

Spiritual Anchors

What is a spiritual anchor?

A boat anchor helps keep a boat attached to one place on the ocean floor so that it does not go adrift in the sea. Likewise, a “spiritual anchor” is something that helps keep us grounded, connected to what matters most, and able to cope with the challenges that life brings. It does so by reminding us of what gives us meaning in life and that there is something “bigger than us,” two main components of spirituality.

A spiritual anchor can be many things. It may be an object, such as a piece of jewelry or artwork. It may be a song or poem. It may also be a meditation practice, such as paying attention to breathing. For those who are religious, it may be a religious symbol or object, such as a cross, or a specific prayer. We will discuss more examples of spiritual anchors below.

How can a spiritual anchor fit into my life?

First, take a moment to think about anchors that may already be in your life. They may be something that you see or do on a regular basis, although not necessarily every day. For example, you might remember that when you see a specific painting or picture on the wall or you listen to a certain song, you feel more at peace.

In the space below, list one or more of these anchors that already exist in your life. Then describe how they help you.

Now, take a few moments to respond to the following questions: (If you did the activity in the [“Introduction to Spirit and Soul”](#) or [“What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values”](#) handout, you may use what you wrote for that activity in this one as well.)

What matters most to me in life? What gives my life meaning and purpose?

What helps me through when times are hard? What gives me hope or peace of mind?

Keep your answers to these questions in mind as you read the examples below and think about how spiritual anchors might fit even more into your daily life.

Example #1: A Sacred Object as Spiritual Anchor

Try this—Choose an object that reminds you of what gives you meaning and purpose. It should remind you of health and well-being for you in some way. Some possibilities are:

- A piece of artwork or sacred symbol
- A copy of a poem
- A special piece of jewelry
- A photograph or something written by a loved one
- A stone or another natural object from a favorite place
- A coin or commemorative object

After you have chosen an object, keep that object with you. You might wear it, carry it in your wallet or purse, put it in your pocket, or place it someplace at work where you often spend time. Then, every time you come into contact with it by seeing or touching it, you can be reminded of what matters most.

Example #2: A Place as Spiritual Anchor

Sometimes being in a specific location can be helpful. For example, being out in nature can help you feel a sense of being spiritually anchored. For some, gathering with a community of faith in a sacred space is a spiritual anchor. The chapel in the VA might be an option.

Try this—Think of a place that you are able to go at least once a week and where you feel more at peace than usual. Plan a set time during your week or day when you will spend at least a few

minutes in this place, no matter how busy you are. Even if you are unable to be in that place, you can try to imagine you are there and use that as an anchor.

Example #3: A Song as Spiritual Anchor

Music can have an immediate effect on our mind, emotions, and spirit.

Try this—Choose a specific song that reconnects you to a sense of peace and what is meaningful to you. Play it on a CD, computer, smartphone, or other device a few times a week.

Example #4: Prayer as Spiritual Anchor

Prayer may be connected to a specific religion. However, prayer may not necessarily be religious. For example, thinking, “I wish you well” every time you come into contact with someone is a simple prayer you can try whether you are religious or not.

Try this—You might consider trying one or more of types of prayer (most traditional faiths have prayers or meditations you can use).

- Use a sacred word or phrase, or an image, to focus on something bigger than yourself (Centering Prayer or using a *mantram* are options [reference below])
- Review your day and work to improve on it for the next day (e.g. “The Examen Prayer”)
- Pray through sacred texts as a way to communicate with God or Higher Power (e.g. “Lectio Devina”)

Example#5: Mantram Meditation as Spiritual Anchor

One type of meditation involves the repetition of a word or phrase. All major faith traditions, including Western ones, use very specific phrases as an anchor. In Buddhism, Hinduism, and a few other religions, the traditional word for this is a *mantram*. Along with helping a person to focus on God or a Higher Power, such a phrase or sound may help you relax and calm your mind.¹

Try this—Choose a word or phrase that calms you down or means a lot to you. Then, whenever you find yourself “adrift” or under stress, repeat this word or phrase to anchor yourself and bring yourself back to the present moment.

Refer to the handouts [“Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living”](#) and [“Mantram Meditation”](#) for more details.

Example #6: A Breathing Practice as Spiritual Anchor

As with using a word or phrase, the breath itself can be a spiritual anchor. In fact, the breath may be one of the simplest, most portable and powerful anchors of all. It is always there with you and nobody even has to know that you’re using it.

Try this—“*Counting Breaths*”: First, when you’re going about your normal activities and not under more stress, pause to count your breath for 5 breaths. After you do, notice how you feel. Then, try this when you are feeling more stressed out, angry, or worried. Again, notice how you feel after you count 5 breaths.

Try this—“Taking a deep breath.” First, when you’re going about your normal activities but not under stress, pause for a moment and take a nice, slow, deep breath. Feel the breath go in and really fill up your whole body. Then breathe all the way out, really emptying out your lungs. Breathe out as long as you can. After you do, notice how you feel. Then, try this when you are feeling more stressed out, angry, or worried. Again, notice how you feel afterward.

Refer to the handouts [“Breathing and Health”](#) and [“Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living”](#) for more details. With regular meditation practice, the breath becomes a more powerful spiritual anchor over time. Also reference the handout [“Seated Meditation”](#) for more details.

Example #7: Compassion Practice as Spiritual Anchor

Like using a phrase or the breath, compassion meditation can be another spiritual anchor linked to a meditation practice. Refer to the handout [“Compassion Practice”](#) for details.

Example #8: A Hand or Body Position as Spiritual Anchor

In some meditation traditions, specific hand positions are used to create focus and awareness. Gently touching the tip of the thumb to the tip of the index finger is one example. Folding one’s hands, raising palms upwards, or placing your hand over your heart are other examples. Try this out to see what positions feel right for you.

Example #9: Silence as Spiritual Anchor

Simply taking a moment of silence can be powerful. Silence can be very healing. Using silence as a spiritual anchor may also mean taking a few seconds to pay attention when things are quiet during the course of the day. Another way to find silence is to schedule a time every week (for example one hour every weekend) when you will not talk on the phone, watch TV, check email, etc. During that time, you practice “just being.”

Choosing your own anchor

Remember, these examples are only suggestions. There are many other possible spiritual anchors! Also, while you may start by using one spiritual anchor, there is no limit to how many you can use. The most important part of using a spiritual anchor is trusting your own intuition to guide you to what works for you.

By using your answers to the questions asked above about what matters to you and what helps you get through hard times, and by working with the examples above, you can choose one or more ways to bring spiritual anchors into your daily life.

For you to consider:

- Did anything surprise you as you worked your way through this handout? If so, what?
- Do you want to try using a spiritual anchor in your daily life? If so, what will you use?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**



For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mindful Awareness• Power of the Mind• Spirit and Soul• Personal Development• Friends, Family Coworkers	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/#self-care

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Jonathan Takahashi MD, MPH, Assistant Professor, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, Passport to Whole Health, and the tool, "Spiritual Anchors."

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References

1. Benson H, Klipper MZ. *The Relaxation Response*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2000.