is most needed. The practice can be adjusted for hard seasons.

- **Shrink the frame.** Look for a single good in a single hour.
- **Name the helpers.** List the people and supports that are present, however small.
- **Pair with lament.** Write two lines of honest sorrow and two lines of thanks.
- **Borrow others' eyes.** Ask a friend what good they see that you may be missing.
- **Use faith resources if relevant.** Many traditions supply prayers and readings that combine lament and gratitude.

Research on veterans and clinical populations suggests that gratitude can coexist with symptoms and may protect against later depression and suicidal ideation. Supportive relationships are often the bridge. ([PMC](#))

## Coaching and Community Applications

### For coaches and counselors.

- Start with a **baseline**. Invite a one-to-ten rating for current gratitude and two sentences that explain the number.
- Prescribe one **practice** for three to six weeks, for example three good things, letters, or bedtime gratitude.
- Pair gratitude with **values and goals**. Ask which values today's blessings point to and what action fits those values.
- Review **weekly**. Celebrate specific expressions of thanks, not only internal feelings.
- Anticipate **barriers**. Plan alternatives for travel days and high stress weeks.

### For teams and workplaces.

- Keep gratitude **personal and specific** rather than programmatic.
- Use short **thank-you notes**, quick hallway acknowledgments, and small acts of timely help.
- Invite peers to appreciate peers. People want thanks from colleagues as well as leaders.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all ceremonies. Many people prefer private thanks to public praise.

## **For congregations and schools.**

- Set seasonal rhythms for gratitude, for example a quarterly letter night or testimony of thanks.
- Combine gratitude with **service**, such as writing notes to volunteers and local partners.
- Teach **lament and thanks together**, so people learn that gratitude does not silence sorrow.

## **Conclusion**

Gratitude is a practical capacity that improves how people see, feel, and connect. It amplifies what is good, rescues attention from negativity, and strengthens bonds with helpers. The evidence suggests meaningful benefits for mood, sleep, resilience, and health, with emerging signs of longevity effects in older adults. Start small and steady. Count blessings a few times each week, write a letter of thanks, speak gratitude aloud, and keep a brief list at bedtime. Consistent practice helps gratitude become part of how a life is lived. ([Greater Good](#), [PubMed](#), [PMC](#))

## **Quick Reference Guide to Terms**

### **Gratitude, two-step definition**

Affirm the good, then recognize its sources, often other people and, for many, God.

### **GQ-6**

A six item self-report measure of dispositional gratitude. Useful facets include frequency, intensity, span, and density. ([ppc.sas.upenn.edu](http://ppc.sas.upenn.edu))

### **Counting blessings**

A journaling practice that lists good things on a regular schedule. Linked to gains in mood, sleep, and health behaviors in randomized trials. (Greater Good)

### **Gratitude letters and visits**

Writing and delivering thanks to a benefactor. Often produces strong increases in positive emotion and connection. (Greater Good)

### **Grateful reappraisal**

A reflective practice that looks for gifts and supports present within a difficult event, without denying pain.

### **ARC model**

Amplify, Rescue, Connect. A summary of how gratitude works through attention and relationship pathways. (Greater Good, PubMed)

### **Longevity signal**

Association of higher gratitude with lower all-cause and cardiovascular mortality among older U.S. women in the Nurses' Health Study. Replication is needed. (PMC)

### **Veterans evidence**

Higher gratitude predicts lower incidence of major depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, and suicidal ideation in a population based veteran cohort. (PMC)

# Gratitude 201

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.

## Notes

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## Summary

Gratitude heals, energizes, and changes lives, yet most people discover that it does not become a habit by accident. This chapter moves from the benefits of grateful living to practical skill. It begins with why grateful awareness is hard to sustain, then offers a set of field-tested practices you can put to work immediately. These include a warm-up exercise that targets a single concrete gift, a grateful way to process painful memories, gratitude letters and visits, a virtual visit when a helper is no longer available, and a grateful place or space that engages the body and not only the mind. Guidance is given on making journaling fit real schedules, avoiding checklist gratitude, and shifting from striving to receiving. The aim is a steady lifestyle of noticing gifts, recognizing givers, and expressing thanks in ways that transform relationships and restore hope.

## What This Chapter Covers

- From Benefits to Practice
- Why Gratitude Is Hard and How to Make It Stick
- Warm-Up: One Concrete Gift
- Grateful Processing of Painful Memories
- Gratitude Letters and Visits
- The Virtual Gratitude Visit
- A Grateful Place or Space
- Journaling That Works in Real Life
- Prospective Gratitude in Hard Seasons
- Implementation for Coaches, Churches, and Teams
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## From Benefits to Practice

Across emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual domains, living gratefully relates to better outcomes. Counting blessings in randomized trials increases positive emotion and life satisfaction during the practice period, with spillover benefits for sleep and health behaviors. ([PubMed](#), [Greater Good](#)) Observational and experimental work links gratitude to better sleep partly through fewer negative thoughts at bedtime. ([PubMed](#)) Large cohort data among older U.S. women suggest that higher grateful affect is associated with lower all-cause and cardiovascular mortality over follow-up. Replication is needed, but the signal is notable. ([PMC](#))

The question for daily life is simple. How can a person get more of this good or, put differently, how can a person let gratitude get more of them. The sections that follow translate that goal into specific, doable practices.

## Why Gratitude Is Hard and How to Make It Stick

Grateful perception does not always come easily. People forget to notice, they adapt to good things, and they postpone expressing thanks. Building a habit requires reflection, remembering, and attention, which can be trained. Small, regular actions are more effective than intense bursts that fade. The mindset shift that helps most is to treat gratitude as received, not achieved. Focus on gifts already present rather than performance about how grateful you are. This reduces pressure and keeps the practice other-focused instead of self-evaluative.

### Guidelines for stickiness

- Tie practices to existing routines rather than adding long, new tasks.
- Prefer short, repeatable actions over ideal plans that are hard to sustain.
- Keep the focus on naming gifts and givers. Avoid turning gratitude into a scorecard about your progress.

## Warm-Up: One Concrete Gift

Begin by recalling a single, recent benefit you received from a specific person. Name the person, describe what they did, acknowledge that they did not have to do it, and note how it helped you practically and emotionally. This warm-up flexes the essential muscles of grateful thinking: acknowledge, recognize, remember, and express. Use it anytime the practice feels abstract.

### Prompt to use today

- I felt really glad when \_\_\_\_.
- The person was \_\_\_\_.
- They went out of their way to \_\_\_\_.
- They could have done something else, but they chose to \_\_\_\_.
- The concrete effects were \_\_\_\_ and I felt \_\_\_\_.

# Grateful Processing of Painful Memories

Gratitude is not only for easy days. It can also help people process troubling events without denying pain. A randomized controlled trial asked participants to bring to mind an open, unpleasant memory and then write in one of three ways: about the event emotionally, about neutral topics, or about possible benefits for which they could now be grateful. Those who engaged in grateful processing reported more closure, a more positive appraisal of the memory, and fewer intrusive thoughts immediately and one week later. ([Documents Delivered](#), [CiNii Research](#))

## How to try it

- Name an open memory that still intrudes.
- Write briefly about genuine benefits or growth that emerged, help received, strengths developed, perspective gained.
- Do not deny pain. Hold both truths at once.
- Revisit after one week to note changes in closure, appraisal, and intrusions.

## Gratitude Letters and Visits

Choose someone who helped you in a meaningful way and whom you have not properly thanked. Write a one-page letter that is concrete about what they did and how it affected you. When possible, deliver the letter in person and read it aloud. In positive psychology programs, this exercise is widely used because it reliably increases positive emotion and connection for both giver and receiver. ([The Marginalian](#), [ThinkND](#))

### Structure to follow

- “Dear \_\_\_, here is what you did, here is when and where, here is the difference it made.”
- Keep it specific, personal, and sincere.
- If an in-person visit is not possible, schedule a video call, read the letter, then send it.

## The Virtual Gratitude Visit

Sometimes the person you want to thank has died or is unavailable. A practical adaptation uses two chairs in a quiet space. Sit facing an empty chair and read your letter aloud as if the person were present. Then switch chairs and answer as you imagine they would respond. This open-chair method has been described as a way to extend the classic gratitude visit when direct contact is impossible. ([Psychology Today](#))

### Steps

- Arrange two chairs to reflect the relationship.
- Read the letter to the empty chair.
- Switch seats and respond as the recipient might respond.
- Return to your seat for closing words of thanks.
- Write a brief reflection about what stood out and what you will remember.

## A Grateful Place or Space

Many gratitude practices are cognitive. Adding a physical setting can deepen the experience. Identify a place that reliably brings calm and perspective, for example a quiet beach, a local trail, a chapel, or a sunlit chair by a window. Use that place to walk, breathe, and name gifts out loud or in writing. The point is to engage the whole person, body and mind, so that grateful perception becomes easier to access even in loss and grief.

### Ideas

- A weekly gratitude walk that pairs movement with noticing.
- A short ritual of thanks in the same spot at the end of each day.
- A seasonal return to a meaningful place to renew perspective.

## Journaling That Works in Real Life

Gratitude journaling is the most common research practice, but there is no single right format. The key is fit. Trial work has used weekly or daily lists of blessings, and both schedules can help when the entries are specific and fresh. ([PubMed](#)) You do not need a special app or a perfect notebook. You need a pattern you can maintain.

### Make journaling effective

- Keep entries concrete. Replace “family” with “my sister’s text that made me laugh.”
- Vary the categories, people, places, and provisions so attention stays alive.
- If daily lists begin to feel mechanical, switch to three times per week.
- Beware checklist gratitude that turns thanks into performance. Treat it as receiving, not achieving.

### Sleep support

If racing thoughts make it hard to fall asleep, try a brief list at the bedside. Part of gratitude’s benefit for sleep is fewer negative pre-sleep thoughts and more positive ones. ([PubMed](#))

## Prospective Gratitude in Hard Seasons

When present circumstances are heavy, it may be difficult to feel grateful now. One helpful tool is to imagine the gratitude you will feel when a season ends. Picture returning to ordinary freedoms, seeing friends, gathering for worship, or resuming routines. Name those future gifts and thank God or thank others in advance. This practice does not deny pain. It restores hope by anticipating goods that are not yet present.

### Prompt

- Six months from now, I will be grateful for \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_.
- Today, one step toward that future gratitude is \_\_\_\_\_.

# Implementation for Coaches, Churches, and Teams

## For coaches and counselors

- Start with a baseline. Ask for a one-to-ten rating for current gratitude and two sentences that explain the number.
- Prescribe one practice for three to six weeks, for example grateful processing of a memory or bedtime journaling.
- Pair gratitude with values and goals. Ask which values today's blessings point to and what action fits those values.
- Review weekly. Celebrate specific expressions of thanks, not only internal feelings.
- Plan for obstacles such as travel or stress. Provide five-minute options.

## For churches and ministries

- Teach that gratitude can coexist with lament.
- Create quarterly rhythms, such as a gratitude letter night or a testimony of thanks.
- Use small groups to share warm-up exercises and to practice visits or virtual visits with care.
- Encourage a grateful place practice, for example a monthly prayer walk that names gifts present in the community.

## For teams and workplaces

- Keep appreciation personal and specific.
- Use weekly micro-rituals, brief thank-you notes, quick hallway acknowledgments, and timely help.
- Invite peers to appreciate peers rather than relying only on top-down recognition.
- Track simple indicators such as faster thanks after handoffs and fewer unresolved frictions.

## Conclusion

Gratitude is not a switch that can be forced on by willpower. It is a way of seeing that grows through simple, steady practices. Warm up by naming one concrete gift. When old wounds intrude, process them gratefully to find closure without denial. Write and deliver a gratitude letter, or try a virtual visit when needed. Return to a grateful place to involve the whole person. Journal in a way that fits real life, and remember that gratitude is received more than achieved. Over time these patterns make grateful living feel natural, and the benefits that began as research findings become personal experience.



# Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## **Grateful processing**

A writing method that reflects on benefits found in a difficult event. Shown in a randomized trial to increase closure, improve appraisal, and reduce intrusive thoughts compared with emotional writing or neutral writing. ([Documents Delivered](#))

## **Gratitude letter and visit**

A one-page, concrete letter of thanks delivered and read aloud to the benefactor. Commonly used in positive psychology programs to increase well-being and connection. ([The Marginalian](#))

## **Virtual gratitude visit**

An adaptation of the letter and visit when the person is unavailable, using an empty-chair dialogue to express thanks and imagine a response. ([Psychology Today](#))

## **Counting blessings**

Brief lists of recent gifts written daily or weekly. Supported by randomized trials showing gains in positive affect and life satisfaction, with spillover into sleep and health behaviors. ([PubMed](#))

## **Gratitude and sleep**

Associations and mechanisms linking higher gratitude to better sleep quality and duration through reduced negative pre-sleep cognitions. ([PubMed](#))

## **Gratitude and longevity**

Cohort evidence among older U.S. women indicating lower mortality among those with higher grateful affect, with calls for replication. ([PMC](#))

## **Prospective gratitude**

A hope-building practice that imagines future thanks for goods not yet present, used when current circumstances feel heavy.

# Connection Matters 101: Overview of Attachment Theory and Relationships

Tim Clinton, Ed.D., and Zach Clinton, Ph.D.

## Notes

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## Summary

Close social connectedness is not a luxury. It is a condition under which human flourishing becomes possible. Flourishing can be pursued through many means, yet it cannot be fully realized apart from secure, dependable connection with others. Scripture frames this reality, “It is not good for the man to be alone,” and points toward abundant life that restores ruptured bonds. Attachment theory explains why connection matters so much, how early patterns of safety and responsiveness shape internal working models of self and others, and why those patterns surface again in adult relationships and spiritual life. This chapter introduces the five hallmarks of an attachment bond, the core questions our hearts keep asking in every relationship, the four attachment styles, and practical ways pastors, coaches, and teams can help people move toward security through safe presence, attunement, and repeatable practices.

## What This Chapter Covers

- Connection and Flourishing
- Biblical Foundations for Relationship
- Attachment Theory: Five Dynamics of an Attachment Bond
- Internal Working Models: Core Questions We Keep Asking
- Attachment Styles in Everyday Life
- Attachment and Spiritual Life
- Assessment and Reflection
- Coaching Applications and Skills
- Building Secure Bonds in Families, Teams, and Churches
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms

## Connection and Flourishing

Flourishing names a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. Across research programs on well-being, one conclusion repeats: people may improve parts of life in isolation, yet enduring flourishing requires close social connectedness, the felt security that others are present, responsive, and for us. Emerging adulthood research highlights how connection is decisive as people navigate identity, work, and love. While pathways to flourishing are many, secure attachment acts like a keystone that supports the arch. See also Arnett's account of modern connection challenges and development in the late teens and twenties. ([Oxford Academic](#))

Disconnection weakens resilience. Digital life can amplify contact while thinning embodied presence. When pace, pressure, and pain isolate people from steady bonds, anxiety and loneliness rise. Restoring connection becomes both a pastoral priority and a coaching strategy because security with others changes how people regulate emotion, pursue goals, and interpret stress.

## Biblical Foundations for Relationship

Relationship is woven into creation. God is social in orientation, reflected in the Trinity and in the design of human community. Scripture's first "not good" announces that isolation contradicts design: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Connection is further tied to abundance in Jesus' words about life to the full. These anchors frame why attachment matters, not only for families and friendships, but also for a life with God marked by peace, unity, and wholeness, the Old Testament vision of shalom. For verses in context, see Genesis 2:18 and John 10:10. ([Bible Gateway](#))

Shalom is relational as well as personal, a harmony that runs vertically with God and horizontally with others. Sin distorts this harmony by rupturing bonds. Redeeming work restores relationship, which is why practices that re-knit connection are central to flourishing.

## Attachment Theory: Five Dynamics of an Attachment Bond

Attachment theory began as a theory of relationship and emotion that describes how humans seek proximity to trusted figures for safety and how those patterns become internalized. Classic formulations by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth identified reliable signals of an attachment relationship. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#), [APA Dictionary](#))

### Five dynamics mark an attachment bond:

1. **Seeking closeness under threat.** In stress, we move toward our attachment figure.
2. **Safe haven.** Proximity to that person calms body and mind.
3. **Secure base for exploration.** Felt safety frees us to explore the world.
4. **Separation protest.** Distance from an attachment figure increases distress, especially under strain.
5. **Loss and grief.** Losing that figure evokes deep grief, which testifies to love and connection.

Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" observations made these dynamics visible: brief separations and reunions reveal whether a child uses the caregiver as safe haven and secure base, a pattern that predicts later relational styles. ([APA Dictionary](#))

## Internal Working Models: Core Questions We Keep Asking

From repeated experiences with caregivers, people form internal working models that answer two sets of questions: What do I believe about myself, and what do I believe about others? In everyday language, the heart keeps asking: Are you there for me? Can I count on you? Do you care about me? Am I worthy of love and protection? What must I do to get your attention? These answers shape how we give and receive love, how we do emotion, and how we respond when relationships strain.

Because patterns are learned over time, people read not only today's response but also the history of responses. Consistency builds trust; inconsistency breeds hypervigilance or withdrawal. The good news is that internal working models can change through new, reliable experiences of safety and care.

## Attachment Styles in Everyday Life

Attachment styles summarize typical answers to the self-other questions. Three styles reflect insecurity; one reflects security. These are tendencies, not destinies. They can shift as people encounter steady, attuned relationships across the lifespan.

**Avoidant (insecure).** Overinflated view of self, low trust in others. Caregivers who were emotionally unavailable or dismissive teach the child to turn away from closeness and self-soothe alone. As adults, avoidant individuals often look competent and independent, yet under stress they distance, withhold inner life, and struggle with dependence or commitment. Spiritually, they may affirm truths but find it hard to rely on God when life breaks. Loving an avoidant person is hard because it is difficult to get in; being avoidant is hard because it is difficult to let others in.

**Ambivalent, sometimes called anxious (insecure).** Low view of self, inflamed view of others. Inconsistent caregiving teaches that love must be earned and that security is always in jeopardy. Adults may perform tirelessly, measure worth by others' reactions, cling, and criticize in the same breath. Life starts to feel like a stage where one is only as good as the last performance. Spiritually, the person may imagine God's affection rises and falls with today's religious output.

**Disorganized (insecure).** Low view of self and others. The source of comfort was also the source of pain, often in contexts of threat or trauma. Approach and avoidance collide, creating unpredictability in closeness. Adults may crave intimacy then sabotage it, not because they do not care, but because closeness triggers danger signals. A painful paradox follows: the very thing longed for becomes the thing feared.

**Secure.** Healthy view of self and others: "I am worthy of love and capable of getting the love I need; others are willing and able to love me." Security does not erase anger or anxiety, yet secure people can name feelings, ask for help, offer nonsexual comfort, and balance closeness with appropriate distance. Security supports resilience, the ability to adapt constructively in adversity.

Ainsworth's experimental work demonstrated these patterns in the Strange Situation, where secure infants protested separation, welcomed reunion, and used the caregiver as a base for exploration; avoidant infants downplayed distress; ambivalent infants clung and protested intensely; later work identified disorganized responses. ([APA Dictionary](#)) Foundational sources include Bowlby's Attachment and Loss and Ainsworth's Patterns of Attachment. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment, mindsplain.com](#))

## Attachment and Spiritual Life

Relational learning does not stay in one lane. As people internalize what key caregivers are like, those expectations can shape how they imagine God: consistently present and attentive, distant and unresponsive, fiercely demanding, or unpredictable. Theologies matter, yet lived images of God often begin in the nursery. Moving toward security therefore includes experiences of dependable human presence and an ever-deepening encounter with God's steadfast love that answers the heart's core questions with yes.

The biblical promise of abundant life invites people to recover trust where it has eroded. Abundance is not a promise of ease; it is the assurance of presence and provision that restores courage to love. For the verse context, see John 10. ([Bible Gateway](#))

## Assessment and Reflection

Psychoeducation helps people name their style and observe patterns without shame. Useful self-reflection prompts include: What do I do when I feel threatened or unseen. What helps me calm down. How do I pursue closeness, and what makes me pull away. What do I believe I must do to be loved. Mapping a genogram can reveal intergenerational scripts about safety and love. Journaling can give language to attachment experiences when trust is still forming. Above all, people change through new experiences that rewrite the model, which is why safe, attuned relationships are interventions, not only insights.

## Coaching Applications and Skills

Create an environment where people feel safe. Safety precedes strategy. In practice this means predictable sessions, confidentiality, attuned listening, and warmth that does not collapse boundaries. Presence is more important than perspective. Advice lands only after a person's nervous system has returned to safety in relationship.

Helpful skills include:

- **Attunement.** Track emotion and pace, reflect accurately, and validate signals of threat or longing.
- **Language of needs.** Normalize asking for help and naming comfort needs.
- **Micro-repairs.** When misattunements occur, model quick, sincere repair.
- **Homework that builds safety.** Encourage nonsexual comforting touch for spouses, five-minute check-ins that ask "Are you there for me," and rituals of welcome and reunion.

- **Group experiences.** Dan Siegel’s interpersonal neurobiology highlights how safe, responsive relationships promote positive neuroplasticity. Group environments that reliably model secure attachment can literally rewire expectancies over time. ([Dr. Dan Siegel](#))

When clients feel overwhelmed, shrink the task. One conversation, one request, one repair. When clients default to performance, reframe worth as received, not achieved. When clients fear dependence, frame help-seeking as courageous connection rather than weakness.

## **Building Secure Bonds in Families, Teams, and Churches**

Families can practice predictable presence: warm greetings, intentional partings and reunions, and small rituals of protection during stress. Parents can explicitly decouple love from performance by praising effort and character more than outcomes. Churches can build care systems that make safe haven real: trained lay listeners, small groups that honor confidentiality, and leaders who model proximity without control. Coaches and ministry staff can screen for acute needs and route people to appropriate care while ensuring that no one waits alone.

Because unhealthy environments can feel familiar, people may sabotage healthy closeness. Anticipating this paradox helps teams respond with calm, consistent invitations rather than withdrawal or overcontrol. Over time, predictability and gentle boundaries teach bodies that closeness can be safe.

## **Conclusion**

Get relationships right and life is blessed; get them wrong and life goes sideways. Connection is the context in which people learn to regulate emotion, risk exploration, and recover from hurt. Attachment theory offers a practical map: seek safe haven, use security as a base for growth, protest separations wisely, grieve real losses, and return again to trustworthy presence. Flourishing grows where connection is steady. Build environments where people know, in their bones, that someone is there for them. Presence often heals what perspective alone cannot.

## **Quick Reference Guide to Terms**

### **Attachment**

A theory and body of research describing bonds that provide safety under stress and a base for exploration. Foundational sources include Bowlby’s Attachment and Loss and Ainsworth’s Patterns of Attachment. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#), [mindsplain.com](#))

### **Strange Situation**

A structured observation with brief separations and reunions that reveals whether the child uses the caregiver as safe haven and secure base. ([APA Dictionary](#))

### **Internal Working Model**

Learned expectations about self and others that guide how people seek help, offer comfort, and interpret relationship signals. These models can change through new, reliable experiences of care.

## **Five Dynamics of an Attachment Bond**

Proximity seeking under threat, safe haven, secure base for exploration, separation protest, and grief after loss.

## **Attachment Styles**

Avoidant, ambivalent, disorganized, and secure. Styles are tendencies shaped by history and can shift with steady, attuned relationships.

## **Shalom**

A biblical vision of peace, unity, and wholeness that is vertical with God and horizontal with others.

Abundant Life

Jesus' promise of life to the full, which includes restored relationship with God and others. For the verse text, see John 10:10.

## **Emerging Adulthood**

A developmental stage from the late teens through the twenties characterized by exploration and identity work, where secure connection remains central to well-being. ([Oxford Academic](#))

## **Interpersonal Neurobiology**

A framework emphasizing how relationships shape the brain and mind, supporting change through safe, responsive connection. ([Dr. Dan Siegel](#))

# Connection Matters 102: Faith, God Attachment, and Human Flourishing

## Notes

Flourish means living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. Relationship with God supports that state by providing a safe haven in trouble and a secure base for purpose and service. Attachment science clarifies why this matters. The same dynamics that help a child settle with a trusted caregiver can shape how a person approaches God, seeks help, and returns to courageous action. This chapter introduces the six domains of flourishing, shows how relationship with God strengthens them, explains the five dynamics of an attachment bond with clear, practical language, connects common attachment styles to lived views of God, and offers simple practices of remembrance and repetition that grow secure God attachment in daily life.

- Flourishing and Why Relationship with God Matters
- God's Design for Relationship
- Five Dynamics of an Attachment Bond
- How Attachment Styles Can Shape Views of God
- What Secure Attachment to God Looks Like
- Practices That Build Secure God attachment
- Coaching Applications and Conversation Starters
- Conclusion
- Quick Reference Guide to Terms



## Flourishing and Why Relationship with God Matters

Flourishing is a multi-domain reality that includes happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social connectedness, and financial and material stability. Relationship with God strengthens each domain. Presence calms anxiety, purpose steadies work and service, character is formed in response to grace, and connection with others is nurtured by a shared story and practices. Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks of eternity set in the human heart. John 10:10 speaks of life to the full. Together they frame why Godward connection is not optional for many people, it is part of how life holds together.

### God's Design for Relationship

Scripture places relationship at the center of reality. "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). God is described as a refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1). When people know that God is near and for them, they meet hardship with steadier emotion and return to tasks with courage. Covenant images of faithful presence and mutual care become patterns for friendship, family, and church life. Abundant life in the New Testament is not the absence of difficulty; it is the assurance of presence within it.

## Five Dynamics of an Attachment Bond

Attachment describes how people seek safety with trusted figures and then launch back into life. These five dynamics appear early in life and continue to shape adult relationships and spiritual life.

### 1. Proximity seeking during a perceived threat

When danger rises or stress peaks, people move toward an attachment figure. Children reach for a caregiver. Adults call a friend, a spouse, a mentor, or a pastor. In life with God, proximity seeking looks like immediate prayer, a psalm spoken aloud, or turning attention toward God's presence. The movement is toward relationship first, problem solving second.

### 2. Safe haven

Once connection is restored, bodies settle. Heart rate slows, muscles release, and thinking clears. With a caregiver, this may be a calming voice or steady eye contact. With God, safe haven is the lived experience that help is near and that refuge is real. Calm can come before answers.

### 3. Secure base for exploration

Felt safety frees curiosity. After settling, a child resumes play and learning. Adults return to tasks, risks, and callings with steadier focus. In spiritual life, confidence that God is with you becomes the base from which you work, serve, and attempt hard things. The secure base is not escape from challenge, it is courage in challenge.

### 4. Reaction to separation

When relational distance grows, people protest. The protest can look like sadness, anxiety, or anger. Children cry out. Adults ruminate, go quiet, or pursue reassurance. Naming protest is healthy. It signals that connection matters. Spiritually, honest lament keeps relationship open during seasons when God feels far.

## 5. **Loss of the attachment figure and grief**

Deep grief follows deep bonds. Mourning is not a failure of faith or strength. It is evidence that love was present. Healthy communities sit with grief, remember the person, and acknowledge that the ache reflects the good of the relationship. In prayer, grief is carried to God as part of honest connection rather than hidden in isolation.

### **Practice: map the five dynamics**

- Recall a recent stressful moment. Note how you sought proximity, what felt like safe haven, and when you were ready to reengage.
- Identify your typical reaction to separation. Prepare one sentence you can use next time to name the need for connection without blame.
- In seasons of loss, schedule small rhythms of remembrance and support so grief is held in relationship.

## **How Attachment Styles Can Shape Views of God**

Early caregiving patterns shape internal working models of self and others. Those models often carry into adult relationships and can color how people imagine God. Two research patterns are useful. Correspondence means God images frequently align with a person's attachment history. Compensation means people with insecure histories may turn to God as a new attachment figure who supplies the security they lacked.

- **Avoidant tendencies.** Self-reliance becomes a shield. God may be imagined as distant or unresponsive. The invitation is to practice small, honest dependence.
- **Ambivalent, often called anxious.** Inconsistency breeds hypervigilance. God may be imagined as hard to please. The invitation is to rehearse promises of steady care and to pace requests for reassurance.
- **Disorganized.** Comfort and threat were intertwined, so pursuit and flight alternate. The invitation is gradual, boundaried closeness with God and with safe people.
- **Secure.** Healthy expectations of self and others, capacity to seek help, offer comfort, and trust God's steady care. Security is not the absence of strong emotion. It is the ability to bring strong emotion into relationship and recover well.

These are tendencies, not destinies. Internal models change through new, reliable experiences of care, including a deepening walk with God and trustworthy human relationships.

### **What Secure Attachment to God Looks Like**

A secure posture holds two convictions. God is near. God is for me. In hardship, presence comes before explanation. Isaiah 43:2 says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." People who grow in secure attachment often describe movement from concept to encounter, language like Job 42:5, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." Across seasons, the experience is refuge and strength rather than instant rescue from every trial.

# Practices That Build Secure God Attachment

Security grows through remembrance and repetition. The following practices are simple and steady.

## **Scripture meditation**

Choose short passages that anchor presence and help. Examples include Psalm 46, Isaiah 43, John 10. Read slowly, write one line, and carry it into the day. Ecclesiastes 3:11 reminds readers that longing for transcendence is planted in the heart.

## **Prayer as honest conversation**

Practice brief, unedited prayer. Name fear, protest, and thanks. End with a simple request for help. Proximity seeking becomes a reflex when prayer is frequent and honest.

## **Solitude and silence**

Pull back from noise to notice God's nearness. Five to ten quiet minutes each day can reset the nervous system and make room for awareness.

## **Training, not trying**

Treat spiritual routines as training, not performance. "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Timothy 4:7-8). Habitual practices build a reservoir of trust before the next storm.

## **Remember and repeat**

Use three daily touchpoints. A morning psalm, a midday breath prayer, an evening review that names where help was evident. Small, repeated moments teach the body that closeness is available.

## **Community rhythms**

Join a small group or prayer partnership that practices confidentiality, presence, and quick repair after misattunements. New expectations are learned in real relationships.

# Coaching Applications and Conversation Starters

**Goal:** help people experience God as safe, present, and trustworthy, especially under stress.

## **Set the environment**

Predictable sessions, clear boundaries, warm attention, and confidentiality signal safety. Presence precedes strategy.

## **Questions that open the door**

- In a hard moment this week, what do you imagine God's response to you was
- Who first shaped your image of what God is like, and how does that still affect you
- When you feel overwhelmed, what helps you sense nearness

## **Simple tools**

- Pray briefly in the room when appropriate.
- Assign a presence passage for the week and ask for two sentences on how it met a current fear.
- Use the five dynamics map. Ask which dynamic needs practice now.
- Plan small experiments, for example one honest prayer when anxiety rises, or a single line of lament paired with a single line of thanks.

## **Pathways to support**

Build a short list of mentors, small groups, and local clinicians for warm handoffs when needs are acute. Ensure no one waits alone.

# **Conclusion**

Connection with God is not an accessory to flourishing. It is a core context in which flourishing becomes possible. Attachment theory offers a practical map. People seek a safe haven in trouble, launch from a secure base into calling, protest separation, and grieve losses in companionship with God. Early patterns matter, yet they are not the end of the story. Through remembrance and repetition, people can learn to experience God as near and for them. The result is resilience that holds in fire and flood, and a life that gradually reflects the peace and courage of those who know they are not alone.

# **Quick Reference Guide to Terms**

## **Flourish**

Living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well. Includes happiness and life satisfaction, health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close relationships, and the material stability that sustains them.

## **Attachment bond, five dynamics**

Proximity seeking during threat, safe haven, secure base for exploration, reaction to separation, loss and grief.

## **Internal working models**

Expectations about self and others formed in early caregiving that guide how a person seeks help and offers comfort. These can change through new, reliable experiences of care.

## **Attachment styles**

Avoidant, ambivalent, disorganized, and secure. Styles are tendencies that can shift with steady, attuned relationships.

## **Correspondence and compensation**

Two observed patterns in God attachment. God images often align with prior attachment, and many people with insecure histories turn to God as a new source of security.

**Secure attachment to God**

A lived confidence that God is present, trustworthy, and for us. Expressed in texts such as Psalm 46:1, Isaiah 43:2, John 10:10, and in testimonies like Job 42:5.

**Remembrance and repetition**

Small, steady rhythms that rehearse who God is and keep proximity seeking active, for example a morning verse, a midday breath prayer, and an evening review.



# **HUMAN FLOURISHING COACHING 101**

## **Closing Reflections: From Foundation to Next Steps**

You've reached the end of HFC 101: Introduction to Human Flourishing. Along the way, you've taken in a rich blend of theology, research, and practice, all focused on one goal: helping people grow into lives that are whole, meaningful, and aligned with God's design.

You've learned how to define flourishing in practical terms, how to spot the key domains that shape it, and how to guide others in strengthening those areas over time. You've seen how core pathways—family, education, work, and community—interact with faith, habit, and identity. And you've come to understand holiness not as an extra piece, but as the center that holds it all together.

This course gave you a clear starting point. A shared language. A set of tools. And a vision that's both biblical and actionable. Whether you're coaching one person or leading in a broader setting, you now have a stronger foundation for helping others grow well—and stay grounded while they do. But this is only the beginning.

The 200-level series will take you deeper into the challenges that often hold people back and the practices that help them move forward with grace and strength. You'll explore how sin and shame impact the way people see themselves. You'll learn how brain health and neuroscience connect with spiritual life. You'll see what builds real resilience in the face of adversity, and how forgiveness, humility, and spiritual habits create space for lasting change.

These next sessions are designed to sharpen your insight, deepen your compassion, and expand your coaching toolkit. You'll move from general understanding to more specific, powerful strategies for walking with people through both growth and struggle.

So, take a moment to look back and recognize the work you've done. You've invested time, attention, and care. You've built a foundation rooted in truth. And you're already better equipped to help others live more fully.

Now it's time to keep going. We're excited for what's ahead—and honored to walk with you into HFC 201. Let's get ready!

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