

Helpful Notes Re Meditation for Youth

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Introduction and Practical Suggestions

We are pleased to offer you these simple suggestions and resources that may assist you in providing quiet moments of prayer and meditation for youth. The fact that you have chosen to download these resources indicates the appreciation you have of the importance of providing such moments for them.

Our offerings here have been prepared for brief periods of quiet and stillness within a typical school setting, at the beginning of the day or after lunch or at the end of the day. The frequency and duration of these quiet moments and meditations will vary according to your own schedule and the readiness of the youth (see below).

Here are a few practical points that may be worth reaffirming:

1. Attending to the Environment & Atmosphere

Ensure that the physical space in which the meditation is to be held has enough room for everyone to spread out on the floor with a sense of their own space. (This will also reduce the chance of people disrupting each other.) Ideally, presentable, clean carpet and a few cushions contributes to the atmosphere. Also, on occasions, being able to blacken the room and light candles will help create a prayerful and intimate setting. Where the physical space is limited it may be better to leave the group seated in their chairs, sitting upright in a relaxed posture, rather than have them lying in a crowded space.

2. Posture For Meditation

Ideally have the group lie flat on their backs with their feet straight (ankles uncrossed), and arms gently beside them with the palms of their hands facing upward. Encourage them to close their eyes gently and to be aware of the rhythm of their breathing. You may need to be aware that some people are not comfortable with their eyes closed - do not force this, simply encourage them to try to close their eyes gently and leave them be in whatever they choose. It is important that nothing is rigid or absolute in this. What is essential here is that the group are physically comfortable, relaxed and able to have a sense of their own space. There may be value, at times, in doing some basic relaxation exercises with them, by way of preparing them for the meditation. Simple things such as a few deep sighs or a few breathing exercises can

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help to settle them. A further help may be to release the stress in their bodies by focusing on

different parts of their bodies. Beginning with their toes, have them take a deep breath in as they squeeze their toes tight holding that for a few seconds. As they exhale they release their toes. Repeating this procedure, with all parts of the body right up to the tip of the head, may help to relax and settle them. However, doing this too often can become too predictable and, for some, irritating and ineffective. To begin the quiet time and meditation, ensure all your instructions are given before you have the group take up their positions. Avoid talking to them once the quiet time has begun. When you are ready to begin, have someone light the candle or candles and focus the group on the candle and the sacred space, (which may have the Word of God displayed). When the group are settled and still, invite them to take up their meditative positions. Do not begin the music while they are chatting and settling - the music will be lost under that restlessness and will lose its effectiveness. Wait until there is complete stillness and silence before introducing the music by bringing it up gradually to a suitable listening level, not too loud and not too low.

3. Know Your Group

If this kind of experience of quiet moments and meditation is new to your group, then begin with little steps and very brief quiet moments, perhaps nothing more than 2 - 3 minutes of silence and stillness as they listen to some appropriate music. When they have accomplished this and are ready for more, gradually build up the meditation in terms of its duration and focus. It is very important, in providing this kind of time with young people, that you know your group - who they are and what they are ready for; what their need and desire is, and of what they are capable. For example, be aware of people who will have difficulty in lying still and being silent. Take time with these people well before the meditation to prepare them and support them. Give them the quiet music you will be using in the meditation to take home for a few nights to listen to. Encourage them to play it before they go to sleep and to be aware of how still they can be in listening to it. Even with this extra support some may still have difficulty with this. Therefore, ensure that in the meditation they are lying close to you, accessible to your gentle touch or perhaps even acting as an assistant to you by lighting the candles or holding the books or pressing the play button on the CD player. You may also need to be aware of people who could be going through a particularly difficult or emotional time - they may become tearful or disturbed in the meditation. Talk to them before hand and have them lie close to you, where you can be aware of them.

4. Expecting the Unexpected

Be aware of and anticipate external elements that may disrupt the quiet and the prayerful atmosphere of the space you are using, eg bells ringing, announcements being made over PA systems, noisy activities that may be near by, such as sports activities, music classes, lawn mowing etc. Never underestimate how disruptive these can be. It is worth checking timetables and knowing the community's routine, check with grounds-men etc. You can never always get it right so have a contingency plan for the unexpected and unpredictable such as coughing fits (be aware of those prone to this - they tend to cough more when lying down), snoring from those who may fall asleep etc.

5. Sensitivity, Intuition and Flexibility

Sensitivity, intuition and flexibility can be invaluable in preparing and implementing this form of prayer and meditation. Sensitivity and intuition enable us to attend to the finer details of timing, placement, preparation, presentation, atmosphere and setting, all of which can contribute to the overall effectiveness of the experience. Anything that is too much or too little, too fast or too slow, too loud or too soft, too strong or too weak can take from the effectiveness of what we do. Balance and simplicity is the key here. This is as practical an issue as when to light the candle, how to move from point A to point B, where to place a symbol, when to introduce words or music and when to let the silence speak, the tone and

level of one's voice, all of which together and / or individually can enhance or detract from the moment.

Having a "feel" and a sense of the sacred is critical. Knowing how to establish a prayerful sacred atmosphere requires aesthetic sensitivity. Movement and gestures, sound and silence, light and dark, image and symbol, pace and duration, all work together to enhance or disrupt prayer. Listening to the silence and stillness, being able to measure and assess that the group are able for more, or are wanting less, ready to move on or stay in the moment, is very important to the effectiveness of these quiet moments and meditations. A practical help in being sensitive to the sacred atmosphere and to the flow of the meditation, is to have everything you need for the meditation ready and at hand, especially your text and music (a torch or candle for light if reading in a darkened room). If you are using a song as well as music in the meditation ensure that they are ready and cued. Be careful in changing them over during the meditation - the clunk from CD players can be very loud in a silent atmosphere. A help here is to press the pause button before you press the stop button. Test your player and find the best one to do this.

6. Choosing Appropriate Music

Music plays a very important part in the effectiveness of meditation and prayer. Selecting the "right" kind of music to guide the meditation is not always easy. The music that works best is quiet, reflective, unobtrusive instrumental music that is even and repetitive in its structure and form, not too busy or cluttered. A very good example of this is Tony O'Connor's Collections, in particular, Mariner (available in Australia, often in Post Offices as well as most leading music stores). Classical music, such as Bach, Mozart etc, is generally not appropriate since its movement is too dramatic and changeable. Ensure that the music is long enough for the entire duration of the meditation so that it doesn't cut out or change track half way through the experience. This can break the flow for the group. If the track is very long it can always be faded down - it is better to have more track length than to have to cut the experience short because of too little track. Avoid having to use different tracks in the one meditation or having to change CDs or tapes. (Pressing buttons can be a real intrusion and distraction in these quiet moments. When it can't be avoided do it with great care.) Always listen to the piece of music you intend using before the meditation, so that you are familiar with it and know its length and suitability. (It is too late during the meditation to be surprised by unexpected movement or changes in the track). Try to avoid using popular instrumental music such as themes from well-known movies, or instrumental versions of popular songs, since it is difficult to listen to such selections without associating them with images and themes from the movie or song from which they are taken. This becomes a distraction and places an external agenda upon the meditation. Having said that, however, there may be times when the use of an instrumental version of a song that is well known to the group (and whose lyrics are suitable for the meditation focus), can be very effective as a subtle way of focusing the group in the meditation.

7. Selecting and Engaging Text and Words

In choosing text or words that may be used in the meditation, it is important to ensure that what is chosen is concise, readily comprehended by the group without explanation and discourse, and not intrusive of the moment, atmosphere or theme.

Be aware of the language used in the meditation - try to be simple and clear, especially for those who may not understand your native language. Also be aware of how inclusive your language is, especially in naming God; recognizing that in many school community's, not all students are Christian. Where this is the case, using the name of Jesus may be alienating for them. Perhaps phrases such as, "Jesus or the God you know..." may help them to feel included. (For our purposes here on this site, in writing up the meditations, rather than insert phrases such as that, wherever the name of Jesus is used in the meditations, it will be presumed that some kind of inclusive phrase will be used, where necessary, depending on spiritual tradition of your group). If well placed, timed, selected and focused, the use of texts

and words can be effective. However, too much can destroy the whole experience and defeat its very purpose. The tone of voice, its intonation and the pace of its delivery need to be

sensitively applied. Another very important point here is knowing how directive to be in the meditation. How much to say and when to say it, how long to pause before moving on with the next phrase etc. Balancing one's voice level with the level of background music is important. If the group can't hear you they will become restless. When talking to them, lower the music slightly and then raise it when you have finished.

8. The Use of Imagination and Visualization

Some people are very comfortable with their imagination and can readily engage in visualization. While this God-given gift is well developed in some, others can struggle with the whole area of imagination and visualization. Therefore, when inviting young people to use their imagination, give them little prompts or guides that are enough to stimulate and support their visualization, but not so directive and specific that there is no room for where they wish to go in this. For example, in imagining a scene, paint general pictures such as, imagine the place where you would most love to be.... perhaps it is beside the sea, or on a mountain top or in a forest... imagine the things around you, the sounds, the colours...etc. Allow room for their imaginations to engage in this. If your directives are too specific some people may not be able to relate to them and therefore become disengaged and restless.

9. Facilitating the Meditation

In presuming that the purpose of these quiet moments and meditations is to provide the group with the opportunity to come into the awareness of themselves, their story and what is happening for them, and hopefully to share this with their God, simply in being in the awareness of God's Presence, then it is critical to gauge, as facilitator, how directive and/or non-directive to be in this process. These quiet moments and meditations are not the place for us to be teaching our children about God, giving them homilies and talks. The purpose here is to provide our youth with an opportunity to experience God and simply be in the comfort and peace of God's loving Presence. The more subtle the approach the more open the experience will be. Learning how to let the music, song, text, or silence direct the experience requires sensitivity and intuition. It also requires trust that God will do what only God can do, which is touch the people's hearts and grace them with God's Presence. It is only God who can do this. The most we can offer here is the sensitivity, intuition and flexibility that allow us to provide the opportunity and create the most appropriate atmosphere. We therefore become facilitators, enablers and catalysts of the sacred moment. That is truly a privilege and an honour.

10. Bringing the Meditation to Closure

When it is time to end the session, give the group warning, not so much with words but perhaps by raising the volume of the music or fading the music out. After this, a simple phrase such as, "When you feel ready, sit yourself up very gently and quietly". Give the group time to "come back" to the space they are in, encouraging them to maintain the quiet. Round off the experience in some way, perhaps with a simple statement such as, "That was a gentle time and we will come back to this again". At times it might be helpful to round it off by singing an appropriate song that does not break the atmosphere in any dramatic way but draws it together and leads them on. Ask the group what they feel like doing here. Avoid asking them to share how they felt or to do anything as a result of their experience. It is important that they have a secure sense of privacy and respect in this. Simply allow them a little time to focus on where they are before moving them on. Having said that, there may be times when it is helpful and necessary for the group, or a particular person, to give expression in some way to their experience. To gauge this one could simply ask, "What would you like to do now"? They might want to draw, paint or journal. Some may even want to chat to someone about how they are feeling. However, it is very important that the group know that they do not have to produce anything or share anything out of this time - that it has simply been a time for them and that there are no expected outcomes or

expectations. Some things are just meant to be for the sake of the experience. Their value is simply in the experience of them.

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