The Power, (Problem), and Potential of Prayer

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THE POWER, (PROBLEM), AND POTENTIAL OF PRAYER

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PTHM 465 Integration Seminar
Professor Kathleen Cahalan

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The Power, (Problem), and Potential of Prayer

Me: *How do I say this again without sounding crazy?*
My sister: *You’re not crazy.*
Me: *But I feel crazy [pause]...maybe I’m not crazy, I’m just broken.*
My sister: *You’re not broken.*
Me: *But I feel broken. Why am not I getting better?*

This was a common conversation I would have for the next few months. I had this short exchange with my sister just a few weeks after my earlier-than-expected return from my semester living and studying abroad in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, mid-May 2016. For nearly six weeks, I’d been debilitated by what had become my constant companions: anxiety and shame spirals that led me to believe nothing I was doing was going to be good enough and I was going to fail. My depression only seemed to be getting worse by the hour.

At the onset of my self-diagnosed symptoms, which began in early April 2016, I sought out help from my exchange university’s counseling department, which was a freely offered service to international students. Beginning with hope of improvement, they chalked up how I was feeling to poor time management. I only lasted a few sessions before stopping. The beginning of May, I tried again, with a different counselor, hoping for a different and better response. She made it clear that what I was experiencing was just a desperate case of homesickness and reassured me that upon my return back home to Minnesota and my family I would feel better. While this in part felt true, it wasn’t fully helpful either. I felt like I was not only physically in crisis, but also in a spiritual one, so I left feeling unheard, unseen, and unbelieved.

In between my less-than-helpful counseling and therapy sessions while I was abroad, I turned to what I’d been taught as a way to find comfort and solace in the midst of anxious and depressive thoughts and feelings: I started to pray, really intentionally and intensely for the first time in my life. The rosary became an additional companion to my shame, anxiety, and depression;
I often wrapped the beads around my hand before attempting to sleep as if the prayer would become more powerful the closer the beads were to my heart. The intercession of Mary—and her healing—was something I sought desperately. While I knew, rationally, I wouldn’t just wake up one morning and feel “normal” and “happy” again, that is what I prayed for. A contemporary Christian song from a popular artist, sent by my sister, was in my consistent playlist rotation. Quoting Luke 12:22-32, the lyrics began:

You can’t add a single day by worrying, you’ll worry your life away... A few lyrics later, the chorus declared: if He can hold the world, he can hold this moment.

The obvious message in this song: don’t worry. Don’t be anxious. Pray, hard, and God will take care of it. So that’s what I did. Many hours, days, and weeks of prayer later, though, nothing seemed to be working. I tried to not worry. I tried to enjoy myself. I tried to be social and spend time with my friends. I tried to take in the wonders of the perfect stretch of beach and the Indian Ocean that was my backyard. I tried to absorb the infectious joy of the kids at the township school in which I volunteered twice a week. I tried meditation. I tried eating certain food and tried to stay hydrated. I tried de-catastrophizing my thoughts. I tried talking to my parents, my sister, my friends and professors from home. I tried going to the Catholic Church that was just around the corner from our flats for daily Mass. I tried unplugging. I tried and tried and tried.

The more I tried, the more I shrank inside, longing to become invisible. I wanted others to see that this was a real problem—and even though it was happening inside of my head—it wasn’t invisible. My anxiety and depression consumed me the longer it progressed, rendering my self-talk toxic and degrading. The lingering thought was that I somehow shouldn’t worry because God was supposed to handle it. This became my mantra.
There I was, caught up in the cycle of shame: seeking help, leaving feeling misunderstood, unbelieved and unseen, believing I was broken and somehow unworthy of healing because I was not getting better, which led to me praying harder, and trying to believe, somehow, that *everything happens for a reason*. I couldn’t understand the logic behind that idea, especially if God was supposed to be, in addition to being all-powerful, all-loving and all-compassionate. Why was this horrible thing happening to me, if there was supposed to be meaning in it?

The following are brief insights into my journal during this time:

- April 28, “God, help me push out my anxiety and worry that I might better be able to embrace your amazing creation.”
- May 20, “Praying, praying, praying,” the only words in my entry from that day.
- May 22, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.”
- June 1, “What does it mean to have faith?”
- June 2, “God does not make mistakes.”
- June 3, “God, I know you are not a magician, but allow me to see that you carry me through.”
- June 24, “I am a child of God.”
- July 26, “I still have faith that the Lord is carrying me, and that He won’t give up on me.”

I eventually started believing that God had given me this burden because I was strong enough to handle it, again reaffirming my belief and perception that prayer would ‘fix’ my problem. When I wasn’t getting better, I tried blaming God, but that made me feel even more isolated. Thus, the cycle continued.

My observations of undergraduate college students in the long, lonely, quarantined spring during March, April, and May 2020 demonstrated a similar pattern of questioning and emotional distress and desire to address struggles through the lens of faith. During Saint John’s Campus Ministry’s live-streamed student Sunday Masses, a common petition from students sending in intentions from home read, “I’d like to pray for anyone struggling with mental health during this time.” Based on the frequency of this prayer request, it seemed as though the undergraduate
students believed, like I did, that prayer was a solution to navigating and overcoming the mental health challenges that they were facing.

While the experiences of mental health challenges amongst college students are in no way restricted just to the past year, it seems as though the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened an awareness of the presence of mental health challenges (which include stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation) amongst college students. COVID-19 marks this as an important, pressing ministerial and pastoral question for now, but will be a question worth asking and pondering long after the pandemic is over.

What my story, and the other stories that will be highlighted throughout this paper illuminate is the problem at hand: the complex and nuanced symbiotic relationship between mental health and prayer. I want to assume that the relationship between mental health and prayer is universally positive. However, there seems to be a common experience that suggests this is not entirely true. Instead, there appears to be a disconnect between what one expects of God through intercessory prayer and the implications that manifest if what was expected does not happen (like how in my situation, my anxiety and depression were not going away). To think prayer can be—and is—used in a way that (even unintentionally) causes harm is distressing. There is great beauty in the mystery of life, of our relationship with God, and of prayer as it is presented in the Catholic tradition that seems to be becoming distorted and warped, somehow, and somewhere. And while I can use myself as a case-study of one to examine and prove that this distortion occurs, I recognize I am not alone in this struggle to untangle the web of things I think I’ve been taught about my relationship with God and about prayer compared to what the tradition actually says and advocates for in light of mental health challenges. Subsequent student voices that will be lifted up throughout
this paper as I dive further into this discussion are further proof of the misinterpretation that is happening.

Gaining a more theologically grounded understanding of prayer and God is important to me because it directly impacts me. In many ways, I am writing this paper for myself because these are the insights I wish I had known earlier but know (and am coming to know) now. This paper goes beyond just my experience, though. My ever-increasing self-awareness and self-growth also inform my understanding of good ministry. Having a more theologically grounded personal understanding of prayer and God will also enable me to better support the students on these campuses to whom I minister. In and out of the current global pandemic, moments of mental distress and personal faith development continue to be part of my own human growth. I write this paper with a particular eye to the current undergraduate students enrolled at the College of Saint Benedict (Bennies) and Saint John’s University (Johnnies). Because I was a person who needed support, who turned to prayer as a coping mechanism and with the hope it would make me ‘better’ only to have me feel more shameful, I strive in my ministerial growth to also support others who are navigating these journeys as well.

With this in mind, these students are likewise my main audience, as the ultimate goal of this paper is to help Saint Ben’s and Saint John’s students, Bennies and Johnnies, better understand and navigate their own experiences of mental health and to pray with emotional agility and a theology of resilience. Armed with this deeper self-understanding and theological support, I also hope students here will feel more empowered to support and accompany their peers who may also be facing their own challenges.

Looking at this paper at a whole, here is a brief roadmap of what is to come. To orient readers to the issues of mental health and distress in college students in general, I begin with an
evaluation of three social structures: generational pressure to attend college in a post-9/11 world, the reality of emerging adulthood and identity development, and the current reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. A discussion on emotional agility, scarcity, and vulnerability serves as a transition to examining this question from a theological perspective, the second main section of this paper. In this section, I claim that a misunderstanding of the divine-human relationship and of prayer is one potential source of harm for individuals in mental distress, and I outline an application of emotional agility and prayerful resilience as an alternative. My final main section is a pastoral response in light of the previous two sections.

COLLEGE STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: MOVING FROM EMOTIONAL RIGIDITY TO EMOTIONAL AGILITY

Wish we could turn back time
To the good old days
When our momma sang us to sleep
But now we’re stressed out
/  
Used to play pretend
Give each other different names
We would build a rocket ship and then we’d fly it far away
Used to dream of outer space
But now they’re laughing at our face singing
“Wake up, you need to make money”
– “Stressed Out” as performed by Twenty One Pilots

Before I am able to turn to outlining a concrete pastoral response, I need to take a step back to dissect the actively rising trend of mental health concerns amongst college-aged students (aged 18-24) on United States college and university campuses in general. Data from the Higher

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1 Throughout this paper, I will be using the terms “mental health concerns” and “mental distress” interchangeably.
2 I will focus specifically on data from college and university students in the United States, but I am curious about whether or not there is a universality to (a) the mental health challenges in college and university students, and (b) if and whether the integration of faith in that response is similar to a student of the same age in different countries/across different faith traditions/cultures/family systems, etc.
Education Research Institute demonstrates that while more and more college students today are gaining access to effective treatment\(^3\) more frequently, the rate of students experiencing mental health challenges and crises have been increasing since the 1990s, with “students [today] reporting the lowest levels of emotional health in 25 years.”\(^4\) I want to note that because of the scope and intention of this paper, I am choosing to focus most specifically on stress, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and depression, as these are the most commonly cited mental health challenges for college and university students in national studies, though I recognize there are a myriad of other nuanced mental health challenges faced by students.\(^5\)

Are college students experiencing and reporting with more frequency more than just ordinary stress, or something is it something more? Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger’s definition of “burnout,” may be helpful here: emotional exhaustion, decreased sense of accomplishment, and depersonalization.\(^6\) Keeping this definition in mind, the answer appears to be “something more” than stress, which is a natural and normal phenomenon. “Overwhelmed” or “stressed out” are oft-heard responses to the seemingly simple question, how are you? on college

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\(^3\) From the American Freshman Survey, the largest and longest-running survey of American college students. Treatment received includes therapy, counseling, medication, or a combination of both, which is a huge positive trend.


\(^5\) Other mental health challenges seemingly on the rise for college students include substance abuse and eating disorders. For more information about the increasing rise in mental health issues amongst this generation, check out this article from NBC news, “Generation at Risk: America’s youngest facing mental health crisis.” [https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/generation-risk-america-s-youngest-facing-mental-health-crisis-n827836](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/generation-risk-america-s-youngest-facing-mental-health-crisis-n827836).

Also see Katy Waldman, “The Rise of Therapy Speak,” from *The New Yorker Magazine* (March 26, 2021) which cites that in one report on the State of Mental Health in America that nineteen percent of adults experienced a mental illness between 2017-18, an increase of 1.5 million people from the previous year. The COVID-19 pandemic has also correlated with “soaring rates of depression and anxiety among young people.” Accessed March 27, 2021 at [https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rise-of-therapy-speak](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rise-of-therapy-speak).

This statistic is not entirely surprising, as anxiety disorders\textsuperscript{9} are cited as one of the most common psychiatric illnesses, with an estimated 13-18 percent of adults\textsuperscript{10} experiencing \textit{some} form of anxiety on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{11}

The American Psychological Association, drawing on the same 2014 National Survey of College Counselors, explains that college counselors have reported that 52 percent of the students they are seeing regularly had “severe psychological problems,” including anxiety disorders and clinical depression, an increase from 44 percent in 2013.\textsuperscript{12} While stress is a temporary response to one’s environment, anxiety disorders and depression—what might cause a student to say they are ‘overwhelmed’ in the first place—are much more serious and linger longer. Another survey of college students from the American College Health Association in 2016 indicates \textit{at least} 52.7 percent of students (receiving mental health services)\textsuperscript{13} reported feeling that things were hopeless,

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\textsuperscript{7} This is based on my observations/interactions with students. Academics are a commonly cited stressor for students I interact with daily. At CSBSJU the block system (where students just take one class at a time, spending three hours in class per day, four days per week) adopted during the 2020-21 academic year has been difficult for many students. One of my campus ministry student workers, Nicholas, a junior at Saint John’s, has often quoted a sentiment he heard from a fellow student—that “the block system is where academic joy goes to die.” While he often says this with a smile on his face, the stress he and his peers feel this year in particular seems different than past semesters. Nicholas, for example, has had some ‘blocks’ where he has expressed that the expectations of his professor have been unreasonable and unrealistic, and that on some days he spent upwards of six hours on preparing for class for the next day, after having spent three hours in class. But, as the next sentence indicates, it’s not just observational but also noted in national studies. The national patterns seem to align with the student experience at CSBSJU.

\textsuperscript{8} Iarovici, \textit{Mental Health Issues}, 6.

\textsuperscript{9} see Appendix A for DSM-5 definition.

\textsuperscript{10} In the general population, not exclusively college students.

\textsuperscript{11} Iarovici,126.


\textsuperscript{13} The challenge of interpreting statistics like this is that it doesn’t look at college and university students as a whole – only the ones who are going to counseling centers on their campuses. With this said, it is likely the total percentage of students experiencing some sort of mental distress is actually higher than these data indicate, representing a much larger problem.
and 39.1 percent reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function during the past 12 months.\textsuperscript{14}

These reported rates of anxiety and depression amongst college students are staggering to consider in themselves. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, major depressive disorder (MDD) affects about five percent of the \textit{general} adult population in a given year and between 15-20 percent across the lifetime.\textsuperscript{15} While college students (18-24) represent just a small slice of this general population (18+) pie, this nearly twenty percent difference stands out like a neon sign. Statistics from the Counseling and Health Promotions Office at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University maps onto national data. Utilization of counseling services by undergraduate students has increased \textit{115 percent} at CSBSJU from 2001 to 2019, with anxiety, stress, and depression in the top three of presenting concerns for students. The following data are from the 2019 report:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenting Concerns\textsuperscript{16}</th>
<th>CSB Students</th>
<th>SJU Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, the 2002 National College Health Assessment found that 1 in 4 college students experienced depression in the past year, with the rates of depression\textsuperscript{17} amongst men and women nearly equal.\textsuperscript{18} While this data point is twenty years old, and slightly different than the data

\textsuperscript{14} “Campus Mental Health,” American Psychological Association.
\textsuperscript{15} “Campus Mental Health,” American Psychological Association.
\textsuperscript{16} Students can choose more than one “presenting concern,” so these percentages may represent the same student multiple times.
\textsuperscript{17} See Appendix A for DSM-5 definition.
presented above\textsuperscript{19}, it stands as significant and important to point out, as most national data of the general adult population shows slightly higher rates of depression for women than men.\textsuperscript{20} The data at CSBSJU seems to reflect the national trend. However, what complicates this discussion and interpretation of available data is that even though two-thirds of students who utilize the counseling services at CSBSJU are women, it does not necessarily mean that women at Saint Ben’s are experiencing these concerns at higher rates than men at Saint John’s—just that they are reporting them at higher rates—which is what the data above represents. This points to a bigger and more complex issue of the stigma surrounding men’s experiences and their willingness (as a whole) to discuss mental health.\textsuperscript{21}

The subsequent sections in this part of my paper will address social structures that impact the mental wellbeing of college and university students in general. There is a myriad of structures that may impact the mental health of college and university students, including race and racism, trauma, gender norms, expectations, and stigma\textsuperscript{22} (as the data in the paragraph above suggests). I have chosen to focus on just three of the most critical for college students as a whole: generational expectations and implications of outside pressures, emerging adulthood and identity development, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this, I will end with a consideration of the

\textsuperscript{19} The difference in these data may further prove how the rates of these mental health disorders are on the rise and/or indicate that more individuals are willing to ask for professional help/are getting diagnosed, which represents a more positive trend. So, even if it seems as though more people are being impacted by anxiety, depression, stress, etc., the numbers may be consistent, though it is hard to say that the correlation indicates causation here.

\textsuperscript{20} Lindsey, “The Prevalence and Correlates of Depression.” (This stands out as both the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, while partnered institutions that creates a co-educational academic experience, are single-gendered residential campuses for women and men, respectively.)

\textsuperscript{21} The Saint John’s Senate launched a new mental health campaign for men this spring semester, a partnership with the Men’s Development Institute and Health Initiatives. The mission of this project, which they are calling the “Johnnie Project,” the Johnnie Mental Health Coalition, is to engage Saint John’s students in conversation with each other to end the stigma on mental health amongst men. This pilot program is meeting four times throughout the spring semester. Topics include depression and anxiety, social media usage, healthy personal relationships, and toxic masculinity. See my Pastoral response for more information about this initiative.

\textsuperscript{22} Additional social structures include family structures, race, ethnicity, gender/gender expression, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, disability status, and social media consumption.
ministerial and pastoral implications of this by bringing Dr. Susan David’s discussion on emotional agility and Brené Brown’s research on scarcity and shame into conversation with each other. The nuances and age-specific struggles of college students are an important distinction in the causes of depressive, anxiety-based and overwhelmed symptoms. Yet the question lingers. Why are college students seemingly more susceptible to mental health challenges than the rest of the population?

*Gen Z Pressures: “Wake Up, You Need to Make Money”*

While I had intended on speaking with Trevor, a junior at Saint John’s, about his spiritual needs, God, and his mental health, our conversation quickly turned into one about money, school, and stress. “My faith is important to me, like, 9PM Mass is always a great start out to my week and helps me feel more stable,” Trevor began, “but I’m also trying to find a paid internship so I can fund my study abroad, even though I’m getting a decent scholarship to be here in the first place. I want to make sure that I can get a good job after I graduate. This causes a good amount of stress for me, and this is even before academic or COVID stress.” With the prophetic words from Twenty One Pilots’ song “Stressed Out” ringing through my head, I blurted out, “wow, pretty hard to think about God and your spiritual needs when you have all that to think about, huh?”

While Trevor’s story is just one story, it helps paint part of the picture of the larger story at play here. College and university students today face strong societal expectations that universally contribute to mental distress and mental health crises on campus. The first is the perceived pressure of simply attending college in the first place. With this comes subsequent pressure the current cohort of college and university students (like Trevor) feel to succeed (with

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23 Note that there is a vast amount of data on these rates that can be found that indicate slightly different data. Overall, the trend indicates that the rates of stress, anxiety and depression experienced on college campuses, by traditional-aged students are significantly higher than the general adult population.

marked ambiguity as to what is meant by ‘success’), find a job, and become financially stable. Born after 1996 (part of “Generation Z,”) raised in a post-9/11 world, individuals in Gen Z are on track, as a whole, to becoming the most educated generations in history (compared to Millennials and Generation X). The PEW Research Center has indicated that “among 18-21-year-olds no longer in high school in 2018, 57 percent were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college,” compared to 52 percent of Millennials (in 2003) and 43 percent of Gen X-ers (in 1987).

On top of attending college at all, college students in Gen Z also feel the pressure to do well. A 2019 article from PEW helps fade the ambiguity of what is meant by “success”. Amongst the pressure teens (in high school) face, academics top the list, with 61% of respondents saying they “feel a lot of pressure to get good grades.” Additionally, the same study highlights how the residual pressure felt by students in high school carries into their post-graduation goals, with about six-in-ten (59%) planning on attending a four-year college, with the same group indicating the same kind of pressure to “get good grades.” Shawn, a junior at Saint John’s, spoke of these statistics in his lived experience as a nursing student. After asking him what causes him to feel stress, he answered after a short pause, “I often find myself getting into these week-long ‘funks’ when I feel like I somehow haven’t met

“So much of my self-identity is wrapped up in my academic success and being perceived as smart. In those moments, I just feel like I’m letting people down.”
– Shawn, SJU Junior

what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/
27 Parker, “On the Cusp of Adulthood.”
28 Respondents were 13-17 in 2019, meaning that the oldest respondents would find themselves in either their first or second years of college now.
29 Horowitz, “Most U.S. Teens.”
30 Horowitz, “Most U.S. Teens.”
someone’s expectations, even if it’s just pressure I’ve put on myself. I had an anatomy test recently where I left thinking, ‘I should be better than this.’ It was gut-wrenching. All of my friends were asking me if I was doing okay, and I just had to admit to them, ‘no, I’m not.’ Even if I don’t want it to, so much of my self-identity is wrapped up in my academic success and being perceived as smart. In those moments, I just feel like I’m letting people down.”

What’s significant about Shawn’s story is that it first demonstrates the stress felt by college students is likely ‘something more’ than just normal stress. It also points to more than just a desire to succeed. It is a story of where Shawn believes his worth comes from, the question I asked him next. Sighing, he expressed, “my first instinct is to say it comes from my accomplishments, even though I wish my worth came from who I am and the way in which I am in relationship with others. I don’t just want my identity to be wrapped up in my academic success…I really just want to be remembered at the end of the day as someone who impacted the lives of others. That’s really why I want to be a nurse in the first place.”

Emerging Adulthood, Emerging Identities

As Shawn spoke, I couldn’t help but recognize how the period of late adolescence and early, or emerging, adulthood (ages 18-25) is an additional, universal cause of mental distress for college students. The four years most students are in college are described by Doris Iarovici, Harvard University psychiatrist, as an “in between period,” marked by significant identity exploration and more intense focus on the self. Questions that young people are asking themselves at this stage of their lives include the deeply vocational questions, where do I fit in? To whom do I belong? What am I good at? These questions fall in line with psychologist Erik Erikson’s stages of development. His theory includes eight stages ranging from infancy to late

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32 Iarovici, 18.
adulthood, each involving an inherent conflict to be overcome. Family and culture-based, Erikson believed each individual is shaped by the social world around them. For college and university students in their last stages of adolescence and emerging young adulthood, this view is especially important, as they straddle two stages: what Erikson calls “identity vs. role confusion” of adolescence and “intimacy vs. isolation” of young adulthood. The questions posed above return with urgency; what is a college student supposed to do when they find themselves unable to distinguish themselves from their peers? (Or, at the very least, they believe they are not distinct?)

The very heart of these questions points to a desire for to be unique. On the flip side, college students also crave to find inclusion (so as to not become isolated), so they also cannot be too different than their peers.

I want to begin outlining how this social and consequently pastoral problem lies in an inability (or fear of) properly answering these questions and fully develop a sense of both identity and belonging. The trends of rising rates of stress, anxiety, and depression amongst college students align with this reality. Combined with the pressure to (a) go to college in the first place and (b) succeed, on top of the “built-in instability of being a college student” it is not hard to see why this pressure, whether it is real or perceived, is felt so readily by college students, and manifested in that instantaneous, no-brainer response, “I’m overwhelmed.”

Erikson’s theory is enlightening surrounding the concept of role confusion, especially when looking to college students, as this time is defined as one in which the individuals “essential personality

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“That first week back [after leaving because of COVID] wrecked me…I could not eat anything, I didn’t sleep well, and I was just anxious all the time. Meeting with Fr. Nick that week was huge. He helped me catch my breath and reorient myself back here.”

—Shawn

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33 Transitions and change could be a whole category of mental distress in and of themselves. As I spoke with Shawn, he mentioned how “big life events” like moving back to college, especially after returning in the midst of COVID-19 impacted his mental state.
characteristics,” their self-perception, and view of others are called into question.\(^{34}\) This stage in Erikson’s theory suggests that without a solid sense of identity (the answer to the “who am I?” question), our perceptions of ourselves could transform into a morphed view. Without a solid sense of identity or sureness of self, even the littlest thing perceived as failure could feel devastating. In a conversation I had with Dr. Mike Ewing, PhD, Director of Counseling and Health Promotions at CSBSJU back in 2018, he explained “in looking at these two campuses, at most 18-22-year-olds, I would say that most (at least 51 percent) of the students I see, are struggling with some sort of crisis of identity,” when their normal development becomes distorted somehow. What I fear this leads to is only increased feelings of isolation, feelings of shame, and silence because of a fear of being misunderstood: an epidemic of believing we are not good enough. What is the young person supposed to do when these questions arise? The idea of shame is one in which I will dive into in greater detail later on because it is one of the main reasons, I believe, people turn to prayer in the first place when they are in mental distress.

The concept of emerging adulthood as a “normative developmental stage” is useful when working with college and university students, as it points to the commonalities in the student experience due to their physical and human development.\(^{35}\) Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett points to how this is a time in which the brain is still finishing development and nearing maturation of the pre-frontal cortex which is integral in essential functions such as personality expression, decision making and the moderation of social behavior.\(^{36}\) However normative this time of development is, though, it is important to remember that while “the college experience brings together groups of

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\(^{34}\) Justin T. Sokol, “Identity Development Through the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory,” *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 142.

\(^{35}\) Iarovici, 21.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
students facing similar transitions and challenges,” there are also individual, personal challenges that reflect each identity (i.e., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation). So again, it seems as though the message college students are receiving is confusing: while striving to discover what makes them unique, they are also looking for inclusion in a group, which they fear they will not be accepted into if they are too different. With this being clearly stated, it becomes essential that college students develop an ability to accurately, authentically, and vulnerably talk about how they are feeling—so not to enter into a cycle of isolation and shame. Ultimately, for college and university students, a balanced sense of identity and belonging is therefore universal and essential for mental health and wellbeing.

COVID-19 impacts on mental health

On top of the generational pressures and development that would have already impacted the mental well-being of students aged 18-24, there is now, of course, the added complexity,

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Figure 11a: Data represents data accumulated from 32 campuses in HMS in fall 2019 and 7 campuses in March-May 2020.

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nuance, and implications of the current global COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{38} Since March 2020, the pandemic has led to a marked increase in the risk of isolation and moments of despair, especially amongst college students, many of whom found themselves living back in their childhood bedrooms.\textsuperscript{39} In a random sample from March through May 2020 of 18,764 students on 14 campuses across the United States, the “symptoms of mental health conditions remain high in college students both before and after the start of the pandemic.” In comparison to data collected in fall 2019, the prevalence of depression increased, with more students in March through May 2020 reporting “that their mental health negatively impacted their academic performance (see figure 11a\textsuperscript{40} for percentages reported).”\textsuperscript{41}

Okay, so how are you REALLY doing? (aka the pressing pastoral question)

“Compassion is knowing our darkness well enough that we can sit in the dark with others.”
– Pema Chödrön

I have highlighted the data and statistics on mental health in college and university students, as well as three potential sources of mental distress, including generational pressure to attend college, emerging adulthood and identity development and the added complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic. College students are living in the liminal space of becoming who they are in their

\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Katy Waldman, “Rise of Therapy Speak” \textit{New Yorker}, March 26, 2021, \url{https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rise-of-therapy-speak}

\textsuperscript{39} In their report on the overall well-being of college students in the COVID-19 pandemic, the American College Health Association explains that roughly one-third of students reported their living situations had changed as a result of the pandemic. See \url{https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/Healthy_Minds_NCHA_COVID_Survey_Report_FINAL.pdf} for more data.

\textsuperscript{40} For anyone interested in the ways in which these terms are defined, here is a brief description: Depression is a score of >10 on the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), which measures the 9 core symptoms of a major depressive episode over the past 2 weeks. Suicidal ideation over the past 2 weeks is one item from the PHQ-9, defined as having “thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way.” Anxiety is a score of >10 on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-scale, which measures symptoms of generalized anxiety over the past 2 weeks. MH impaired academics is defined as >6 days in the last 4 weeks when mental or emotional health negatively impacted academic performance.

\textsuperscript{41} American College Health Association, \textit{Impact of COVID-19 on College Student Well-Being} (Silver Spring: American College Health Association, 2020). While psychological well-being post-pandemic is lower relative to fall 2019, the same students also reported higher levels of resiliency.
personal identities (or at the very least, trying to in the midst of this pandemic). Here are few questions to consider, posed to me by Saint John’s junior Joe Penny. How are college students supposed to become who they are if they do not even know who they are now? Additionally, how are college students supposed to navigate this task if they are unable to look in the mirror and understand, and much less acknowledge, that they are feeling what they are feeling and then know how to navigate and lean into that feeling? I invite you into a space of brief reflection. Joe’s ponderings left me with more questions than answers.

The lack of clear answers is significant. It becomes increasingly important, urgent even, that college and university students learn how to, as Dr. Susan David, Harvard Medical School psychologist and emotion researcher explains, move from a place of emotional rigidity to one, instead, of emotional agility. It is in the midst of this conversation about emotional agility I would like to further strengthen the claim that college students often feel compelled to pray in their states of mental distress because they, as Joe postulated, are not aware of how to accurately, authentically, and vulnerably lean into or talk about what they are experiencing or feeling. As Dr. Susan David explains, I seek to help “rewrite the narrative that faith and positivity and cure are a package deal and that we can’t have one without the other.”

Brené Brown’s work on scarcity and shame shows that the instinct to label our feelings as either ‘good emotions’ (which we are therefore, according to this mindset, supposed to feel) or ‘bad’ emotions aligns with what she calls the “never-enough problem.” That is, we live in

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44 Susan David, “The gift and power of emotional courage.”
45 Ibid. This is how Dr. Susan David defines emotional rigidity. She repeats this same idea in literal conversation with Brené Brown, host, “Dare to Lead: On the Dangers of Toxic Positivity with Dr. Susan David, Part 1 of 2,” (podcast), March 1, 2020, accessed March 8, 2020.
constant comparison of others and fear of being perceived as being in the world in a way that is different than how we perceive we should be feeling, which ultimately inhibits our ability to actually feel what we are feeling.\(^\text{46}\) (phew.) When we are conditioned into not fully expressing how we are doing when people ask us how we are, or simply respond with an oversimplification like, “I’m overwhelmed,” we do not allow ourselves, much less others (including God), to see the full extent of who we are and that what we are experiencing.\(^\text{47}\)

Emotional agility is important because it is a recognition that we have emotions (everything from anger, sadness, joy, happiness, depression, anxiety and loneliness) that are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad.’\(^\text{48}\) They, just simply, are. Dr. Susan David explains how “emotions are not the end product” but that they are the “messy, beautiful ‘signposts’ that we have that allow us to understand ourselves better.”\(^\text{49}\) While we have a tendency to try and immediately move past the ‘bad’ feeling or emotion (or to ignore it, cover it up, or not talk about it), this ultimately causes us more harm than good because it has the potential to undermine our own perceptions of ourselves. Instead of experiencing an emotion like sadness and saying, “I am feeling sad; the reason why is [this] and this is what this emotion is leading me towards,” avoiding the emotion can lead to thinking, “I am sad,” which Dr. Susan David and Brené Brown alike express is a way the feeling becomes a dominant identity trait that takes control over us. In a sense, our sadness (or whatever emotion we are feeling) takes over.


Also see sociologist Charles Cooley’s concept called the “Looking Glass Self,” rooted in the idea that behavior and self-esteem are dictated by a person’s perceptions of how they will be perceived by others.

\(^{47}\) Brené Brown, host, “Dare to Lead, Part 1 of 2” (podcast). These are direct quotes and paraphrased ideas from Dr. Susan David, as facilitated by Brené Brown.

\(^{48}\) Ibid. [Susan David in conversation with Brené Brown.]

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
This inability to accurately and vulnerably name and lean into the fullness of our holistic experiences, whether this mental distress comes from the pressure college students feel to continue their education, from navigating a time of emerging identity and adulthood, the pandemic, or some other factor, is in itself a ministerial problem. Parker Palmer outlines this well in his book *Let Your Life Speak* as he writes “though it [mental distress, anxiety, depression] is a deeply personal matter, it is not necessarily a private matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct.”^50 He continues, stating “the key to this form of community involves holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness. We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul…never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.”^51

Living in a world that believes if we “feel difficult emotions” (or are experiencing a mental health difficulty like anxiety or depression) that there is something “wrong with us” is the reality for many.^52 My opening story is one in which I grappled with the weight of this ‘not enough-ness,’ that made me feel as though I was broken for not being able to simply ‘snap out of’ the depression and anxiety I was experiencing. While this ability to ‘snap out of it’ was exactly what I thought I wanted, it ultimately just made me feel worse about myself and more ashamed^53 for what I was experiencing in the first place. My desire to continue seeking out help wavered on thinking I should feel something other than how I was feeling. Isolation manifested in nearly all of my relationships, because I didn’t want to feel like a burden on anyone. The short snippets from my personal journal

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^52 Ibid.
^53 Brené Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Definition accessed at https://brenebrown.com/definitions/.
from that time show how I longed for God to just take away all of my ‘bad’ emotions so I could be happy and ‘normal’ like everyone else.

As I move into theological discussion and reflection, my ultimate goal is becoming clearer: to support individuals to engage in the world holistically. For those who choose to engage in prayer and seek to deepen their relationships with God in their times of mental distress (and also for those who do not), I hope they are able to navigate their challenges from a place a of worthiness and belonging.

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF PRAYERFUL RESILIENCE AND EMOTIONAL AGILITY

You need a big God...
Big enough to hold your love
You need a big God...
Big enough to fill you up
Sometimes I think it’s getting better
And then it gets much worse
Is it just part of the process?
[...]
Though I know I should know better
Well, I can make this work
Is it just part of the process?
– “Big God” as performed by Florence + The Machine

As someone who like answers, and also as someone who would like to be able to enter into a place of worthiness and belonging as I engage with God in prayer during my times of mental distress, what am I supposed to do? What does this entail? What does it look like? What am I supposed to say in prayer and how am I supposed to say it? How long am I expected to wait for my prayer to be answered? How do I know if my prayer has been answered at all? I see harmful implications if the way college students (or anyone for that matter) enter into prayer because it is as a “learned response coming out of an immature, naïve faith,” one that is automatic and mechanical. Fr. Nick Kleespie, OSB, chaplain at Saint John’s highlights this risk as he expressed
to me in a conversation from 2018 that “prayer cannot solve all the struggles at hand. It cannot swallow depression.” Pausing, he continued, stating, “God gets really small when we start demanding something specific.”

Holding onto this thought, the last few weeks on my Instagram page, I’ve posed a myriad of questions including:

- Do you believe everything “happens for a reason?” (Why?)
- In general, do you think the things that happen to you are “part of God’s plan?” (Why?)
- When you experience mental distress, do you think you experience that “for a reason?”
- Do you think you experience mental distress because it’s “part of God’s plan?”
- When you are in a state of mental distress, do you pray less? More? Stay consistent?
- What words do you use to describe or talk about God?

I knew my answers to these questions, but recognized I had no sense of how others, especially current CSBSJU students, thought about these questions and how the answers influenced their daily lived experience. At the heart of these questions, what I really hoped to tease out was, “who do people understand God to be? What are their expectations of God? How to they respond to moments in their lives that are hard? When they choose to engage in prayer, why do they pray?”

Returning to Fr. Nick’s insight, what I demanded from—and expected from God in my state of mental distress was something very specific: to be “normal.” The time I have spent studying theology has demonstrated to me how a theologically

“I had so much anxiety about the future that I over-compensated through over-scrupulosity. I got to the point where I was going to confession every time I thought I had done something wrong. I was almost praying too much. I felt like through my prayer I needed to be perfect, or that God somehow expected perfection from me somehow. My piety prevented me from recognizing my worth as coming from my whole self, and that this full self is me know. I come from a community where faith equals joy, and there is no real acknowledgement of anything negative. With my friends, I try not to say ‘I’ll pray for you’ when they’re struggling. Instead, I try to say things like ‘Can I sit with you?’ or I try to encourage, where appropriate counseling. I thought I was alone for so long I just want to help them recognize they aren’t alone.

–Reagan, CSB Senior

54 Fr. Nick Kleespie, in conversation with the author, Collegeville, MN, October 2018.
grounded understanding of the divine-human relationship is one critical step in moving from a space of isolation or shame. The Duplex Ordo debate from the 20th century Neo-Scholastic thinkers, countered by Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner, will offer a historical lens for this conversation. The limitations of the views of God and prayer presented in the scope of this debate, however, leads me to the psalter and psalmists who “had no problem loudly sharing their every thought with God.”55 This, I believe, to be a striking example of the power of lament and prayer in community—and a powerful counterbalance to shame and isolation. This, ultimately, leads me towards examining what a theology of prayerful resilience might entail.

Who is God to you? Debates throughout history and their limitations

Christians have long struggled with the questions surrounding prayer: what it is, how to do it, and how we know whether or not it’s worked. For the purposes of furthering my claim, I will be focusing on questions surrounding the relationship between God and humans. From a deeply human and anthropological perspective, it is important to continue to peer deeper into the mystery of the divine-human relationship. The answer not only provides insight, but also gives us language to articulate our experience of God’s presence in the world, precisely because the way we think about God on a daily basis ultimately shapes our understanding of prayer and our understanding of prayer shapes our daily interactions with God. What is a healthy expectation of God in prayer? What happens when we pray? How do we know if God is present, listening, and active in our lives? Is God’s presence intimate and something with which we engage constantly, or is the mystery of God something totally separate from anything we experience?

At the most basic level, the duplex ordo model is one approach to answering the questions posed above about God’s presence (or not) in the world and how God responds (or doesn’t) to our

55 Mary Strommes, “From this Vantage Point,” in the March edition of Give Us This Day (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021), 261.
prayers (namely, our prayers of petition, when we are asking something of God). In this framework the natural (human) and supernatural worlds co-exist in two layers that do not interact with one another. An attempt by the Neo-Scholastics to “preserve the gratuity of grace,” rather than our human freedom, is of the utmost importance with this line of thinking. The Neo-Scholastics argue that if humans had a “natural longing for God,” then this grace or salvation would somehow be “owed” to humans. The problem that seems to stump these thinkers is, ‘how can grace be both fundamental/essential to the human experience but at the same time given freely?’ The answer they offer allows for the separation of our human experience and grace (i.e., God) to make sense but serves as an unhelpful response to an individual seeking God through prayer in a time of distress. In order to preserve God’s freedom (and additionally to preserve God’s radical ‘otherness’), the Neo-Scholastics argue how humans have to exist in a natural state where we don’t have a natural orientation to God, and grace must be something totally gratuitous (given to us like a “zap” outside of our experience in the world).

In this sense, if this is the way the world operates, our prayers of petition and intercession come from a place of passivity, where we send up our prayer and hope that God responds. Then, hopefully God simply “zaps” down grace.

Henri de Lubac rejects the Neo-Scholastic way of thinking. He questions and raises the concern that if grace is something so radically other and humans have no conscious experience of

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57 The Neo-Scholastics seem to be asking a similar question to Rahner here: i.e. How does God’s transcendence remain without being compromised by our human experience? (Rahner’s question being: How can humans experience God without sacrificing what it means to be God or what it means to be human?)
58 This image of a “zap” makes me think of how I used to imagine God and Heaven when I was little and just starting to wrap my head around the idea and mystery of God. For me, God lived in the clouds and stayed there, while I lived down here on earth. I didn’t think a lot about God when I was little; God felt like something foreign and outside of my experience...but during lightning storms, my imagination would light up. During those storms is when I felt God’s presence the most. Similarly, in my times of greatest mental distress, I longed for the “zap” from God to ‘make me better.’ I was not focused on prayer as a way to strengthen my relationship with God but as a source of healing.
God’s grace or the supernatural, then things like the Incarnation, God’s salvific plan, and the presence of the Spirit hold no meaning because this separation ultimately renders them pointless, even suggesting “the world is no different as a result.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, de Lubac removes any separation between us and God at all, drawing upon the need for theology to respond to our lived experience and concrete reality. For de Lubac, God’s grace becomes the core of the human experience and nature because of his claim that because of our nature, humans were created with a “supernatural destiny” and an “unconditional longing for the divine.” This is when praying in times of mental distress makes sense.

Stepping back and away from the intricacies, technicalities, and nuances of this debate, I return to the questions posed a few paragraphs earlier: what does a healthy theology of prayer and God entail? Where is God in the midst of our prayer, especially in moments of distress when our expectation might be that God will take our burdens away, like I did? Do either of these models actually provide a helpful foundation in a pastoral response to one’s mental distress?

I answer no. It seems that both of these understandings of the divine-human relationship can lead to a misunderstanding of both God and of prayer that are ultimately harmful. If the duplex ordo were in place, then there might be a better explanation of God’s apparent absence in our lives, which is perhaps more neutral than harmful. However, to think that God is not intimately involved in our lives is simply not true. Rendering prayer unnecessary, thinking of receiving God’s grace as a “zap” has the potential to raise the question of who is worthy of receiving this “zap” of grace in the first place. If I’m in a place of mental distress, in this model, and am not getting better, does this mean I am not enough in God’s eyes to receive grace? One potential outcome, as suggested

60 Colberg, 5.
by Brené Brown’s research, is experiencing feelings such as shame and scarcity, or thoughts like “I must do something, I must not be worthy of receiving grace, why do others and not me?”

Similarly, if the duplex ordo is not in place and the divine-human relationship and interaction are inseparable, as outlined by de Lubac, then the response to why God is not seemingly responding to my prayer can be as equally damaging. As stated above, if God is supposed to be so intimately close to me, but is not responding to my prayer, is there something wrong with me? Is my relationship with God as close as I thought it was? Is God listening to my prayer? Is this suffering happening for a reason?

Rahner’s input in this debate is helpful and connects to the concept of emotional agility from Dr. Susan David. The nuance between in the argument ‘by our nature’ humans have a natural end in God and that all humans have a supernatural end in God, though technical, stands with utmost importance. That is, for Rahner, grace is more than just a single moment in which we experience the divine, which, in Rahner’s view, compromises the gratuity of the grace offered. The argument that Rahner makes in response to de Lubac seems to be a similar one the Neo-Scholastics make when framing the duplex ordo. How does grace remain a free gift while at the same time demonstrating God’s grace is an integral part of what it means to experience a human life?

What seems to be missing from what the Neo-Scholastics and Henri de Lubac argue is the infusion of grace into the day-to-day ordinariness of our lives. The points of misinterpretation and potential to harm comes from the starting place of the arguments. What if the starting point of prayer was simply the human experience, instead of the nature of God or an expectation of receiving grace or healing? Beginning with the human experience may offer a better foundation for us to be more present and aware of our feelings (i.e., emotionally agile), to observe and be
present to those around us (including God), and to work through our experience, whatever it may be, from multiple angles and within the context of multiple relationships—the work of discernment. Our relationship with God, therefore, becomes less rigidly vertical. By doing this, prayer becomes less strictly “monological”\textsuperscript{61} – where I pray with a specific end result in mind (i.e., healing). Instead, it can become dialogical as well, opening up the possibilities of moving on a horizontal plane as well. What this necessitates is balancing both speaking and also having the courage to pause and listen for God’s movement in ways other than our expectations. Further, holding space for a dynamic, dialogical movement in prayer also invites us into the possibility of recognizing the God in others (a movement from God as some abstract incomprehensible being). Prayer, in this way, can be grace-filled moments like a conversation with a friend, listening to music, an unexpected moment of joy, burst of creativity, holding another person in their own moment of suffering, or silence, all of which amount to the experience of simply being human.\textsuperscript{62}

This must be what Fr. Nick meant when he warned against putting God into a box. It may be necessary, while acknowledging the mystery of God, to also recognize God is bigger and smaller than anything we can actually ever comprehend. Yet, there are still moments in which we feel compelled to turn to God, like moments of distress. To offer a different model of prayer and emotional agility, I now turn to the psalms of lament.

\textit{Lament Psalms: Stepping out of a naïve experience of prayer into a raw and vulnerable experience of God}

\begin{quote}
\textit{My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?}
\textit{Why so far from my call for help,}
\textit{from my cries of anguish? –Psalm 22:2}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Listen to my prayer, LORD, hear my cry;}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{61} Joseph Penny, in conversation with the author, Collegeville, MN, March 8, 2021.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
do not be deaf to my weeping!
For I am with you like a foreigner,
a refugee, like my ancestors. –Psalm 39:13

Surely, I wait for the LORD;
who bends down to me and hears my cry,
Draws me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the muddy clay,
Sets my feet upon rock, steadies my steps,
And puts a new song in my mouth. –Psalm 40:2-4a

I received mixed responses when asking students whether or not they believed in “everything happening for a reason,” and even more mixed answers when asking them about whether things, especially perceived ‘bad’ things happen to us “according to God’s plan.” Logan, a Saint John’s sophomore, shared how “depending on my mental state, sometimes I am good at seeing the bigger picture outside of my struggles and can make a ‘reason’ for them, but at other times I get sucked in and find myself stuck in ruts and that distress seems void of reason.” Describing God as loving, guiding, and present, he also indicated that in times of mental distress he found himself praying less often. Another student, Grace, a Saint Ben’s sophomore, likewise struggled with grappling with the idea of things “happening for a reason” or happening strictly “because of God’s plan” because of her belief in good coming from God, a sentiment shared by classmate Rianna. Words these students used to describe God mirror Logan’s: God as good, gracious all-loving, all-knowing, friend, savior, and creator. Through my conversations with these students, there did not seem to be a clear answer “why,” nor did we gain any clarity about why we experience moments of brokenness, though all three have indeed experienced this brokenness firsthand. This lack of clarity points to our ‘natural’ state of brokenness by simply being human.
While there may not be a simple answer to the questions I posed, underlying Logan, Grace, and Rianna’s stories was a cycle: some experience of brokenness followed by restoration that gives way to more brokenness and restoration, the ups-and-downs of a human life lived. Turning from the debates of the nature of God, the structure, function, and content of Psalms 22, 39, and 40 offer insight for individuals negotiating these “downs-and-ups” of mental distress so that this sequence of brokenness and restoration does not sink into a vicious shame cycle (read: “I must be doing something wrong or not praying hard enough” for me to find myself in this situation of brokenness in the first place). Ultimately, these three psalms of lament offer an example of what a more balanced expectation of God in the midst of prayer can look like.63

As it has been highlighted throughout this paper thus far, an authentic human life is not without experiencing the entire spectrum of emotion: from the deepest feelings of abandonment, anguish, and despair to profound elation and joy. These experiences, ideally, are kept in a delicate tension in order that the individual’s life remains holistically balanced. An old Japanese proverb goes: “stand up seven times, fall down eight.” The reality this reflects back is profound, but also leaves space for reflection. Does one step forward necessitate an additional step(s) back? What happens when it seems as though all we are doing is taking steps back, like when we find ourselves experiencing times of great anxiety, depression, or distress? Is this the worldview with which one is to live? Is there space for hope and trust? At times prayers of joyful thanksgiving and at others, moments of anxious and desperate lament, this same proverb likely would have resonated deeply

63 The 45th name attributed to God in Islam is as the “Answerer of prayers:” “the one who responds to the requests of those who ask by assisting them, to the call of those who call upon him by answering them and responds to the plight of the poor with all they need.” From Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, (Fez: The Islamic Texts Society, 1999), 115.
with the experiences described in Psalms 22, 39, and 40; all provide insight with how to restore this desired balance.

Psalm 22 is an encapsulation of this intense cycle and range of human experience; it is a haunting cry of agony and utter abandonment: “my God, my God, why […]” the psalmist weeps (v. 2). The question of theodicy ringing loudly, the psalmist cries out day and night for God. But God does not come immediately – it does not seem as though the psalmist’s prayers have been heard at all (vv. 2-6). Had the psalmist expected God to respond immediately, it would seem this is the perfect moment for the psalmist to give up (and had the psalmist had adopted an understanding of God within either the duplex ordo model or de Lubac’s inseparableness and indistinguishable supernatural orientation to the divine, the psalm very well could have ended there). Dehumanized (v. 7), mocked (v. 8-9) attacked by enemies, the psalmist, essentially broken, goes against all reason and still continues to trust in the (apparently absent) merciful God who saved his ancestors from enemies (vv. 5-6). So why trust?

The actions of the psalmist in Psalm 40 provide some insight as to why this trust remains. After finding themselves in the depths of a (metaphoric) quagmire, they find themselves being lifted out and set on firm ground once again (vv. 3-4). There is no indication of how long they had been there, but the psalmist recognizes, in thanksgiving, immediately that God has done this; they make no secret of YHWH’s kindness and justice (vv. 6). It is tempting to ask who/what put them there (thinking there must be a reason behind the suffering), especially when one recalls the viciousness of the attack the psalmist in Psalm 22 experiences (vv. 13-22).

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64 Most of the students I spoke to indicated that they find themselves praying more in times of distress.
65 Shockingly, in Psalm 39, within the psalmist’s lament, they totally blame God for their predicament (v. 10) – perhaps in a “how can this possibly be part of your [God’s] plan??” kind of a way. I empathize with this psalmist’s lament. In my own experience, I too had moments when I blamed God for causing my seemingly endless anxiety and depression.
While it seems impossibly paradoxical to call bad times a ‘blessing’, it seems to be the only way to suggest why these psalmists shift from accusing God for being absent to a sudden and dramatic expression of confidence and praise in God. These psalms collectively demonstrate a different way of responding. We are provided yet another glimpse into what a human expression of trust, rooted in emotional agility, confidence, and right relationship with YHWH looks like. Vulnerably and boldly, the psalmist calls on God.

The transition from deep anguish into joyful praise in Psalm 22 (vv. 23-32) suggests the psalmist is attuned to the constantly deepening relationship between themselves and YHWH. Like in a therapy or pastoral ministry setting, they seem to recognize how this intimate vulnerable relationship could transform how they interact with their ups and downs, as well as those in their community. They, like in Psalm 40, want “all the ends of the earth” (Ps. 22:28) to hear the work of God so that they, too, trust in God as the psalmist does. Though the psalmist in Psalm 39 does not praise God to their community (a departure from Ps. 22 and 40), they cannot keep silent and bear all of their suffering in front of God, eventually.

This grateful (but not naïve) trust, therefore, seems to be a key to navigating this cycle of “up and down,” and points to the larger goal of establishing an intimately vulnerable relationship with YHWH and community. With every prayer, the psalmists find new vitality, but with an openness as to how God will respond and care for them within their time of need. As life continues swing like a pendulum, even in moments of shame, we are called vulnerably share our deepest confusion; we are called to take this to God (Ps. 39).

The psalms of lament are critical to framing a more theologically resilient understanding and expectation of God and prayer because they demonstrate clearly how (a) we do not have to bear suffering alone (that God accompanies us in our suffering), and (b) even in times when it
seems as though God is not answering our prayer, in the end, the psalmist resolves to end in hope and praise of the God they (even if just in hindsight) recognize was there the whole time. Additionally, the lament psalms are significant and have the potential to be a great source of comfort to one experiencing mental distress exactly because of their ability to explicitly and accurately name and navigate a wide range of human experiences and emotions. While at the same time expressing self-awareness and emotional agility, the psalmist also recognizes both the divine-human as well as human-human relationships; most lament psalms are expressed by a community.

As Fr. Nick commented at Campus Ministry’s Virtual Holy Week Retreat last year, “lamenting in isolation has a different flavor than lamenting in community and to God. Lamenting alone brings loneliness. A lament to God, and to God in community means I recognize God is with me…because GOD IS LISTENING.”

Fr. Bryan Massingale, while in conversation about racial justice and systematic racism, offers additional insight into the importance of adopting a practice of lament (especially in community). Lament, he claims, leads to compassion. Within their cries, he writes, the one lamenting “points to the ugliness of the world and plainly expresses what is wrong,” providing space for “profound interruptions and claims to attention.” Given mental health’s stigma, especially for men, this interruption is profound. In the face of their oppression and perceived brokenness, the people of Israel “did not hesitate to give full voice to its fear, anger, and dismay,” totally contradicting the ‘settled claims’ of faith (and harkens back to Dr. Susan David’s hope to dismantle the expectation that faith, positivity and cure are a ‘package deal’). The lament as a genre serves as a resource to deconstruct both mental health stigma and the understanding of how one is to speak to God in prayer (i.e., politely and peacefully). Laments are filled with confusion,

66 From April 10, 2020, Good Friday Session, Saint John’s Campus Ministry Holy Week Retreat via Zoom.
anguish, and outrage, chastising God in many cases (like Psalm 39), wondering where in the world they [that is, God] are. Again, as Dr. Susan David explains, our emotions are neither good nor bad, they simply are.

Therefore, standing witness to lament fosters and facilitates compassion. The word used in the Gospel texts describing the compassion of Jesus as he witnesses the suffering of others is *splanchnizesthai*—a “visceral response of profound feeling and strong emotion.” (Doesn’t this sound familiar?) Massingale explains how compassion is a “response on a different level,” one “stirred within one’s deepest humanity when confronted with human agony or need” and is what can follow from seeing and standing witness to the lament of others (and to ourselves).68 Moving from a place of emotional rigidity to emotional agility and into a place of compassion, it is not only “sorrow for and identification with, but also *action* to meet the others’ need.” Instead, coupling emotional agility in lament and compassion together provide the foundation for working against the stigma and status quo for those suffering from mental health challenges and mental distress. Rather, it creates the possibilities to vulnerably work to “alleviate the suffering of another.”69

*Prayerful Resiliency through the accompaniment of others*

*If we want to accompany others along the road of faith, we must resist the temptation to call out to them, saying, “Hey what are you doing way over there. Get over here with us.” It is far more effective to go to the other, meet them where they are on the journey and say, “May I walk beside you?”*

–Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel)

Fr. Bryan Massingale’s discussion on compassionate communities who honor the lament of individuals and in community leads to an additional claim: undergraduate college students will feel more supported during times of mental distress, anxiety, or depression, if they lean into this

69 Massingale, 115.
image of resiliency in community. In Scripture, Matthew 18:20 offers great insight into what this might look like. Jesus teaches his disciples, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This is significant and important to name in connection with the claims of this paper thus far because it emphasizes the importance of fighting against a sense of isolation that often accompanies feelings we deem as “bad.” Recall how Parker Palmer calls upon us in community to support each other in the midst of this isolation (what he calls “alone-ness”), which is something we all experience throughout our lives precisely because of our humanness. In addition, it emphasizes a radical understanding of how one might engage in a relationship with the divine that manifests horizontally as well as vertically. That is, God, through Christ Incarnate, can be found within our engagement with and encounter of others, and in the midst of each other’s suffering.

The pastoral implications for this flow abundantly from the symbol of accompaniment as the model for ministry. Likewise, it sets up the framework well for what a theology of resilience entails. While at the end of this theological section, faith is a word that must still be defined—because it again gives insight into the deeper why behind why we pray in the first place when we find ourselves in places of mental distress. It is still worth asking the question why is it something people turn to? Recognizing faith as both a noun and verb, as the “motion of life” and as a “dynamic, multifaceted activity [and] an active dialogue with promise” offer a good starting point. Prayer, then, within the scope of this multifaceted activity is—and should be—a natural response as we attempt to continue growing in relationship with the divine (even when we are

“I have the philosophy never to half-ass my responses when working with people who are struggling. You don’t have to be fine. Right now [in this time of pandemic], you probably aren’t. And that’s okay. That’s why we’re here right now.”

—my therapist, April 2020

70 Palmer, 92.
71 Sharon Daloz Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 31-2. [emphasis mine]
praying at a time when it may be difficult to do so) and at the same time make meaning of the ebbs
and flows, and ups and downs of our human lives. In this way, prayerful resilience becomes the
recognition that, while seemingly ironic, “faith can come alive in an engagement with radical
uncertainty.”72

SACRED PLACES OF ACCOMPANIMENT, ACCEPTANCE, AND PRAYERFUL AGILITY

I don't know where this road will end
But I'll walk it with you, hand in hand
I can't promise you fair sky above
Can't promise you kind road below
But I'll walk beside you, love
Any way the wind blows
Do you let me walk with you?
I do.

—“Promises” as performed by Reeve Carney and Eva Nobelzada from the Broadway musical
“Hadestown”

I am finally led into thinking about what accompaniment looks like for undergraduate
students who are seeking support in the midst of their mental health challenges or within their
experiences of mental distress. Especially for students who are, through their search for their
authentic selves in their emerging identity and adulthood, striving to more deeply understand how
to live and grow into relationship with God, Campus Ministry is in a critical position to guide
students through this intense time of discernment. Campus Ministry also stands as an important
department on campus to offer students pastoral guidance and care during the time they spend at
Saint Ben’s and Saint John’s. Because of my role as a Saint John’s Campus Minister, I will be
turning my focus to Saint John’s students for this response.

I will begin by first evaluating the strengths and successes of two different men’s groups
at Saint John’s. The first is the Men’s Spirituality Groups, today called Johnnie Brothers, operated

72 Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, 30. [emphasis mine]
by Saint John’s Campus Ministry. The second is the Men’s Resiliency Group I facilitated in the fall in partnership with Saint John’s Residential Life and Housing. Following an analysis of both groups, I offer my own suggestions of a new pastoral response to support undergraduate students in times of mental distress in light of the limitations of both groups.

*Sacred Time and Sacred Space: Men’s Spirituality Groups at Saint John’s University*

Partnered with the desire to guide undergraduate students to a space of healthy prayerful resilience, there seems equal importance to serve the spiritual needs of undergraduate men on college and university campuses. Fr. William Schipper, OSB, with W. Merele Longwood and Philip Culbertson, writes about how an initiative to “[develop] spirituality and [to bring] a critical perspective to the dominant masculine ideals in American society” was ultimately accomplished at Saint John’s through the creation of Men’s Spirituality Groups (today called Johnnie Brothers). This is the first group I will be evaluating in this pastoral response section.

The Men’s Spirituality Groups here at Saint John’s bring together undergraduate men in small groups on a semi-regular basis to “reflect on their lives.” As has been previously mentioned, the stigma, especially for men, to discuss issues related to mental health can be a real barrier. Groups of this nature are important because they provide a platform for men to “challenge traditional masculine norms,” moving beyond beliefs that “regard paying attention to spirituality as inappropriate for ‘real men.’”

Longitudinal research on restricted emotionality (i.e., emotional rigidity) in Saint John’s students, conducted by Gar Kellom, former executive director of the Saint John’s Men’s Center for Leadership and Service, conducted to observe and articulate masculine social norms, offers

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74 Ibid., 23.
deep insights into not only the identity development of undergraduate college men and the challenges they face in the midst of that development. Kellom’s insight deepens the importance of Dr. Susan David’s work on emotional agility. Kellom surveyed all male students entering Saint John’s in the fall of 2004, continuing until 2008. In addition to this survey, a smaller group of students was sampled in their sophomore and senior years to mark any possible changes over their time on campus. Survey questions included statements such as, “strong emotions are hard for me to understand,” and “I have difficulty expressing my tender feelings.” Students were instructed to answer for both themselves and to answer how they thought their peers might respond. Kellom reported that students “consistently ranked their agreement with [the] statements lower than they thought their peers would answer,” indicating an application of the stigma of ‘typical masculinity’ on their peers at a higher rate than themselves. Results on a similar survey about men’s spiritual norms indicated similar findings. Enter in, then, the importance of the Men’s Spirituality Groups (Johnnie Brothers) on campus to fight the misconceptions of both ‘typical’ masculinity and spirituality amongst college men.

The success, according to Gar Kellom, in these groups at Saint John’s can be boiled down to four key elements, common in each group:

1. The creation of a confidential “safe space” for men to gather together.
2. Skilled mentors or facilitators to maintain the safe space (usually two, sometimes two monastics or one monastic and one lay person).
3. Modeling (by mentors) of how to share or open up/disclose one’s own story.
4. Modeling (by mentors) of how to actively listen and ask good follow-up questions.

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75 Ibid., 6-7.
76 Ibid., 9.
77 Responses were scored on a scale of 1-60. An agreement to the statements scored the highest. Average scores for students rating themselves as seniors was a 25, and the score of 30 for their peers.
78 Reference Longwood, Schipper, and Culbertson, Forging the Male Spirit, p. 12-14 for survey data.
The content of these spirituality groups focuses on “one of its members’ stories at each meeting,” meaning that in a group of ten students and two facilitators, each group member has an opportunity, over the course of the academic year to have a full meeting devoted to their story.\textsuperscript{80} Beginning in their first year, the men who participate in these groups remain in the same group throughout their time at Saint John’s (citing the Benedictine Value of stability). This provides the opportunity for students to interact with, grow with, and deepen their relationships with their fellow group members and facilitators over their college careers. Furthering the significance of these groups for the undergraduate men who participate in them is the way they foster their spiritual agility. While this term might not be explicitly used, as the safe space is created, Fr. William Schipper explains how, when the “bonds of safety and trust” are formed, group members slowly realize that being vulnerable, authentic, and open is possible for themselves—and that they can be that vulnerable, authentic person with other men.

Thematically, each year focuses on topics appropriate to the spiritual and developmental maturity of the group members. Topics for each year might be as follows (with slight variation for each individual group):

- First year: “Who am I and what do I believe?”
- Sophomore year: Relationships
- Junior Year: Authenticity (our external vs. internal selves)\textsuperscript{81}
- Senior Year: “What have I learned throughout my time here at Saint John’s, how have I changed, and how do I move forward?”\textsuperscript{82}

This storytelling model with a developmentally scaffolded progression stands as an immense strength of this group in dismantling stigma amongst men, as it provides space for the men

\textsuperscript{80} Gar Kellom, “Recent Research,” 35.
\textsuperscript{81} Many past participants have named this theme was especially important for them to open up in their spirituality. See Forging the Male Spirit, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{82} Longwood, Forging the Male Spirit: The Spiritual Lives of American College Men, 38-39.
involved to “discuss personal issues in their own lives, moving beyond the ‘usual’ topics of discussion – sports, politics and sex.”\textsuperscript{83}

A second critical dynamic noted within this model that flows from the first is how the group provides undergraduate men the chance to hear the experiences of not only their mentors, but their peers as well. This creates the “opportunity for new understandings of self and others,” allowing group members to “acknowledge they often have the same fears, joys, and challenges as their peers,” and “raise questions within themselves that they had not previously pondered or had not yet been able to articulate fully.”\textsuperscript{84}

Ultimately, graduating seniors often cite the effectiveness of these groups based on how participating in the groups throughout their college experience influenced their self-understanding as a man, gave them the opportunity to know how to build better relationships with others outside of their group (i.e., with parents, significant others), deepened their sense of spirituality, instilled in them a sense of justice and compassion, and finally, enabled them to speak of their individual sense of vocation.\textsuperscript{85} Engagement in these groups has also been highly successful in “assisting these young men in challenging masculine stereotypes as they learned more reflectively authentic ways to be a man in society today.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textit{Doing well when we shouldn’t be: Men’s Resiliency Pilot Group at Saint John’s University}

\textsuperscript{83} Longwood, 37.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 90.
A second group worthy of evaluation and insight in this pastoral response is the Men’s Resiliency Group I facilitated for my final field education practicum in partnership with Saint John’s Residential Life. Like the mission statement of Saint John’s Campus Ministry, which is committed to serving the spiritual and religious development of undergraduate men\(^{87}\), the mission statement for Residential Life also seeks to support undergraduate students in gaining a “better understanding of themselves as young men though their involvement in and strong commitment to community,” fostering inclusiveness, mutual respect, personal responsibility, spiritual development, academic success, and good stewardship.\(^{88}\) Recognizing a personal and pastoral goal to more fully provide undergraduate male students with opportunities to engage in holistic growth, I wondered, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and a trepidatious election cycle, what tools and strategies students had or were learning in order to gain more resiliency in order to continue showing up in their various roles each day when the world is steeped in ambiguity. Additionally, I wondered how students – male students in particular – were being taught how they do not need to tackle all of these questions at once and as an individual, but that it was acceptable for them to seek support within a community.

Speaking with Br Daniel Morgan, OSB, Director of Residential Life at Saint John’s during summer 2020, we spoke often of programmatic hopes to tackle topics related to things such as toxic masculinity and vulnerability. Approaching students later in the semester with the idea of joining a pilot “Men’s Resiliency

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Group” demonstrated an expressed need by several undergraduate men to engage in intentional conversations with their peers. I intentionally sought to keep this group (at least at first) ‘spirituality/religiously neutral’ to encourage a diverse cross-section of students to participate. I also reached out to students who I knew were not already involved in a Johnnie Brother’s (Men’s Spirituality) Group. In the end, I secured eight undergraduate students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, who committed to spend an hour each week discussing resiliency with myself and the other members of the group.\(^9\)

Our first two sessions, we met in a hybrid fashion, with most of us meeting socially distanced in a classroom, and some joining via Zoom. Following the second session, COVID-19 cases spiked on campus amongst the student body, and we transitioned into all meeting via Zoom for the rest of our meetings. Over the series of the eight weeks we spent together, a pattern seemed to emerge, suggesting that with each session, the level of trust and willingness to be vulnerable deepened. With each session, I posed the same three questions to begin: Where are you at, where are you coming from, and what’s bringing you into this space today? These questions served as a foundation for my scaffolding as a facilitator and guiding a discussion of the resiliency practices and strategies I had introduced the week before. One member, Michael, had joined the first two meetings on Zoom due to being in both quarantine and isolation due to COVID-19 and had expressed excitement at being able to gather with the other group members in person. When I

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\(^9\) To get a sense of the group dynamic: Several of the students, Michael (a senior), Henry (a junior), Matt (a sophomore), Trenton (a sophomore), and Logan (a sophomore), I had met through my work in Campus Ministry as the Ministerial Resident for Retreats. Trevor (a junior) and Nate (a junior), I met through my work as a summer Faculty Resident with Saint John’s Residential Life. Elijah (a senior), I connected with through a mutual connection, after a former student worker of mine suggested I speak with him because of his work on the St. John’s Senate and as the Student Director of the Men’s Development Institute, an organization on campus which seeks to promote the holistic development of men on campus by leveraging existing infrastructure and resources in our community. Michael, Henry, Matt, Trenton, Trevor, and Nate all identify as Catholic (in one of our meetings, Nate expressed that he considers himself to be “a man of faith,” with affirmation from Michael, Matt, Trevor, and Trenton) and each regularly attend the Sunday Student Mass offered through Campus Ministry. Both Elijah and Logan identify their religious affiliation as atheist/agnostic.
asked these questions at the beginning of our third meeting (again on Zoom), he expressed, “some of you guys I’ve never physically met before this group, but I’ve noticed that I feel like I can be vulnerable and open with you guys, and that’s pretty cool.” By the fourth week, I began noticing a sense of mutuality, respect, and affirmation, as the guys began offering reassurance and words of support with and to each other, which carried into the subsequent weeks. During our sixth meeting, Elijah expressed, “I’m trying to get myself back to a good place mentally. I enjoyed last week and it’s exciting to be here with you all this week again to dig deep.” In the same meeting, Nate made a comment after sharing a point of insecurity he had been harboring, expressing “these aren’t things I just share with anyone.”

Each group’s agenda was designed to build upon the previous meeting, each with an increased risk of vulnerability and emotional exposure. Like the Men’s Spirituality Groups, a storytelling model with a developmentally scaffolded progression was essential for its success. Session Two, everyone brought a photo of a person for whom they were grateful, to reflect and debrief a week-long practice of Morning Gratitude. In Session Three, the focus was on intentional focus and attention, and I placed the guys into breakout rooms with the instruction to see what it would feel like to give their partner undivided attention for two minutes. Following the fourth session, Michael sent me a text message which read, “Not sure why exactly, but today was really, really great. It had me smiling so much.” Session Five, however, felt like a hinge point, with the conversation turning to the practice of Self-Kindness. The questions I posed, which I sent out a few days prior to our meeting were:

- Who lives in your head? (What are the tapes that keep spinning?) What would it take for you to look at yourself with the eyes of a person who loves/trusts/values you unconditionally?
- How do you define success?
- What do you need most right now? From yourself, from others, and if it applies to you, from God?
What is your worth? Where does it come from?

A brief moment of silence proceeded the sharing before Logan jumped in, “okay, I don’t know about all of you, but these questions really resonated with me and I just have to say a few things.” He ended with the admission, “I’ve started to doubt my worth.” Logan’s comment was met with head-nods of affirmation from the others. Elijah commented, “I constantly think about my failures, I think about what I haven’t been doing, what I could do better…this is in my head a lot.” Henry followed with saying, “I’ve been convinced these judgements are so important, to listen to this voice and recognize it’s ridiculous sometimes and always judging me.” Logan offered to send Henry an email to follow up, and I continued sitting back, watching them give out strategies to each other. During each guy’s sharing, the others responded with head-nodding, smiles, comments in the chat like, “you’ve got this, we’re here for you…you’re not alone.” Nate stepped in, testing out the thought, “If five-year-old me were here, what would he think of me? Would he be proud? I put pressure on myself because I don’t want to let this part of myself down. I’ve tricked myself into thinking the things I’m choosing to do are the coolest things ever even if it doesn’t always seem like the things that I’m doing are cool compared to what other people think or say are cool.” At the conclusion of the meeting, Matt expressed, “I just want to say that tonight there was a new level of trust built up with the openness of this group, and I really appreciate that.” His comment was met with additional smiling and head-nodding as we waved goodbye.

The last session stands out as a particularly significant display of openness and vulnerability, when I asked everyone to bring something, a poem, piece of artwork, a song, picture of someone who has shaped them, a description of a place that was meaningful to them. The theme of the meeting was to reflect on where we derived our strength. At the onset of this meeting, I outlined, for the first time, guidelines for speaking and sharing: We each come with individual
strength and wisdom within us to share; It is not our job to ‘fix’ anyone or to give advice in this circle. You don’t have to share. Invite others in gently (e.g., Elijah, do you want to share?). Elijah shared an original poem with one verse being, ‘and today I want to cry.’ Trevor and Henry both shared the Theodore Roosevelt speech “The Man in the Arena.” Logan shared books that were special to him, given to him by his favorite teacher. Nate shared a song from a video game. Watching as they invited each other into the space of sharing and vulnerability, I posed a question: What was it like for you to share that? “Scary,” came the echoed response from many of the guys. Following up, I wondered and asked, “I’m hearing a lot of fear…what allowed you to jump over that hurdle?” After a pause, Nate answered: “It’s always scary to share stuff like this. I mean, I shared a song from a videogame soundtrack. But I was okay sharing it with you because I trust that you guys won’t judge me or think less of me because we’ve been spending time together these last seven weeks and I know you’ve all got my back.” The ‘aha’ moments from the session: these vulnerable parts of myself are things that I can share with others, and it’s okay to do that.

Analyzing the Strengths of Both Groups: Cultivating Presence

Gretchen Ki Steidle, the founder and President of Global Grassroots, an organization focused on catalyzing women and girls as leaders of conscious social change in their communities, writes on how to cultivate a sense of presence. This work provides deeper insight into the clear success of both the Men’s Spirituality (Johnnie Brothers) Groups and my semester-long Men’s Resiliency Group. It likewise suggests how the sense of connection ignited by the participation in either group allowed the group members to feel supported, seen, and valued.

How is real presence cultivated? In the final meeting for my Resiliency group, I introduced guidelines for speaking and sharing. Resisting the compulsion to ‘fix’ and give others advice90—

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the opposite of what I had observed in the group—stands as the first main source of wisdom. She writes about the importance of allowing others to simply be—just like how Dr. Susan David invites us into recognizing our feelings as simply our current state of being. An assumption I had brought with me was that the guys in this group would recognize this without an explicit reminder. While they did not seem to judge each other or overpower each other beforehand, offering words of affirmation when someone expressed struggle, the instinct seemed to be to jump into the role of ‘fixer’ and advice-giver. The modeling of active listening and asking good follow up questions, one of the four “key elements” noted by Gar Kellom, informs a change I made in my own facilitation. The dynamics of the Resiliency group shifted slightly when I was explicit in my modeling and expectation of what this active listening looked like. I observed as they began inviting each other into the conversation, rather than waiting to speak, and building upon what their peers had shared. The flow of conversation became less about sharing the most polished thought or being the one with all of the answers. Steidle also points to how mindfulness (and prayer, potentially) enables stronger relationships to form with better listening. She continues, explaining how through the regular practice of mindfulness “we build relationships that are driven by deeper human understanding and common ground.”91

There was nothing explicitly spiritual about the Resiliency group, seemingly the opposite of the aptly named Men’s Spirituality Groups. Yet, Brené Brown’s definition of spirituality offers a counterpoint and deeper insight into the movement away from isolation towards this cultivated presence as the connections between the members of each group, Men’s Spirituality or Resiliency, increased each week and session. She defines it as “recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to

91 Steidle, *Leading from Within*, 54.
that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.” While for Brown, spirituality is more focused on the human spirit rather than the transcendent Holy Spirit, what is significant in this context is how, “practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.” In this way, the strength of both men’s groups is the simple intentionality of gathering together—to accompany one another vulnerably.

What’s still needed: Proposed Pastoral Response

There are very clear strengths of both groups illuminated above. The model I propose is not to negate these strengths. In fact, I would encourage all Saint John’s students to join a Johnnie Brothers (Men’s Spirituality) Group because I recognize the impact of sustained relationships, mentors who can offer wisdom and guidance, and meeting over the course of one’s entire time at Saint John’s (since the identity-rooted questions highlighted throughout the paper take longer than a single semester, or even four years, to answer). However, the model I propose is one of accessibility for all Saint John’s student, regardless of their participation in a spirituality group. Likewise, the model I propose will tackle the topic of prayer and mental health explicitly. The main limitation of both of the above groups, from my perspective, however, comes in the source of who facilitates and initiates. There is nothing objectively wrong with this source of mentorship and facilitation coming from non-peers—in fact offering potential wisdom, expertise, and different perspectives from being removed from the intimate college experience with the facilitation coming from members of the monastery, older lay men, or in my case, from a woman.

However, within the symbol and model of accompaniment, there is a real need for a student-run and facilitated group that is focused on the support and accompaniment of peers in the midst of conversations pertaining to mental health, faith and spirituality development, and prayer.

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With the goal of destigmatizing and ‘normalizing’ the conversations between men regarding their mental health and spirituality, two conversations they are capable of having, but maybe would not feel naturally inclined to do so outside of a group, it is important for undergraduate men to see their peers, especially ones they look up to and trust willingly entering into these conversation circles. This is what will ultimately allow for the elimination of the stigma surrounding talking about mental health as well as help create the space of healthy (and prayerful) resilience and agility.

The “Johnnie Project,” launched this past spring semester serves as a potential space of collaboration and support of students and bridges the gap between students who choose to engage with Campus Ministry’s Spirituality Groups and for those who do not. This program, inspired in part by the Resiliency Group I piloted in the fall, is meeting four times throughout the spring semester with the intention to help end the stigma of mental health amongst men on campus. Each session is about an hour long and open to all Saint John’s students, facilitated by student leaders. Sessions include opportunities to dialogue about depression and anxiety, social media usage, healthy personal relationships, and toxic masculinity. Nearly forty Johnnies attended this first session on anxiety and depression, a major accomplishment in itself (and brings to light the pressing reality of the statistics indicating that nearly 70 percent of Saint John’s students going to the counseling center on campus experienced anxiety and close to 50 percent for both depression and stress).

Because of this strong peer-initiated group and clear engagement from students on campus, I suggest adding a fifth session (ideally following session #1 in future iterations of this project). In partnership with Campus Ministry, the goal of this session would be to further engage Saint John’s students into conversation about how their experiences of faith (or not) shapes the way they...

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93 These student facilitators received training from Dr. Mike Ewing, PhD, Director of Counseling and Health Promotions at CSBSJU as well as facilitation training from Rev. Dr. Anna Mercedes.
navigate times of distress, anxiety, and depression—especially as they are called into moments of prayer in light of these experiences.

My focus on this pastoral response again is three-fold: (a) that it is accessible to all students, regardless of their participation in a spirituality group, (b) that it is facilitated by students, for students, in collaboration with Campus Ministry, and (c) that its focus is explicitly on prayer and mental health. Sticking to the same timeframe as the currently planned Johnnie Project outlines, the session will last an hour long, and provide the opportunity for Saint John’s students to enter into dialogue with one another.

For both the development of content and reflection questions, I return to the wisdom of the lament psalmists, who begin in a vulnerable expression of isolation, distress, or a complaint of a change they would like to see. Again, the practice of lament is significant for undergraduate students experiencing mental distress, anxiety, or depression because the form and structure offers “troubled individuals a means of unburdening themselves before God and receiving the reassurance” that they are in fact not alone.94 These statements of trust, “uttered in spite of the difficulties” and disorientation an individual might be experiencing are ways of reorienting undergraduate students’ experiences of distress. Even more importantly, they provide the pray-er (that is, the undergraduate student in mental distress) a safe and vulnerable place to continue building trust with God in a theologically balanced way. Instead of simply expecting their prayer to be answered, the prayer itself swings, like a pendulum, between the depths of despair and hopefulness that represents the full range of the human experience.95 In lament, there is no space for shame to manifest. Rather, in the very acknowledgement of distress, it also leaves space for hope that God will listen and act.

95 Brueggemann, Psalms and the Faith and Life, 22.
This may be a new way for undergraduate students to think of their individual relationship with God, and also a new form of prayer for them. However, praying with the psalms of lament, rather than (or in addition to) intercessory prayer in times of distress, where one may simply name ‘problems’ to be fixed by God, encourage undergraduate students to trust in the mystery of how God interacts and engages with them and others; the ebbs and flows of the psalms allow for movement to go “beyond self-deception and come to an understanding of the ambiguities and mysteries of our own experiences and deal them in a way that indicates what we are looking for is where God is present” in big and small ways in our lives.\textsuperscript{96} While challenging, the lament psalms clearly show what it looks like to rely on God rather than trying to gain our own control through prayer. (At least in my own experience of intercessory prayer, this is what I sought, rather than seeking to deepen my relationship with God; I just wanted to be “fixed.”)

Recognizing how the ritual action contained within Catholic liturgical prayer “recognizes that human beings are a union of soul and body,”\textsuperscript{97} I also turn to the ancient—yet still practiced—Benedictine monastic tradition of the Liturgy of the Hours. The intentionality of entering into prayer and dialogue provides space to not only be in “meditative dialogue between an individual soul and God” but also brings individuals \textit{intentionally into prayer within a community}. In this way, the focus of prayer is on the mystery of God, the self, Church, and world.\textsuperscript{98} Evening Prayer, in particular, serves as a source of inspiration in the sense it is “celebrated in order that ‘we may give thanks for what has been given us.’”\textsuperscript{99} Not only does this pastoral response celebrate the rich Benedictine and Catholic Tradition of the Saint John’s community, it also provides students with

\textsuperscript{96} Brueggemann, 28-32.
\textsuperscript{97} See the explanation of “Ritual Action” from Saint Bernard Abbey, a Benedictine Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. Accessed April 12, 2021 at \url{https://stbernardabbey.com/the-divine-office/}.
\textsuperscript{98} “Liturgy of the Hours,” USCCB, \url{https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgy-of-the-hours}
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
the opportunity to *themselves*, like the ancient psalmists, to explicitly and accurately name and navigate a wide range of their *own* experiences and emotions. Therefore, it presents individual students a safe space to practice holistic, theologically grounded emotional and *prayerful* agility, and places them in the context of doing so with the support of their peers who are doing the same thing.

With this in consideration, below is a snapshot of a proposed session outline to add onto the “Johnnie Project:”

**Johnnie Project Session #2 – Prayer and Mental Health**

- Gathering/Opening Welcome
- Reiteration of Ground Rules
- Recitation of Psalm 69 (excerpts)
- Individual Reflection in Silence
- Small Group Discussion of Reflection Questions
- Intercessions
- Dismissal to go in peace

The session (the full proposed session can be found in Appendix A) itself models the Benedictine monastic practice of slowly reciting the psalms in groups, called “choirs.” This slow reading provides individuals the opportunity to not only read the words but also listen to them be recited by fellow community members. Likewise, the members of the choirs become a single voice, with no individual voice rising above another. Silence, as it is an integral element of this form of prayer, will also be integrated as students are encouraged to sit with the text, to meditate upon which words or phrases stand out, and to place themselves in the context of the psalmist. With the slowness of going through the psalm throughout the session, it is essentially a facilitated *lectio divina* session. The purpose of working through the psalm in this way is to provide Saint John’s students the opportunity, first, to read, meditate upon, pray with, and contemplate the psalm together, the four traditional steps of *lectio divina*. The reflection questions are scaffolded as the
psalm unfolds, providing students a platform to build upon and connect their own stories to the words of the psalm. Ultimately, the hope is that (while perhaps not happening in the session itself), students are opened up to a new way of prayer that encourages and facilitates a movement that brings students:

a. Beyond the words of the psalm

b. Into a reflection of their own experience of disorientation

c. Into re-orientation, ending with new perspective on their personal experiences, which they can express in an emotionally agile and prayerfully resilient way.

An essential step before the session itself will be the mentoring and support of student facilitators. The student facilitators for the current Johnnie Project have received training from Counseling and Health Promotions as well as facilitation training from Rev. Dr. Anna Mercedes, a co-administrator of Becoming Community, an initiative funded through the Mellon Foundation that is focused on creating transformative inclusion through conversation and developing tools to create space for “all to be heard and for all to thrive.” Therefore, the role of student facilitator is essential. The mentality behind the Johnnie Project is “Johnnie supporting Johnnie,” Elijah Henderson, one of the student senators and facilitators, explained to me. Again, through my evaluation of the Men’s Spirituality and Resiliency models, facilitated by adult mentors, this facilitation by students is a refreshing and much needed addition.

I would suggest, however, that in addition to the current student facilitators, that a Saint John’s student campus minister also helps lead this proposed session. Like the current facilitators who have received training from Health Promotions and Anna Mercedes, a student campus minister makes an important addition in this “Johnnies supporting Johnnies” initiative because they will have received mentorship and guidance on how to minister to their peers from professional, theologically trained staff.
Like the goals of the Becoming Community Initiative, the Johnnie Project seeks to be a safe space where individuals can feel “authentic, recognized, accepted, and wanted.”\textsuperscript{100} It is the hope that this proposed session deepens the ability of students who participate to recognize not only their individual needs, experiences, and struggles, but to also be opened up to see the needs of their peers as well. The importance of community—and accompaniment within community—is important. On top of gaining insight into theologically agile and resilient prayer, the navigation of the paradox of living through times of mental distress is something I hope undergraduate students can lean into as well, as they recognize that while they may feel alone that they might come to see that they are, in fact, never alone.

**LAYING IT ALL DOWN IN A CALM, SAFE SPACE**

*Called your name, and you formed out of the emptiness.*  
*Called your name, and I swear this time I’ll be my best.*  
*Called your name, and I felt home sweet home.*  
*May you find grace when overtaken by the tempest.*  
*May you find humor in the cynic and the pessimist.*  
*May you find faith in the Great Unknown.*  
*Lay it all down...in a calm, safe space.*

— “To the Great Unknown” as performed by Cloud Cult

In the first section of this paper, I oriented readers to the issues of mental health and distress in undergraduate college students in general. An evaluation of three social structures, generational pressure to attend college, the reality of emerging adulthood and identity development, and the current reality of the COVID-19 pandemic paved the way to a discussion on emotional agility, scarcity, and vulnerability. The second section of this paper hinged on the questions of emotional rigidity and agility, as I claimed a misunderstanding of the divine-human relationship and of prayer

\textsuperscript{100} “Becoming Community,” College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, [https://www.csbsju.edu/becoming-community](https://www.csbsju.edu/becoming-community)
was one potential source of harm for individuals in mental distress. Turning to the wisdom of the lament psalms, I outlined an application of emotional agility and prayerful resilience. This ultimately led me to my proposed pastoral response to add a fifth session to the Saint John Senate’s “Johnnie Project.”

The story-telling nature of the psalms and scaffolded reflections layered throughout the proposed session are critical because both point to a fundamental human desire: to be seen, heard, and accepted by others in the totality and raw-ness of our experiences. As I conclude, I am reminded of the challenging command in the prologue of the Rule of Saint Benedict to “listen with the ear of [our] hearts.” What are we doing (read: what am I doing, what are you doing, what is our community doing) to ensure that this kind of deep listening and real presence is being manifested, especially in the midst of the personal challenges of anxiety, depression, and mental distress faced by so many? Chapter 53 in the Rule provides some insight into what this looks like, as it offers the reminder that “all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” The simplicity of sitting and listening without judgement, rather, with compassion, brings back to mind the dialogical nature of prayer brought up in one of my many conversations with Joe Penny.

“It seems to me that people often forget that a conversation, like this one,” Joe said to me, “can be—and more importantly, is—prayer. I feel blessed to be sitting with you. You are sitting with me; you are with me. I am recognizing the God within you as you are seeing the God within me, and that, in itself, is incredibly healing.”

In light of my own story, this act of being accompanied by others was—and still is—essential. Ultimately, being accompanied, and now accompanying others, has led me to my own

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101 Joe Penny, in conversation with the author.
recognition of worthiness. I can look in the mirror and realize that I am, in fact, “good enough,” and “doing enough,” and understand that the feelings I continue to experience are valid because I am a person. This transcends, then, into my ability to better accompany and empathize with the suffering and experiences of others. This accompaniment, it cannot be emphasized enough, should not be centered around the assumed brokenness, struggles, or sadness of a person, but instead seek to engage more fully with standing witness to the whole person. What is at the heart of answering the question of how to accompany well in times of mental distress, then, is discovering the authentic, real person behind the struggle.

As suggested by Erik Erikson, this question of who we are is essential to our full development as human beings, yet it cannot be answered alone. Fr. Bryan Massingale echoes this as he calls for the creation of compassionate communities that uphold and honor the lament and joys of the suffering of others. The kind of re-orientation that occurs in the midst of their lament and disorientation of the psalmist comes as both the individual and community that is accompanying that individual arrive at a point of honest, resilient agility, the concept brought forward by Dr. Susan David. It is this rootedness in our own emotion and experience that presents the opportunity to most fully recognize the radical presence of the divine in all things and in all people.

I have always been fascinated by stories: the way they can bring us places, make us feel, and continue to teach long after our initial experiences. I often return to my journals as a source of wisdom, seeking solace in the recognition of the resilience I didn’t know I had in my times of deepest struggle. Though not the words of the ancient psalms, I find myself standing in solidarity with that ancient unnamed soul who sought God’s presence and healing in the midst of the

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ambiguity of their suffering. It strikes me how the words of the psalmists, though, ancient, will continue to be relevant as long as humans experience anxiety, depression, and mental distress. However, this example of what it looks like to resolve in hope and joy in seeking God amidst this very real human struggle inspires me to continue pondering still what it means to be part of this divine-human relationship. While embedded in mystery, it challenges me to stay present, and to cultivate places of real presence when I am with others, because, as Joe reminded me, the divine can often be found there, too.

I close my eyes now, wading through the wisdom of my experiences, the words of the psalms ringing through my mind, recall those whom I accompany and those who accompany me. I open them to find myself in a calm, safe space.
## Appendix A – Johnnie Project Session #2 – Prayer and Mental Health Facilitator Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gathering/Opening Welcome</th>
<th>Reiteration of Ground Rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>1. Come in with an open mind, and don’t be afraid to be vulnerable and to take risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Confidentiality is key. What is said here, stays here unless the other person agrees for their story to be shared</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Be respectful of others, including being cognizant of the pronouns of those in this room</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. This is a place to make mistakes, that’s okay, let’s correct each other and learn from them</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Share the “airtime.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Quick note:** any information that is disclosed to us that may indicate self-harm or harm of others, we will have to inform Counseling and Health Services.

- We also ask that you make an effort to listen before making yourself heard (three before me).
- Anyone else have any ground rules they would like to add?

Student Campus Minister offers a brief explanation of Liturgy of the Hours and the recitation of the psalms in “choirs”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recitation of Excerpts from Psalm 69</th>
<th>Facilitator 1:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Save me, God,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for the waters have reached my neck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have sunk into the mire of the deep,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>where there is no foothold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have gone down to the watery depths;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the flood overwhelms me.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Facilitator 2:**

I am weary with crying out;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes fail,  
from looking for my God.

**ALL:** Hasten to answer me, for I am in distress.

**Individual Reflection Question:** When have you felt like the psalmist with the “waters up to your neck”?

After 1 minute of silent reflection, **Facilitator 1** begins again.

**Facilitator 1:**

God, you know my folly;
my faults are not hidden from you.
Let those who wait in hope for you, LORD of hosts,
not be shamed because of me.

**Choir 1:**
Let those who seek you, God of Israel,
not be disgraced because of me.
For it is on your account I bear insult,
that disgrace covers my face.

**Choir 2:**
But I will pray to you, LORD,
at a favorable time.
God, in your abundant kindness, answer me
with your sure deliverance.

**Choir 1:**
Rescue me from the mire,
and do not let me sink.
Rescue me from those who hate me
and from the watery depths.

**Choir 2:**
Do not let the flood waters overwhelm me,
nor the deep swallow me,
nor the pit close its mouth over me.

**Choir 1:**
Answer me, LORD, in your generous love;
in your great mercy turn to me.

**ALL:**
Do not hide your face from your servant;
hasten to answer me, for I am in distress.

**Individual Reflection Question:** What words or phrases stand out to you when you heard and read this section of the psalm? Why?

After 1 minute of silent reflection, Facilitator 2 begins again.

**Facilitator 2:**
But here I am miserable and in pain;
let your saving help protect me, God,
That I may praise God’s name in song
and glorify it with thanksgiving.

**Choir 1:**
That will please the LORD more than oxen, more than bulls with horns and hooves: “See, you lowly ones, and be glad; you who seek God, take heart!

_Choir 2:_

For the LORD hears the poor, and does not spurn those in bondage. Let the heaven and the earth praise him, the seas and whatever moves in them!”

_ALL:_

For God will rescue Zion, and rebuild the cities of Judah. They will dwell there and possess it; the descendants of God’s servants will inherit it; those who love God’s name will dwell in it.

**Individual Reflection Question:** How do you think the psalmist found hope in the end? What hope do you hear in this psalm?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Reflection in Silence</th>
<th>Provide about 5 minutes of silent, individual reflection time before releasing students out into small groups for discussion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Small Group Discussion of Reflection Questions | - What words or phrases stood out to you when you heard and read this psalm? Why?  
- What experiences in your own life can you talk about tonight that are similar to the suffering expressed by the psalmist?  
- How do you think the psalmist found hope? From where do you resolve to find hope and re-orientation in your own life and experiences?  
- The psalmist expresses a number of emotions vulnerably in the midst of their prayer to God. What would it be like for you to do the same in this space today? |
| Intercessions | Merciful God, you are attentive to the cries of our hearts. In hope we pray: “O God, listen to our prayer.”  
- Ease the sufferings of those who have suffered trauma and sensitize us to the hurts of others. Unite us in compassion for one another…  
- Help us to listen to one another with respect and love…  
- For all of us gathered together today…  
- For what else?  
- For all of these prayers and for those we hold in our hearts… |
| Dismissal to go in peace | May the light of Christ shine through our darkness, and may all we do give glory to God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. |
Appendix B – Critical Definitions

Depersonalization: the depletion of empathy, caring, and compassion and a decreased sense of accomplishment, the feeling that nothing you do makes a difference.\(^{103}\)

Emotions: Involuntary neurological (chemical and electrical) responses that takes place in a cycle throughout the entire body via the nervous system. Drs. Emily and Amelia Nogoski describe emotions as having a beginning, middle, and end, like tunnels, which we need to get through, lest we get stuck. “We have to go all the way through them to get to the light at the end.”\(^{104}\)

Stress: a normal, proportional reaction to a situation or external pressures or to the psychological perception of pressure.
  - Some stress is necessary for all living systems; it is the means by which they encounter and respond to the challenges and uncertainties of existence.\(^{105}\)

Anxiety: a mental and/or physical state of negative expectation
  - Anxiety is a response intended to capture attention and stimulate necessary change to keep us safe.
  - Occasional bouts of anxiety are natural and can even be productive.\(^{106}\)

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD): The DSM-5 outlines the following criteria to make a diagnosis of GAD.
1. Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance).
2. The person finds it difficult to control the worry.
3. The anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms present for more days than not for the past 6 months).
   i. Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
   ii. Being easily fatigued
   iii. Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
   iv. Irritability
   v. Muscle tension
   vi. Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless unsatisfying sleep)
4. The disturbance is not better explained by another mental disorder
5. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.


\(^{104}\) Ibid.


6. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance

Depression: The DSM-5 outlines the following criterion to make a diagnosis of depression. The individual must be experiencing five or more symptoms during the same 2-week period and at least one of the symptoms should be either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day.
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
5. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
6. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
7. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.
8. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation\textsuperscript{107} without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

To receive a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must cause the individual clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The symptoms must also not be a result of substance abuse or another medical condition.

\textsuperscript{107} For more information about Suicide Warning Signs: https://www.psycom.net/suicide-warning-signs

If a person is thinking of suicide, it's also important to ask them if they have a plan. If they say yes, assist them in seeking immediately help. They can simply walk into an emergency room or urgent care clinic, or they can call 911. At any time they can also call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
Appendix C: Ground-Rules and Points of Encouragement for Students Engaging their Peers:

1. **Start out with sharing an authentic story, when appropriate.** This could be in a small or large group, or individual setting. The action of standing in front of any number of people, acknowledging imperfection or struggle and admitting the difficulty in sharing a potentially vulnerable thing about yourself is a display of courage. Often one of the most difficult steps in seeking counsel in the first place is mustering up *enough* courage to jump past the potential fear of judgement or stigma surrounding asking for help. Therefore, it is important to begin with where we (ministers) are at (inhomently imperfect and flawed human beings) and go from there. Our presence and actions are influential, whether this is known or not, and we must embrace this.

2. **Don’t assume you know anything about how others experience anxiety or depression.** Instead, as Dr. Mike Ewing suggested, we must ‘tap into the expertise of the other person’. It is important to meet individuals at their point of need. That is, though my personal experiences can be a great creator of empathy, it does not make me an expert about what anyone else is going through. This is why *listening is essential*. What is needed here, in this place? Ask questions and listen to the answer. The answer here, is will always be different for each person.

3. **Define what living empathetically looks like.** Oftentimes, the greatest display of empathy is simply expressing something like, *I don’t really know the ‘right’ thing to say here, but I can be here for you in whatever way you need me.*

4. **Engage in contemplative listening.**¹⁰⁸ This is simply hearing another’s story in an accepting and non-judgmental way. This kind of listening requires attentiveness, mindfulness, and presence to stay with the other person’s story. We should not have expectations, just an open mind; there is not a right or wrong answer. Especially for youth still navigating the process of discovering their

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¹⁰⁸ S. Joyce Iten (OSB) in discussion with the author, Collegeville, MN, September 2018.
own identities, but for anyone, really, this is important – what we have to say matters, and our experiences are real. “All people really want,” S. Joyce told me, “is to be listened to.” Validating that is key.

5. **Practice contemplative dialogue.** This, like contemplative listening, is a skill that can and should be used every single day – a practice of providing non-defensive dialogue that invites the sharing and telling of one’s story. Through our words, we expand our levels of understanding that allow us to extend our boundaries and capacity to respond and also listen. Being aware of our assumptions towards individuals is critical here, so that we do not allow them to become our beliefs about that person. In light of stereotypes surrounding depression or anxiety, it is good for us to know if we are thinking something like, “this person is just sad; all they need to be is cheered up,” and turn our response into something like, “I’ve noticed by what you’re saying you haven’t felt like yourself lately, how long has this been going on?” Though this example is simplistic, it again acknowledges the reality and truth of the other individual’s story. Young adults are used being told what to do or how to feel, so listening and striving to understand their perspective is a way to build up a positive rapport and show them how their ideas are valued and important.

6. **Focus on getting to know the person in front of you holistically, not ‘fixing’.** Start with a ‘weather report’ of sorts. Starting off with general questions like, “how are things going?” might seem simple but provides a starting place. If possible, engage with your identities together – who are you? What do you value? What do you have in common? Asking questions focused on this question of identity is important, as once a basis for who they are and what they believe is brought into the room (and conversely, for you to be able to answer this question as well), an opportunity is created to better support them in how to live out their values in an authentic way.

7. **Finally, lean into accompaniment with that person.**
Bibliography


Suggestions for Further Reading:


NIMH. “Major Depression.” Available at: [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml#part_155721](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml#part_155721)

