



Prayer through a Lens of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

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David H. Rosmarin, Spirituality, Religion, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: A Guide for Clinicians

For readers unfamiliar with emotion regulation, it is defined as “the processes by which individuals influence [the] emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275). In more colloquial terms, emotion regulation refers to the strategies one employs to shape one’s emotions, and the methods one employs to process them. Clinically speaking, emotion regulation can be adaptive or maladaptive. For example, it is now known that experiential avoidance (distraction from, or suppression of, negative emotions) tends to increase the experience of anxiety and mood symptoms over time, whereas acceptance (allowing oneself to fully experience emotions and sensations without trying to change, control or avoid them) tends to eventually decrease the experience and impact of such symptoms (Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown & Hofmann, 2006). In the modern clinical practice of CBT, the term *emotion regulation* often refers to the use of processes to facilitate understanding and acceptance of negative emotions when one is distressed (Linehan, 1993). (pp. 40-41)

Attention deployment:

Efforts to modify internal, attentional focus without making further changes to external, environmental factors that may affect the experience of emotion.

Distraction and mindfulness are opposite examples of attention deployment that can each be used to facilitate the shifting of attention from or toward emotionally salient aspects of one’s environment. (p. 42)

Spirituality-Religion (S-R) can have significant relevance to mental health because patients utilize it in the process of regulating emotions. (p. 42)

Spirituality-Religion (S-R) can also influence attention deployment and is often relied upon to shape the experience of emotion by modulating attentional focus, without otherwise changing one's environment or internal evaluations or perspectives. Perhaps the most common example of S-R-based attention deployment emotion regulation is **prayer**, which can be defined as an attempt to address or communicate with the Divine (Spilka & Ladd, 2012). Among the aspects of S-R life, there is a particular disparity in the degree to which daily prayer is endorsed by mental health professionals (19%) compared to the general population (75%) (Delaney et al., 2007). In order to appreciate the relevance of prayer to emotion regulation, practitioners must first recognize that it is a far more dynamic process than many professional psychologists believe to be the case, and given its centrality within many S-R systems a detailed discussion is warranted. In particular, there are five different types of prayer: (1) thanks, (2) praise, (3) conversation, (4) silence/contemplation, and (5) request. Each of these types can have varied effects on attention deployment and the experience of emotion. (pp. 43-44)

Prayers of thanks can facilitate a shift of attentional focus from burdens to blessings. (pp. 44)

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers,
Modeh Ani**

(1) I give thanks to You living and everlasting King for You have restored my soul with mercy. Great is Your faithfulness.

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית,

הכנה לתפילה

(א) מוֹדֵה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם

שֶׁהַחַיּוֹת בֵּי נַשְׁמָתֵי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה

אֲמוּנָתְךָ:

Ritualized praise can thus enhance one's mundane day-to-day experiences by facilitating a selective focus on positive events – both current and historical – and their latent spiritual meaning. (Rosmarin, p. 45)

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory
Prayers, Asher Yatzar**

Blessed are You, Adonoy our God, King of the Universe, Who formed *adam* with wisdom and created within him openings and hollows. It is obvious and known in the presence of Your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your Presence even for a short while. Blessed are You, Adonoy, Who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, הכנה

לתפילה

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת-

הָאָדָם בְּחַכְמָה וּבְרָא בּוֹ נְקֻבִים וְנִקְבִים חֲלוּלִים

חֲלוּלִים גְּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָנֶיךָ כֶּסֶף כְּבוֹדְךָ שֶׁאִם יִפְתַּח אֶחָד

מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסְתֵּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקִים וְלַעֲמֹד

לְפָנֶיךָ אֶפְלוּ שְׁעָה אַחַת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' רוֹפֵא כָּל-

בְּשָׂר וּמִפְּלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת:

The next two forms of prayer – conversational and silence/contemplation – involve reflecting on one’s inner experiences and meditating on one’s relationship with the Divine, respectively. While conversation and silence/contemplation are similar to each other and distinct from prayers of thanks and praise, these do not inevitably focus on positive events and are also not necessarily uplifting. In fact, these two forms of prayer are often used to remain connected to the Divine in the context of a spiritual or life struggle (“Praying About Difficult Experiences as Self-Disclosure to God,” International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, VandeCreek, Janus, Pennebaker, & Binau, 2002). (p. 45)

I Samuel 1:9-18

(9) After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose. *Septuagint adds “and stood before the Lord.”*—The priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the LORD.— (10) In her wretchedness, she prayed to the LORD, weeping all the while. (11) And she made this vow: “O LORD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.” (12) As she kept on praying before the LORD, Eli watched her mouth. (13) Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. (14) Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? *Lit. “Remove your wine from you.”* “Sober up!”

שמואל א א': ט'-י"ח

(ט) ונתקם חנה אחרי אכלה בשלה ואחרי שתה ועלי הכהן ישב על-הכפסא על-מזונת היכל ה': (י) והיא מרת גפוש ותתפלל על-ה' ובכה תבכה: (יא) ותדר נדר ותאמר ה' צבאות אם-ראה תראה | בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא-תשכח את-אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו לה' כל-ימי חיי ומורה לא-יעלה על-ראשו: (יב) והיה כי הרבתה להתפלל לפני ה' ועלי נשמר את-פיה: (יג) וחסה היא מדברת על-לפה רק שפתיה נעות וקולה לא ישמע ויחשבה עלי לשפחה: (יד) ויאמר אליה עלי עד-מתי תשפתקין הסירי את-ייגה מעליך: (טו) ותען חנה ותאמר לא אדני אשה קשת-רוח אנכי וניזן ושכר לא שתיתי ואשפך את-נפשי לפני ה': (טז) אל-תתן את-אמתך לפני בת-

(15) And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the LORD. (16) Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.” (17) “Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.” (18) She answered, “You are most kind to your handmaid.” So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast.

בְּלִיעַל כִּי־מֵרֵב שִׁתִּי וְכַעֲסִי דִבַּרְתִּי עַד־הִנָּה: (יז)
 וַיַּעַן עָלַי וַיֹּאמֶר לְכִי לְשָׁלוֹם וְאַלֶּיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתֵּן אֶת־
 נְשִׁאתֶךָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁאַלְתְּ מֵעַמּוֹ: (יח) וַתֹּאמֶר תִּמְצָא
 נְשִׁפְחֶתְךָ חֵן בְּעֵינַיִךָ וַתִּלְדֵּךְ הָאִשָּׁה לְדָרָכָהּ וַתֹּאכַל
 וּפְגִיחָהּ לֹא־הָיוּ־לָהּ עוֹד:

Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Amidah, Response to Prayer

Hear our voice, Adonoy, our God; spare us and have compassion on us, and accept our prayers compassionately and willingly, for You are Almighty Who hears prayers and supplications; and do not turn us away empty-handed from Your Presence, our King, *(At this point, the worshiper may add any private petition, and ask God’s help)* for You hear the prayers of Your people, Israel, with compassion. Blessed are You, Adonoy, Who hears prayers.

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, עמידה, שומע תפילה

(א) שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ חוּס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ
 וְקַבֵּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרַצוֹן אֶת־תַּפִּלַּתֵנוּ כִּי אֵל
 שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלוֹת וְתַחֲנוּנִים אַתָּה וּמִלְפָּנֶיךָ מִלְּכֵנוּ
 רִיקָם אֶל־תְּשִׁיבֵנוּ כִּי אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלַּת עַמֶּךָ
 יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרַחֲמִים: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה:

It is entirely possible that request prayer – which is an emotional process (Sharp, 2010) – may simultaneously provide intermittent distraction from negative emotions, while allowing for inhibition through the formation of new, psychologically adaptive associations. (VandeCreek et al. p. 46)

Numbers 12:13

(13) So Moses cried out to ה', saying, "O God, pray heal her!"

במדבר י"ב:י"ג

(יג) וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה' לֵאמֹר אֵל גֹּאֲרָא גֹאֲרָא לָהּ:
{פ}

Berakhot 32b:5

On the subject of prayer, **Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked** and prayer is not accepted as it once was, **as it is said** in lamentation of the Temple's destruction: **"Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer"** (Lamentations 3:8). Yet, **despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked** with the destruction of the Temple, **the gates of tears were not locked**, and one who cries before God may rest assured that his prayers will be answered, **as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears"** (Psalms 39:13).

ברכות ל"ב ב:ה'

וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בַּיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ
נִנְעְלוּ שַׁעְרֵי תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק
וְאֲשׁוּעַ שְׁתֵּם תִּפְלְתִי". וְאִף עַל פִּי שֶׁשַׁעְרֵי
תְּפִלָּה נִנְעְלוּ, שַׁעְרֵי דְמַעָּה לֹא נִנְעְלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
"שְׁמָעָה תִּפְלְתִי ה' וְשׁוֹעֲתִי הֶאֱזִינָה אֶל דְּמַעְתִּי
אֵל תִּחְרַשׁ".

Rabbi Naomi Levy, Seeking the Ability to Pray

Having the desire to pray doesn't necessarily lead to prayer. There are numerous obstacles that prevent us from speaking to God. Distractions from outside combine with resistance from inside, and it is no wonder that prayer rarely comes easily. What helps? Make time for daily reflection. Don't feel inhibited by your lack of eloquence. If no great thought enters your heart, just remember to give thanks for something each day. Don't allow guilt or shame to cause you to hide from God. Search for sources of inspiration – the beauty of nature, the love of your family, your health, your hopes for this world. If no words rise up from you, say a prayer for the ability to pray. (p. 30)

Additional Resources

David Rosmarin, *The Connections Paradigm*

Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*

James L. Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith, *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy*

Yehuda Amichai, אֵל מְלֵא רַחֲמִים (O Merciful Lord)

O merciful Lord,
If the Lord was not merciful
Then mercy would've been throughout the world and not just in
Him.
I, who have picked flowers up on the mountain
And looked upon all the valleys,
I, who have brought dead bodies from the hills,
Can tell that the world is merciless.
I who have been the king of the salt by the sea,
Who stood undecided by my window,
Who counted strides of angels,
Whose heart has lifted weights of pain
In the terrible competitions.
I who uses only a small part
Of the words in the dictionary.
I, who must solve riddles against my will
Know that if the Lord was not merciful
Then mercy would've been throughout the world
And not just in Him.

אֵל מְלֵא רַחֲמִים
אֲלֵמְלֵא הָאֵל מְלֵא רַחֲמִים
הָיָה הַרְחָמִים בְּעוֹלָם וְלֹא רַק בּוֹ.
אֲנִי, שְׁקֻטְפִי פְּרָחִים בְּהַר
וְהִסְתַּכְּלִיתִי אֶל כָּל הָעֵמְקִים
אֲנִי, שֶׁהֵבֵאתִי גוֹיּוֹת מִן הַגְּבְעוֹת
יֹדַע לְסַפֵּר שֶׁהָעוֹלָם רִיק מֵרַחֲמִים
אֲנִי שֶׁהֵייתִי מֶלֶךְ הַמֶּלַח לִיד הַיָּם
שֶׁעֲמַדְתִּי בְּלִי הַחֲלָטָה לִיד חִלּוּנִי
שֶׁסִּפְרִיתִי צַעְדֵי מְלֵאכִים
שֶׁלְבִי הָרִים מִשְׁקָלוֹת כְּאֵב
בְּתַחֲרִיּוֹת הַנּוֹרְאוֹת
אֲנִי שֶׁמִּשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ רַק בְּחֵלֶק קָטָן
מִן הַמְּלִים שֶׁבַּמְּלוֹן
אֲנִי, שֶׁמִּכְרַח לְפִתּוֹר חִידוֹת בְּעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי
יֹדַע כִּי אֲלֵמְלֵא הָאֵל מְלֵא רַחֲמִים
הָיָה הַרְחָמִים בְּעוֹלָם
וְלֹא רַק בּוֹ.

Psalms 13

למנצח מזמור לדוד:

For the leader. A psalm of David.

How long, O LORD; will You ignore me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

How long will I have cares on my mind,
grief in my heart all day?

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Look at me, answer me, O LORD, my God!

Restore the luster to my eyes,
lest I sleep the sleep of death;

lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him,"
my foes exult when I totter.

But I trust in Your faithfulness,
my heart will exult in Your deliverance.

I will sing to the LORD,
for He has been good to me.

עַד־אֵנָה יְהוָה תִּשְׁכַּחַנִּי בַצַּח עַד־אֵנָה | תִּסְתִּיר אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

עַד־אֵנָה אֲשִׁית עֲצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי יָגוֹן בְּלִבִּי יוֹמָם עַד־אֵנָה | יָרוּם אִיְבֵי עָלַי:

הַבִּיטָה עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָאֵירָה לְעֵינַי פֶּן־אִישָׁן הַמּוֹת:

פֶּן־יֹאמְרוּ אִיְבֵי יִכְלְתִּיו צָרִי לְגִילוֹ כִּי אָמוּט:

וְאֲנִי | בַּחֲסֶדְךָ בְּטַחַתִּי יִגַּל לִבִּי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָמַל עָלַי: {פ}