

# CHRISTIAN MEDITATION For Vulnerable Communities

**Offering Christian Meditation in a Way that is Inclusive of those with Addictions and Mental Illness**

**Collaboratively written by:**

Kathy Coyne, Canada

Terry Doyle, UK

Jeff Ewener, Canada

Pat McSherry, Canada

Michele O'Brien, Ireland

Increasingly, addiction recovery programs and mental health counsellors are encouraging people in recovery to try daily meditation as a way to maintain balance and calmness under sometimes chaotic conditions. Christian Meditation offers a meaningful option for Christians who want to meditate in a way that resonates with their own faith tradition.

However, meditation groups are not always well prepared to "welcome the stranger," especially someone whose life circumstance may be different than theirs. Some of us who run groups for people with mental illness and addictions have come up with a list of tips to help you make your groups a comfortable place for everyone.

Overall, a person who is living a chaotic lifestyle experiences many challenges when getting involved with a mainstream meditation group. The best approach is to start a separate group where any discussions can be more relevant to how meditation can be useful in recovery and helping to discover inner stability. Once they have begun to show respect for other members (by showing up on time and participating in discussions), an acceptance of the discipline of regular practice, and the willingness and commitment to their own group, they could then be introduced to more mainstream meditation groups. This gradual process makes it a less daunting prospect for the individual, one that is experienced as a sign of progress.

However, every group, especially groups in inner city areas, will at some point have members who are functionally homeless, living with mental distress, or at various stages of a recovery program. Many group members may, without anyone knowing, be dealing with depression, attention deficit disorder, extreme poverty or various addictions that are sometimes less visible but equally life-altering. Many may be experiencing isolation and exclusion in different parts of their life. In Christian meditation, we know that we are one and that everyone is a gift and has a gift. We know also that if anyone feels excluded or cannot offer their gifts, we are incomplete as a community.

Christian meditation can make a difference. Some ideas to help you support these community members in their participation are:

1. Be genuinely welcoming. Vulnerable members of our community often feel invisible. Being authentic and truly present for people without being intrusive is a gentle gift we have to share.
2. Language is important. People who are homeless or people with addictions are first of all people. Encourage group members not to speak about vulnerable people in our community as "those people," or "the addicts," or "the prostitutes." Language like this can make people who may have been homeless at some point, or who are in recovery themselves, not feel safe. Speak the language of the people in the group as much as possible, to the degree that it is honest and natural to you.
3. Although anyone who comes to the group will know that it is a Christian meditation group, too much "God" talk can be off putting for many. The first goal is to help people feel included. Once that happens, you can gradually introduce a deeper exploration of our spiritual foundation. Sensitivity, careful & engaged listening, and faithful humility may overcome resistance and help you find the common ground. It may help to speak personally, from one's own experience -- about what God means in your own life, what you have been able to overcome or deal with, with the help of God, through prayer. But the power of example can exert a gentle pressure that penetrates the thickest resistance, eventually. And will also be translated, over time, into terms the other person needs to hear.
4. The primary focus of a meditation group is the journey and practice of meditation. To support this, encourage people to leave their "stuff" at the door and to sit as silently as possible prior to the start. There are lots of opportunities to offload and problem-solve at other times.
5. Be open to other ways of being. People with mental illness or who are in recovery have a lot of different things going on in their lives. They may arrive late, or fall asleep in meditation a little more frequently than others. Always have a chair for them and welcome them with a smile even if they are late. Accept that sleeping in a safe place may be the best thing for them that evening ? or even every evening.
6. People with mental illness may like things a certain way, a certain chair or a personal ritual that they do as they get ready to meditate. Honour this ? there may be much for us to learn in this.
7. Some people in poverty may ask for money, and offer a very good reason why

you should give it to them. It is a good idea not to, no matter what the reason. You can be prepared for this by being aware of the services in the community, by taking the person for a meal or giving them a ride to where they are going.

8. People who self-identify as being in recovery may appreciate the link with 12 Step programs. Ask them ? and if so, consider incorporating prayers that are meaningful to them in some meditations, and invite the person who self-identifies to read from it. You can then also offer Christian meditation as one way for practicing Step 11. Resources to support them using Christian meditation as part of their 11 Step practice are available on the WWCM webpage: <http://www.christianmeditation11step.org/>

9. Plan carefully how you will facilitate the sharing component. Make sure everyone knows that sharing is optional. It is also really important that no one give advice or opinion on addictions. In particular, never allow the sessions to degenerate into problem-solving and loud and lively discussions about the merits or failings of particular drugs or support agencies.

10. People with mental illness may experience significant anxiety. Some ways to help reduce that is to limit surprises. Find out what talks people like and which they don't like and keep things consistent. Some people find talks by John Main very soothing and talks by others more complicated. See what people are most comfortable with, and use those as often as possible.

11. Engender a sense of welcome and belonging by giving people a voice. Ask for people's input on logistical arrangements. Invite a person who may experience exclusion to be a prayer reader but ask ahead of time so that they can practice or prepare themselves emotionally. Sometimes people are willing to always be a reader, especially if they can read a prayer that they have read many times. Participating in this way fosters confidence and a sense of worth.

12. Be prepared for comments you don't quite understand. Encouraging people to say a bit more is good. So is simply affirming the value of their idea, with ?that's a good point? or ?I hadn't thought of it that way.? But be careful not to allow others to push for explanation or you may end up with a more complicated discussion than you can handle!

13. Support people to participate in the larger meditation community by giving rides to retreats, arranging for scholarships, and staying with them until they get comfortable with a larger group of people they don't know. Consider introducing quiet days for those who are further down the recovery path, and visits to a local monastery if possible.

14. Difference often brings out our fears. Meditation communities are opportunities to ?be not afraid? and to share in each other's vulnerability. It is also important to have healthy personal boundaries. Be careful not to create expectations you cannot fulfil. Always be open to the unforeseen. When you are the only ones in the building in the evening, consider having a partner to close up with.

15. Remember that it's not about high numbers. Be content to share more with the few committed ones, rather than pandering to the masses who are not ready or really interested. Be very careful about accepting those who are being pressured to attend

from the courts or probation especially if there is more than one. They may hide behind the false front, and spoil things for those who DO want to come.

16. Encourage the few who take to the practice to advocate its merits amongst their peers. Remind them that they are living proof that meditation works. But discourage proselytising ? this will scare away many potential beneficiaries, and prevent some from ever coming. Remember that God will find a way even where we can't -- but we should try to avoid making God's task more difficult than it is, by getting people's backs up and driving them away.

All in all, Christian Meditation can help all of us to turn our lives around, and it provides a steady anchor in an often chaotic lifestyle ? even our own. It is also an opportunity to be in solidarity with those among us who are vulnerable, as we are called by Christ to be. And as we do so, we enter into our own vulnerability, where Christ is present for eac

Peace & Justice

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.wccm.org/content/christian-meditation-vulnerable-communities>