

Spiritual Affective Disorder

A Guided Journal to
Shine a Light on the Blahs



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Week One: Flip the Switch



You have probably heard of “Seasonal Affective Disorder.” It is a condition in which the lack of sunlight, often during winter months, can affect our moods and ability to cope effectively. Millions of people suffer from some sort of anxiety or depression disorder. If you do not, chances are you are close to someone who does.

In this journal, we are playing with the SAD acronym and calling out a condition called “Spiritual Affective Disorder,” considering how the uncertainty and pace of life can keep us from the spiritual and emotional wellbeing that the Creator desires for us. But instead of focusing on typical spiritual practices as an antidote, we will simply focus on how everyday life activities could become healing practices—boosting our mood and helping us shine a light on the “blahs.”

Some Thoughts

Depression, from its mildest to its most clinical and severe, can look like many things: sadness, irritability, and fatigue. Most of us can probably resonate with having those emotions. And I think all of us can recall a time when we found it difficult to get out of bed. Perhaps it is a seasonal passing depression, perhaps it is thorough and has been lifelong. Perhaps getting out of bed is difficult because of burn out, or because of grief.

Depression happens for all kinds of reasons. Grief, unprocessed trauma, and childbirth can all lead to forms of depression that can make even the act of arising from sleep each morning an impossible task to consider. A passage in the Book of Isaiah says, “Arise, shine; for your light has come.” This does not mean that we are supposed to feel good all the time or else we’re not worth anything. It means that each day is a new chance to do things for ourselves and others that helps heal what feels broken, a little bit at a time. Sometimes just the act of getting out of bed is all that is required.

What do you notice about how you deal with stress, anxiety, and uncertainty?

What are the messages that you tell yourself that are likely not true (like “I’m such a slacker” or “This will never end”)?



”Arise, shine,
for your
light
has come.”

Feeling afraid, uncertain, down, and depressed
is no sin.

It doesn't mean you are separated from God.

May we lean on those who are right there
and ready to be a cradle of love for each of us.

Here is a prayer for this week:

Waking God,
we give you thanks for the chance to
start fresh every day.

Open our eyes to the light of
possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds
difficulties.

Be with us, near us, beside us.
Amen.

Suggestions for “Arising” Practices

Place this page and prayer somewhere
where you will see it first thing in the morning.

Some ideas are:

- near your bedside at the foot of a lamp that you turn on when getting up
- on your bathroom mirror if brushing your teeth is an early morning ritual
 - by the coffeepot if the day just doesn't begin without coffee or tea
 - on your door to see before you head out for the day

Week Two: Soothe a Savage



The 17th century poet and playwright, William Congreve, originated the saying, “Music hath the charms to soothe a savage breast” (often misquoted as “beast”). The play goes on to say “...to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak.” Indeed, music is known to have a powerful effect on our moods with its ability to literally “move” us. The Psalmist proclaims that God can give us a new song, bringing us out of a “miry bog.” Today we affirm that attention to our music “playlists” can offer a transformative daily spiritual practice.

Some Thoughts

Music is a powerful agent of healing when we consider mental health. Studies show that music is a powerful “bridge” and communicator. A familiar hymn or song sung to someone who seems lost to dementia or Alzheimer's disease has been found to bring them more awareness and recognition. The act of making music can help children process trauma that they do not have words for. Singing together in a choir is one way to cope with and manage the symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Music has an undeniable power when it comes to our physical and mental health. Music has even been found to ease the pain of childbirth!

Singing communally can generate oxytocin within us, a hormone that brings us together and can help regulate our blood pressure and lower the stress hormone, cortisol. An article in Time magazine said this, “When you sing, musical vibrations move through you, altering your physical and emotional landscape. Group singing, for those who have done it, is the most exhilarating and transformative of all. It takes something incredibly intimate, a sound that begins inside you, shares it with a roomful of people and it comes back as something even more thrilling: harmony.”

Cultivating a playlist of music you might listen to can be a powerful spiritual practice. Even if you don’t have the opportunity to be in a live singing group, singing along with your favorite artists can still give you the benefits of heightened cortisol and the alleviation of feelings of being alone. Being aware of how certain music makes you feel is important. Music that brings your energy down might not be helping you in times when you need a boost. Create a playlist for different needs, different times of day, different “feels.”

What are the negative or toxic messages that play in your mind?
Could music help replace that chatter?

What music gives you a “pep in your step?”
What kind of music calms you?

Many among us feel at times that we exist under an oppressive cloud of silence, a blank static that fills the channel and blocks us from tuning into the song of our life. May we listen carefully to life-giving voices, fixing our hearts on a message of hope and connection.

Here is a prayer for this week:

God who sang all creation into being, we give you thanks for the sweet harmonies and soul-stirring rhythms that lift up our spirits in the dance of life.

Open our eyes to the light of possibilities, even when the day ahead holds difficulties.

Be with us, near us, beside us.

Amen.



Replace the negative self-talk with your soul's music.

Suggestions for Music Play-List Practices

Place this page somewhere where you will see it every day and remember to insert music in some form into your day. Some ideas are:

- make your own personal playlist on Spotify or another app
- go through your music collection and make a pile to play throughout the week
 - set your radio or app to your favorite station and play at least once each day
- make your own music each day - sing or play an instrument!

Week Three: Lighten Up



Life can be serious business. Certainly watching the daily news can give the impression that there is little good to find in the world. This week we choose to lighten up—to “spin” life in a little different way as we look for the delight and especially, humor, in life. A lot of people cite the ability to make us laugh as a number one thing they look for in friends and spouses. Many comedians have the knack for seeing everyday life in ways that make us laugh. Perhaps laughter is the best medicine!

Some Thoughts

Is it really possible to laugh in the midst of all the bad news we deal with on a regular basis? There are many researchers who tell us that we actually can't deal with all that bad news without bouts of levity to help us move forward. There is a reason we call it “comic relief!” Humor plays an important role in our mental health and how we heal in conflict. Humor is a vital part of finding common ground and healing divides because it has a mysterious way of disarming us. It is hard to find an enemy in someone with (not “at”) whom you are laughing. Perhaps because laughing together is an experience of shared stress relief.

Studies show it can literally soothe physical tension, stimulate the intake of oxygen-rich breathing, get our hearts, lungs, and muscles pumping, then decrease our heart rate and blood pressure afterwards, giving us a more relaxed feeling. It can improve our immune system, relieve pain, and improve our mood.

This is not to say that all moments are rife with the possibility of laughter. And forcing humor is not always helpful. It is inevitable that we will find ourselves at times having difficulty seeing anything “light” about a situation. That’s OK. But consider that these are also times when laughter can surprise us—“laughing in spite of ourselves.” There is even a technique used by therapists that utilizes exposure to funny things as a way of rewiring devastating memories and the emotions associated with them that keep replaying themselves in our minds.

Finding laughter and not taking ourselves too seriously can relax us into a deeper sense of belonging to God and one another, and also a deeper sense of enjoyment. And what can be more spiritual than the pure enjoyment of all God has given us?

What are you not finding funny about the world right now?

What is your preferred mode for getting some laughs?
Can you put that in your schedule?

Who in your life provides “comic relief?”
Can you get some time with them?



Laughter is the
best medicine.
Lighten it up!

Sometimes laughter eludes us and that is OK—
we don't have to force it.
It is in these times when God sometimes
surprises us with delight
in spite of our circumstances and
we find ourselves open to allowing
healing laughter
when we thought this would never come again.
Here is a prayer for this week:

God of Delight,
we give you thanks for
good humor and joy!
Open our eyes to the light of
possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds
difficulties.
Be with us, near us, beside us.
Amen.

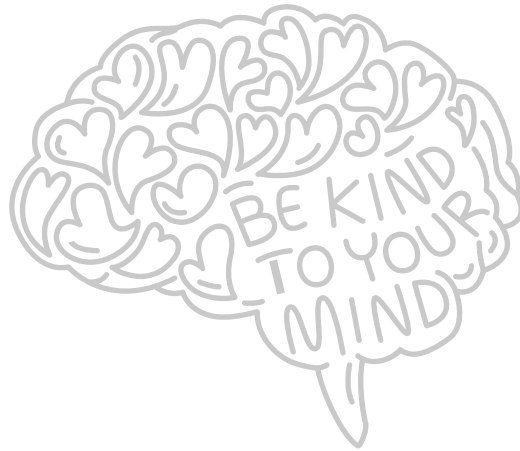
Suggestions for Laughter Possibilities

Place this page somewhere where you will see it every day and remember to expose yourself to something funny throughout the week (remember that if you don't feel like laughing, it is OK...whether you laugh or not, seeing others laugh has benefits).

Some ideas are:

- google "funny animal videos" or babies laughing
- find a movie you've laughed at before and view it
- find a stand-up comedy show to attend or watch
- gather with friends and family and tell funny memory stories

Week Four: Make My Day



The prophet Micah offered up a vision for life lived from a different perspective. Rather than see doing good as “obligatory,” he said that when we live our lives with a love for kindness for all God’s people, we are fulfilling God’s desire to spread justice and love throughout the land. What if we lived each day on the lookout for ways to make someone’s day through a kind and unexpected gesture? It might just make our day as well!

Some Thoughts

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly are things we can spend a lifetime considering--a lifetime practicing! But perhaps this life long work isn't that complicated. There are myriad overwhelming justice issues that we can pick from a laundry list of suffering and devastation in this world. Kindness can feel exhausting to live into when cruelty is baked into our economy, our politics, and even our churches sometimes. And humility? The opposite is encouraged from us constantly in pop culture. Pride and ego are rewarded above humility in how we rise in our careers or in our social settings.

And yet something as simple as a gesture of kindness is within our grasp. How can we be kind to our neighbor, or someone we do not know? What if kindness was making sure we took the shopping cart back to the store, or at least put it in the shopping cart corral in the parking lot?

For all that was difficult during the pandemic, there were so many stories of kindness: grabbing groceries for immunocompromised folks, finding all kinds of ways to stay in touch even when we were sheltering-in-place, and donating to non-profits that were doing charitable work in our communities.

A good deed really isn't complicated! And it turns out that we are hardwired to benefit from helping one another. In fact, there are many studies that indicate that good deeds not only make those on the receiving end feel better, but those who practice good deeds benefit in all kinds of physical and mental ways from a "helper's high." And volunteering can actually lengthen your life! Additionally, studies have shown that kindness is actually "contagious" – a "good virus." It's a win-win: living into the way God created us to benefit from connecting and helping one another, and extending a blessing God has given you to someone else.

What are examples of when you felt kindness from someone or when you performed a kindness for someone?

How did each of these make you feel?

Links:

<https://wb.md/2uZFa9t>

<https://youtu.be/5iC-xqyF6Us>

Warning:
Performing acts of
kindness may cause
you to feel great!



We may feel disconnected and isolated at
times from one another,
but we can never be out of God's reach.

May we all be touched by loving
hands of blessing,
and may we embody God's grace and
generosity today.

Here is a prayer for this week:

Generous God,
we give you thanks for your
everyday mercies.

Open our eyes to the light of
possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds
difficulties.

Be with us, near us, beside us.

Amen.

Suggestions for Making Someone's Day

Place this page somewhere where you will see it every day and remember to keep your eye out for opportunities to perform random acts of kindness.

Some ideas are:

- pay for the person behind you at a drive-through eatery or toll booth
 - volunteer at a local non-profit
 - look for opportunities to carry bags, groceries, etc.
for someone needing help
- call or send a hand-written card to someone "just 'cuz!"

Week Five: Little Altars Everywhere



Where do you think God’s “dwelling place” is? The Psalmist speaks of longing to be in God’s “house.” Indeed, being in what feels like a sacred place can transform and inspire us. Instead of thinking that finding God requires us to go to a designated “holy” place, what if we created spaces that reminded us of the sacred wherever we are? Our overall sense of wellbeing can be improved when we see our ordinary surroundings as sacred containers for spiritual connection.

Some Thoughts

Curating a space with intention has significant mental health benefits. All of our senses are taking in information and each one—what we see, hear, breathe, and smell—has a direct impact on mental health. Little details such as the color of the walls or the temperature of a room as well as the warmth of the lighting affects mood. It can make a big difference to your sense of wellbeing if you are regularly navigating loud noises or cluttered spaces. Being isolated from others for long periods of time can feel like the walls are closing in. Too often we don’t take time to notice or adjust our surroundings to create a better environment for

our state of mind and, therefore, our spirits. This week, we are going to imagine that the spaces we inhabit can be our “sacred spaces” if we pay attention to how they make us feel and endeavor to improve that in some way.

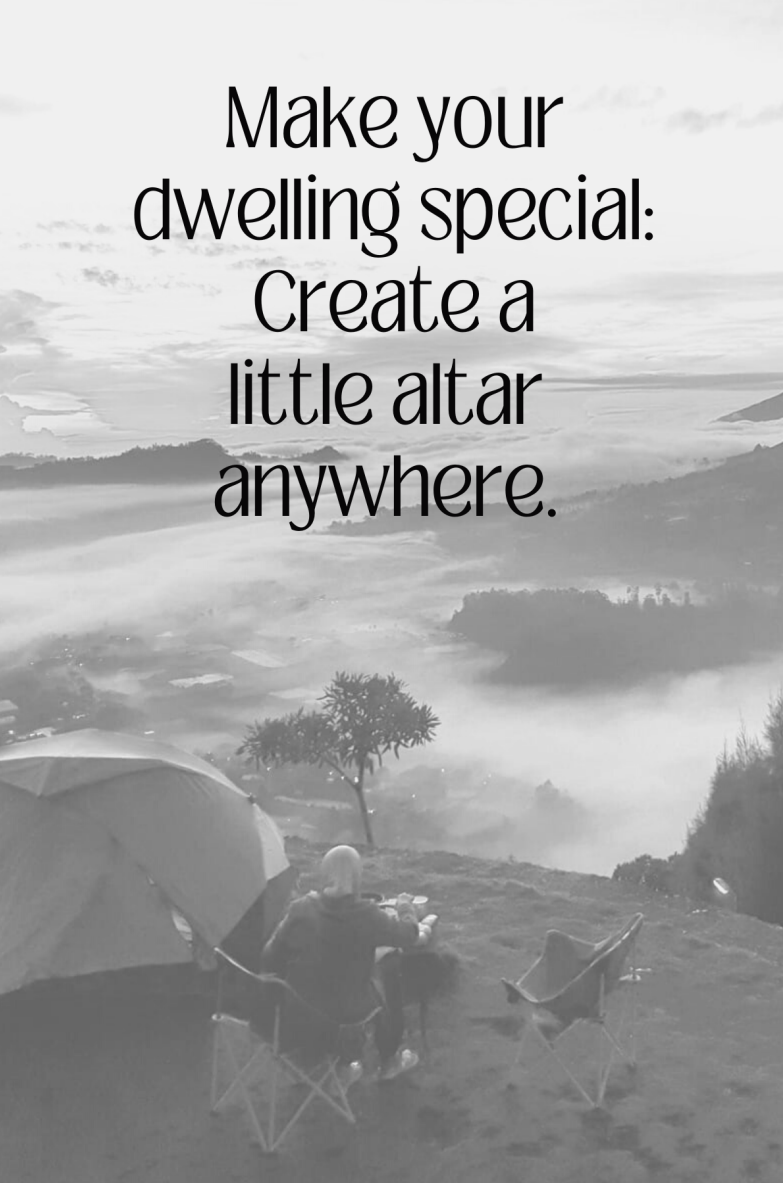
We all have places where our sense of the “sacred” is heightened. Maybe it is nature or a sanctuary with stained glass or a body of water. Perhaps it is somewhere specific in the world. For me, Ireland is one of those places. In fact, Celtic spirituality in Ireland identifies the places where we feel closer to the Divine as “thin places.” This description helps us imagine that when we are in places that feed our soul, the distance between ourselves and peace, calm, awe, and mystery is “thinner” or closer. What we know also is that bringing elements of those places into our ordinary, everyday spaces can help transport us whenever we need to feel more of that closeness.

This also comes into play when we deal with grief. Setting up an altar in memory of someone can help us process our loss, giving us a tangible sense of presence for a while. Indeed, when tragedy strikes a community we humans often spontaneously bring flowers and other mementos to mark a place and give us a collective space to be with each other. Making “little altars everywhere” (or anywhere) can allow our environments to help us, providing important symbols and surroundings for wellbeing.

What spaces do you spend a great deal of time in?
Your house/apartment? Your work place?

What do they feel like to you? Do they give you energy or drain it?

Make your
dwelling special:
Create a
little altar
anywhere.



We may sometimes feel that conversations about depression and anxiety don't "fit" within certain relationships or what we call "sacred" places.

May we cultivate a community of brave and compassionate vulnerability, trusting that all feelings are welcome because God is here today and listening. Here is a prayer for this week:

Abiding God,
we give thanks for your steadfast presence in all places.
Open our eyes to the light of possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds difficulties.
Be with us, near us, beside us.
Amen.

Suggestions for Creating an "Awe-Some" Space

Place this page somewhere where you will see it every day and remember to set apart some time to make a special adjustment in your space.

Some ideas are:

- place some flowers that bring you delight in a spot well-frequented
- create a little altar on a table, a mantel, or in a corner with special objects
 - re-arrange a room to give you a different perspective
 - clean out a closet, drawer, or corner that has been bugging you
 - plan a trip to your "thin place"

Week Six: Walk This Way



Research shows that one of the most effective mood-boosters is moving our bodies. Stretching, walking, and dancing can send feel-good endorphins coursing through us and the change can feel like a light coming on. The Hebrew authors of our scriptures used the metaphor of “walking” in God’s ways to help us see the benefits to our spiritual lives of moving toward the goodness of God. Walking (or any kind of movement) can be seen as a spiritual practice—as a blessed gift of God’s love in action in the world!

Some Thoughts

Our faith invites us time and again to choose life. This is a fundamental part of the mental health journey. In the most dire of mental health crises, that choice can become difficult. There are many things we can do that are a larger part of us “choosing life” when depression or anxiety or any other affliction of our mental health becomes challenging. Choosing life can be difficult when maybe we don’t even want to choose to get out of bed. Healthier daily habits can suffer, making the spiral into lethargy difficult to reverse.

Walking in and of itself can be a simple way to choose life. A walk, especially a walk outside, has numerous mental health benefits: improved sleep, better endurance, stress relief, mood improvement, and others. Dancing has even more: it can improve self esteem, ease depression and anxiety, and protect your memory!

I actually wrote a book about skiing and snowboarding as spiritual practice. We experience everything through our bodies, including our spirituality. Being in motion is a way to choose life and is one of the ways we walk in God's ways—God did not make us sedentary, no matter the range of your physicality. Whether it is walking, rolling, dancing, or other forms of exercise, physical activity is incredibly good not only for our body's health but also our mind's wellbeing.

Physical exercise is a way to tap into a form of prayer you can do with your body. Focused prayer and meditation can happen in many active ways such as a bike ride, martial arts and T'ai Chi. For everyone it will be different! But at the end of the day, even the simplest choice to take a walk is to choose life.

What is your relationship to your body?
Can you imagine that your body is part of your
spirituality and mental wellbeing?

What ways of moving your body do you enjoy?

Links:

<https://wb.md/3UuSrAy>

<https://wb.md/3VpGvRP>

Make a move to elevate your mood!

Friends, it is human nature to compare ourselves to one another, and so easy to fall into a trap of doubting our self-worth if we believe we fall short, especially as we consider how we move through this world.

May we know that each one of us is enough, that we are all unique and precious children of God.

Here is a prayer for this week:

Energizing God,
we give you thanks for the gift of movement and our physical bodies.

Open our eyes to the light of possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds difficulties.

Be with us, near us, beside us.

Amen.

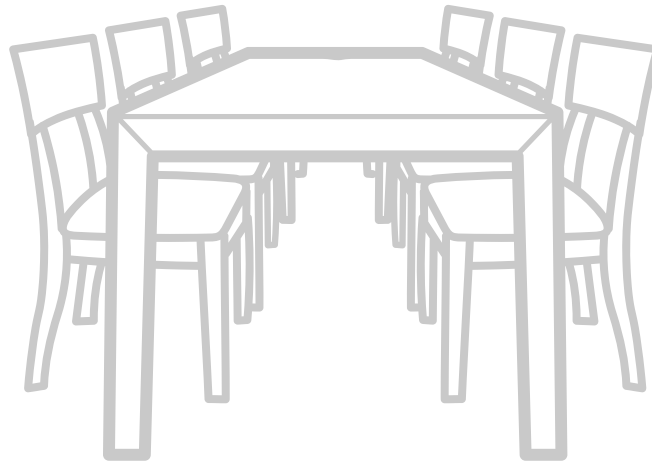
Suggestions for Getting Yourself Moving

Place this page somewhere where you will see it this week to remind you to keep moving in some way.

Some ideas are:

- find a walking partner and set a time to meet, walk, and talk
 - listen to an uplifting podcast while you walk or exercise to add more benefit
 - wiggle your toes, talk with your hands, fly like a bird with your arms
- put on your favorite dance music and have a ball!

Week Seven: Leave Room for Dessert



The server at your favorite restaurant might regularly say to you, “leave room for dessert!” In other words, don’t eat to excess — leave some room. This is a good spiritual practice. Gleaning is the practice of gathering food for those who need it out of the abundance of what is available. When we bring awareness to the food we buy, cook and throw away, we increase our care for the human family. Whether it is cooking more than enough and sharing with someone who needs it, buying extra at the grocery store to donate to the food bank, or getting involved in a gleaning network’s efforts, our everyday use of foods is our spiritual practice this week.

Some Thoughts

Food has so much to do with how we can care for ourselves and our neighbor. It is a fundamental part of extending hospitality. It is central to our primary Christian ritual: Holy Communion. And the choices we make about food, what we eat, how we eat, when we eat all have impacts on our physical, spiritual and mental health. Eating meals as a family can benefit the mental health and resiliency of children and teenagers. Even the kinds of food we eat have mental health impacts: microbes in our gut produce neurotransmitters like serotonin

Links:

<https://bit.ly/3Vtes42>

<https://bit.ly/3B3Cz1h>

<https://bit.ly/3FvIO1H>

Extending hospitality
creates life-giving
connection.



Many of us are hungry,
perhaps for physical food,
and perhaps also for human connection
or spiritual direction.

May we all take a seat today at
God's banquet table,
and let us take in our fill of grace and hope.
Here is a prayer for this week:

Nourishing God,
we give you thanks for the physical
and spiritual food that sustains us.

Open our eyes to the light of
possibilities,
even when the day ahead holds
difficulties.

Be with us, near us, beside us.
Amen.

Suggestions for Giving and Extending

Place this page somewhere where you will see it this week to remind you to intentionally reach out and share abundance.

Some ideas are:

- offer to cook for, or bring take-out to, someone who might feel isolated
 - volunteer at a local food bank or deliver meals
 - contribute to an organization that feeds hungry people
- throw a potluck for family/friends (and take up a collection for the above)
 - make or buy your favorite dessert and share with friends, family or colleagues

Week Eight: Get Up and Don't Be Afraid



This journal has focused on how ordinary moments and activities in our lives can be spiritual practices that yield profound gifts for our wellbeing. At a crucial moment in Jesus' life he said to some disciples, "get up and don't be afraid!" Sometimes when we are not at our best, a good rousing piece of encouragement can make the difference. As our last journal entry, we will focus on reflecting on the things that worked the best for us as we explored ordinary activities as spiritual practice.

Some Thoughts

Encouragement can go a long way. Words of encouragement provide motivation. And the right kind of encouragement can positively affect the symptoms of depression. But we have to be careful not to expect someone to just "get over it" or pull themselves up "by the bootstraps." Here are some helpful examples of phrases you can use to encourage someone you know who has depression, or to encourage yourself if you are feeling the effects of "the blahs."

“It’s OK to not feel OK.”

“You are not alone.”

“You can move forward in the face of depression.”

“I’m here for you no matter what.”

“Help is available.”

“Your story isn’t over.”

(If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, please contact <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> or call 800-273-8255 or text 838255)

And in general, depression or not, research shows that sharing kind words with even a stranger benefits the person receiving the compliment as well as the person offering it. Simple acts of kindness, simple acts of observation and gratitude, simple things like taking a walk, can all lead to a deeper awareness of the divine, and a closer connection to God while also having a net positive impact on mental health. Keep on finding ways to boost your wellbeing and encourage others with your own experience of trying different things to find just what helps you most!

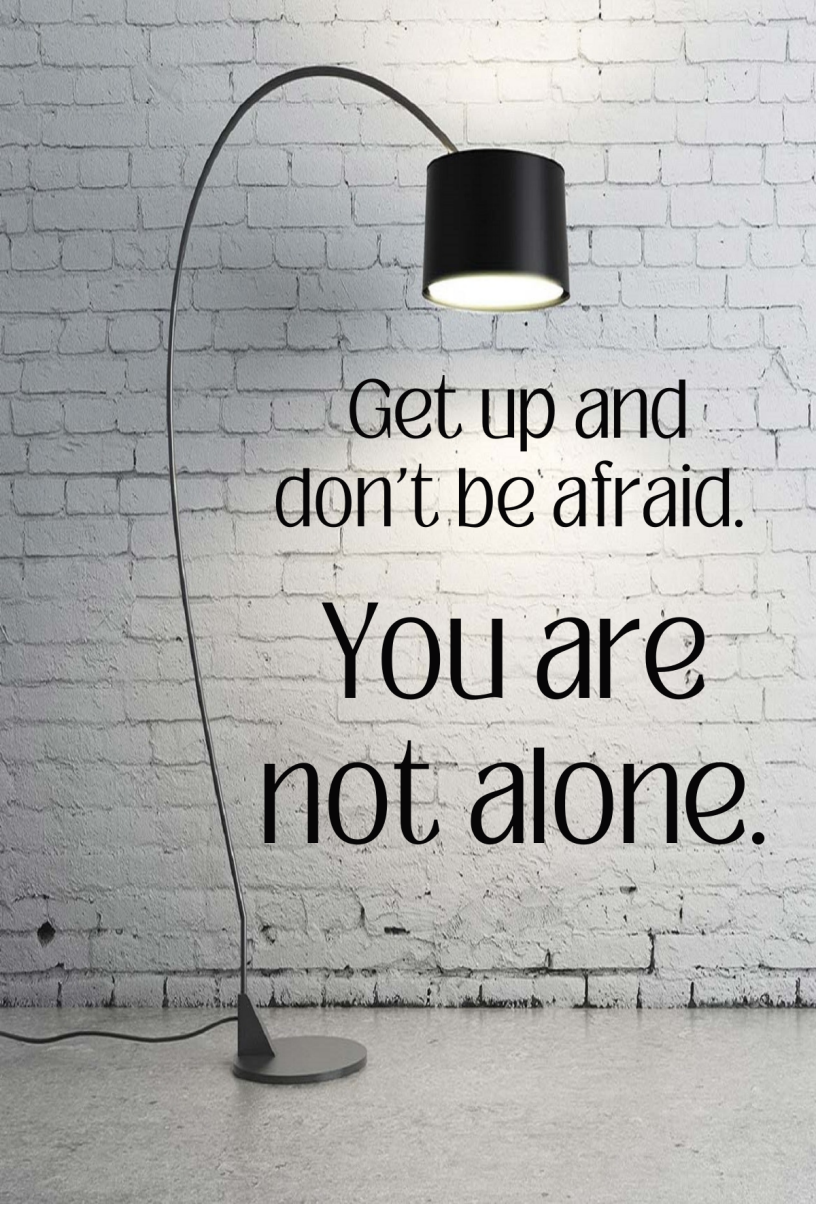
When does encouragement help you?
What kind of encouragement is best, or worst?

List the practices you’ve tried that helped you the most.

Links:

<https://bit.ly/3ulr55u>

<https://rb.gy/gcngiy>



Get up and
don't be afraid.
You are
not alone.

Fear and anxiety can hinder us from leading the lives we wish to live. We can't always control these human feelings. May we have compassion for one another especially during tough times, and extend support and kindness at all times. Here is a prayer for this week:

Motivating God,
we give you thanks for the courage to live boldly into your promises. Open our eyes to the light of possibilities, even when the day ahead holds difficulties. Be with us, near us, beside us. Amen.

Suggestions for Keeping the Good Vibes Going

Place this page somewhere where you will see it this week to remind you to make a plan for best practices.

Some ideas are:

- reflect on which "ordinary" practices really helped elevate your spirit
 - set up notifications on your phone or calendar times to continue these practices
- write an encouraging note to someone about one of your experiences



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