



TAKE A BREATH

An Overview of the *Selah* Stress Management Intervention



Spirited Life®
Selah

Executive Summary:

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) produces, procures, and disseminates research findings to support the health and wellbeing of clergy, with an emphasis on United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.

One of the particularly special things CHI does is test interventions with clergy to see if clergy will engage with the practices and experience good outcomes. From 2018-2022, CHI partnered with the United Methodist clergy of North Carolina to conduct the *Selah* Stress Management trial. CHI tested 3 interventions.

- **The Ignatian prayer practice of the Daily Examen.** The *Selah* trial was innovative in testing a specific prayer practice for stress symptom reduction. Clergy practiced the Examen, which takes 12-15 minutes, close to daily for six months. Compared to a control group, six months after starting the Daily Examen, clergy had significantly fewer stress and anxiety symptoms, as well as increased spiritual well-being in ministry. After six months, the Daily Examen showed trends in improving depressive symptoms. Changes in heart rate variability (HRV) moved in the right direction but not significantly so.
- **Stress Proofing.** Stress Proofing taught a combination of bodily stress awareness, breathing exercises, and lifestyle changes pertaining to sleep, device use, and caffeine, and had never been rigorously tested before. Clergy engaged with the practices, which take 10-12 minutes, with high frequency across six months. Compared to a control group, three and six months after starting Stress Proofing, clergy had significantly fewer stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Changes in HRV and spiritual well-being in ministry did not differ from the control group.
- **Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction.** Clergy found the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) practices of awareness of breath, body scans, walking meditation, yoga, and Loving Kindness Meditation acceptable and – somewhat surprisingly – practiced an average of 30 minutes/day at very high rates for six months. Compared to a control group, just three months after starting MBSR, clergy experienced a significant improvement in HRV, which measures the heart’s ability to relax following a stressor. In addition, at both three and six months after starting MBSR, clergy had significantly fewer stress and anxiety symptoms and increased spiritual well-being.

Together, the *Selah* Stress Management trial findings offer practices powerful enough to reduce stress symptoms during a pandemic and times of emotionally charged national and denominational change.

CHI particularly recommends Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, which led to strongly beneficial physical changes in addition to perceived symptoms of stress, after just three months. CHI also recommends the Daily Examen which takes half the number of minutes/day as MBSR, is easier to learn, and additionally improves spiritual well-being after 6 months. For clergy already practicing Stress Proofing, CHI recommends continuing those practices and considering adding MBSR practices to achieve physical changes that decrease the chances of cardiac events and strokes.

Selah [Exclamation] from Hebrew *selāh* (in the Bible) occurring frequently at the end of verses in Psalms and Habakkuk, probably as a musical direction, whose meaning is generally interpreted as “pause and listen” or as instruction to take a breath

How We Got Here

Between 2010 and 2014, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative designed and implemented a holistic health intervention for North Carolina United Methodist Clergy, *Spirited Life*. *Spirited Life* specifically targeted symptoms of metabolic syndrome, depression, and stress and showed remarkable physical health outcomes. Markers of metabolic syndrome showed significant improvement throughout the intervention period and sustained for 18 months following the end of the intervention period. Our data did not indicate that *Spirited Life* generated anything greater than minor improvements in depression and stress symptoms nor were they sustained over time.

Consistent with national trends related to stress and burnout among those serving in professions who describe feeling “called” to their work, our continued work with North Carolina United Methodist clergy since the conclusion of *Spirited Life* suggested a need for a specific focus on stress reduction in this population. Our partners at The Duke Endowment indicated their interest in studying the acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of stress management tools with the goal of identifying stress management practices for clergy that are scalable for continued implementation in the North Carolina United Methodist conferences and beyond. In particular,

the goal was to identify practices that would not interfere with pastors’ ability to give themselves fully to the Church by evaluating small practices that were practical for a life in ministry.

Believing that addressing and reducing stress and anxiety symptoms could also reduce secondary symptoms of mental distress such as depressive symptoms and burnout in clergy, the *Spirited Life: Selah* Stress Management Trial was conducted. Through the *Selah* study, we have worked to determine which of these practices were acceptable to clergy based on their willingness to attend program offerings; which of these practices were feasible to clergy, based on their attendance and participation in the practices; and which of these practices would lead to reductions in survey-based validated stress and anxiety symptoms measures and improvements in physiological responses to stress (measured by heart rate variability) as compared to a waitlist control group over a six-month period. Following a pilot program in 2018-19, *The Spirited Life: Selah* Stress Management Trial ran from 2019-2021. This report contains the results of over four years of planning and study. We are grateful to be able to share it with you.

The Nature of Clergy Stress

THE SPIRITED LIFE: SELAH program was grounded in Sanctification Theory, which proposes that when someone gives sacred meaning to something, as clergy do with the vocation of ministry, they will exert substantial time and energy to it, fiercely protect it, experience strong emotions around it, draw on it as a resource and experience desolation when it is lost.



STRESSORS COMMON TO MANY “SERVANT-HEARTED” OCCUPATIONS

- Long hours, especially on evenings and weekends
- Difficult emotional labor
- Complex interpersonal skills needed
- Ambiguous outcomes
- Few projects with finite endings
- Expectation to function in multiple contexts and complete many varied tasks
- The slow pace of change

STRESSORS COMMON TO CLERGY

- Public criticism
- Congregational conflicts and interpersonal difficulties
- Unpredictable days
- All-volunteer staff
- Differing opinions among congregants on your role in the church
- Congregants’ expectations of your family members
- Institutional decline and financial stress
- Task switching
- Exposure to traumatic situations



When Stressed, Clergy Have Less Emotional and Creative Bandwidth for What Really Matters

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

- Being present with a congregation member and their family at the time of death
- Preparing a meaningful worship service for Sunday
- Connecting with God through prayer
- Building a new ministry
- Meeting with other pastors to respond to a crisis
- Planning an interfaith service

Program Overview

Throughout 2020 and 2021, we engaged almost 300 United Methodist clergy from across the state of North Carolina on a journey to evaluate three specific practices chosen specifically for clergy, and guided by data from United Methodist clergy in NC across 10 years and the most up-to-date findings in the larger stress management literature.

SPIRITED LIFE: SELAH aimed to help clergy live fully into ministry while decreasing stress symptoms. Despite the abundance of existing programs to reduce stress, people often don't engage in them because they are too time-consuming, don't fit with one's beliefs, or don't fit into one's day. These particular practices were adapted specifically for clergy with an eye towards promoting spiritual well-being in addition to reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Because the funding for this research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the programmatic components of *Selah* Study were delivered remotely. While this was not the original program design, we were grateful for the opportunity to engage clergy during a uniquely stressful period as well as having the opportunity to design and test programming that is easily scalable and low-cost.

SPIRITED LIFE: SELAH was a program created to introduce clergy to one of three stress management practices. These practices were designed to equip clergy with the tools they need to manage and respond to the stresses of ministry.

SPIRITED LIFE: SELAH began with attendance and participation at an online



As clergy, we're expected to tell other people how to grieve, but we forget to tell ourselves how to grieve... *Selah* came along at a wonderful time and showed me ways to connect with God that I don't think I had connected with in a long time."

Terry Williams
Pastor, NCCUMC



workshop designed to introduce clergy to a new stress reduction practice and to a group of fellow clergy. Depending on which practice was chosen, clergy attended anywhere from three to eight online sessions where they learned their practice under the guidance of trained and qualified instructors.

Following attendance at the workshop, participants were invited to six months of daily practice and some online follow-up sessions. Practice was encouraged via daily text messages from their instructors and the *Selah* staff.

SPIRITED LIFE: SELAH had two primary components:

- Instructional programming that introduced clergy to particular stress-reduction skills, and invited them into daily practice in community with a cohort of 15-20 other clergy.
- A six-month behavioral health study that used surveys, biometric data, interviews, and daily reporting to rigorously determine whether or not each program made a difference in stress symptoms.

The Practices

| The Daily Examen

The practice of the Daily Examen is a simple but powerful prayer that has been practiced by Jesuit clergy for over 500 years. It takes only 10-15 minutes and can be used to reflect on positive emotions, move past negative emotions, and align your work with God's work. In the Duke Clergy Health Initiative's study of flourishing clergy, we found that flourishing pastors are more likely to do just that – to move past difficult emotions by focusing on their contributions to God's larger plan.

The Daily Examen originates from Ignatian spirituality and shares important commonalities with the Wesleyan theological tradition. For both Wesleyan and Ignatian spirituality, the assurance of God's love and freely given grace serve as the foundational theological belief. For both Wesleyans and Ignatians, honest self-examination is important for holy living. For both, prayer is central and essential to this transformation of life and faith.

| Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction

Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is based on the ancient practice of mindfulness, which is about waking up, being fully alive, and being present for the richness of each moment of our lives. The MBSR program challenges participants to practice present moment awareness, deep relaxation, and gentle movement. Through the use of these techniques, a person learns to discover and observe his or her reactions to life's stressors and to choose how to respond. With practice, one can apply these skills to everyday situations and connect more fully with one's self, loved ones, and the life one is living. MBSR can help people who are coping with medical problems, job or family-related stress, and anxiety and depression.

INTERVENTION #1

THE DAILY EXAMEN (15 MIN/DAY)

Five-step prayer:

- 1 Become aware of God's presence.
- 2 Review the events of the past 24 hours, recalling two to three things for which you are grateful.
- 3 Review what stands out and pay attention to what emotions arise. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, pray through these emotions, noticing which are drawing you closer to God or pulling you away from God.
- 4 Talk with God about what is standing out for you. If needed, ask for forgiveness.
- 5 Look forward to the next 24 hours. What is the one thing you should do? Where do you need God's assistance?



INTERVENTION #2 MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION (45 MIN/DAY)

Mindfulness is a set of practices to encourage being present for the richness of each moment of our lives:

- Awareness of breath
- Loving Kindness Meditation
- Walking meditation
- Mindful yoga
- Body scan
- Responding vs reacting
- Choiceless awareness

INTERVENTION #3 STRESS PROOFING (15 MIN/DAY)

Advance preparation and in-the-moment physical techniques for stressful episodes

Awareness

- Stress biology and cycles
- Spot symptoms of stress

Stress “Resets”:

- Gear shift breathing
- Rectangle breathing
- Chair stretching exercises
- Releasing muscle tension

Lifestyle changes:

- Full night’s sleep
- No technology before bed
- Abstinence from sugar and caffeine

MBSR is a widely used stress-reduction program with a strong evidence base supporting its effectiveness.. In previous studies of MBSR, the majority of participants reported lasting decreases in both physical and psychological symptoms. Pain levels improved and people learned to better cope with pain that may not go away. Most people also reported an increased ability to relax, greater enthusiasm for life, improved self-esteem, and increased ability to cope more effectively with stressful situations. Though MBSR has origins in Buddhist practices, it has clear resonance with the Christian contemplative tradition.

| Stress Proofing

Stress Proofing is a program focused on physiology that includes exercises that work directly on the body to mitigate the symptoms of stress. This system is based on Stress Inoculation Training, which uses scenarios and recovery skills to prepare people in advance for stressful episodes. The techniques include a variety of breathing and stretching methods, as well as ways to conduct deep tissue massage on oneself to release muscle tension. The awareness aspect involves understanding stress biology, attending to device use and sleep, and learning to spot the symptoms of stress in yourself and others.

The Science Behind Measuring Stress

Who participated in *Selah*?

*A total of 255 pastors participated in the Trial with 71 randomly assigned to the control group. Compared to all UMC clergy in NC, *Selah* participants were more likely to be female and have elevated depressive symptoms.*

	SELAH PARTICIPANTS	NC UMC POPULATION BASED ON 2019 STATEWIDE SURVEY
Average age	53.9	53
Gender	Female 47.5% Male 52.5%	Female 33.7% Male 66.3%
Race	White 90.6% Black 5.9% Other 3.5%	White 88.8% Black 5.9% Other 5.3%
Appointment Type	Local Church Appointment 82.4% Extension Ministry Appointment 17.6%	Local Church Appointment 86.6% Extension Ministry Appointment 13.4%
Financial Stress (moderate/very/extremely)	31.2%	36.8%
High Blood Pressure	34.5%	40.5%
Elevated Depressive Symptoms	17%	10.7%

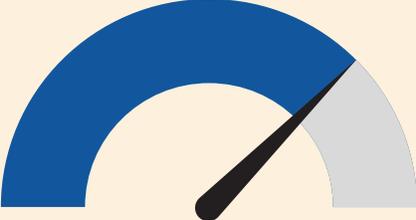
How stressed were *Selah* participants before they started?

At baseline:

The *Selah* trial baseline score on the Clergy Occupational Distress Index was a mean of 1.0 (SD 0.6), compared to the full Statewide Survey population of 1.2 (SD 0.6) in both 2019 and 2016. So *Selah* participants were slightly less distressed than the NC UMC clergy population.



42% of *Selah* trial participants said their overall life stress was very or extremely stressful



71% said they fairly or very often had congregant-related stress

How did we measure stress and the impact of these practices?

Participants in Spirited Life: *Selah* agreed to offer data on their experience so each practice could be tested and recommended as appropriate to clergy in the future.

SURVEYS

All participants were invited to complete three 30-minute surveys during the study. These surveys were completed at baseline (before learning a practice), then again 3 and 6 months later. The survey allowed us to measure participants' self-reported stress symptoms using 41 items of the Calgary Symptoms of Stress Inventory and anxiety symptoms using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 measure, as well as tracking depressive symptoms and spiritual well-being.

Calgary Symptoms of Stress Inventory

IN THE PAST WEEK, HOW OFTEN...

- Does it seem you are easily annoyed and irritated?
- Have you noticed excessive tension, stiffness, soreness, or cramping in the muscles in your shoulders?
- Have you noticed rapid breathing when not exercising?
- Have you experienced nausea?

0 - Never
1 - Infrequently
2 - Sometimes
3 - Often
4 - Very frequently

Generalized Anxiety Disorder, 7-item measure

OVER THE LAST 2 WEEKS, HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU BEEN BOTHERED BY...

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that is hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

0 - Not at all
1 - Several days
2 - More than half the days
3 - Nearly every day

Trial participants: These are participants who enrolled in *Selah* prior to the pandemic and were assigned by a process of randomization to either start learning their practice immediately or to wait for 6 months prior to learning a practice while giving data as control participants.

Control participants: These are participants who gave us data prior to learning any stress management practice. The vast majority of these participants later enrolled in a workshop and learned a practice. Gathering this data allows us to compare those who are learning each practice with active clergy who are not engaged in that practice.

Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

is the measure of variance in time intervals between successive heartbeats

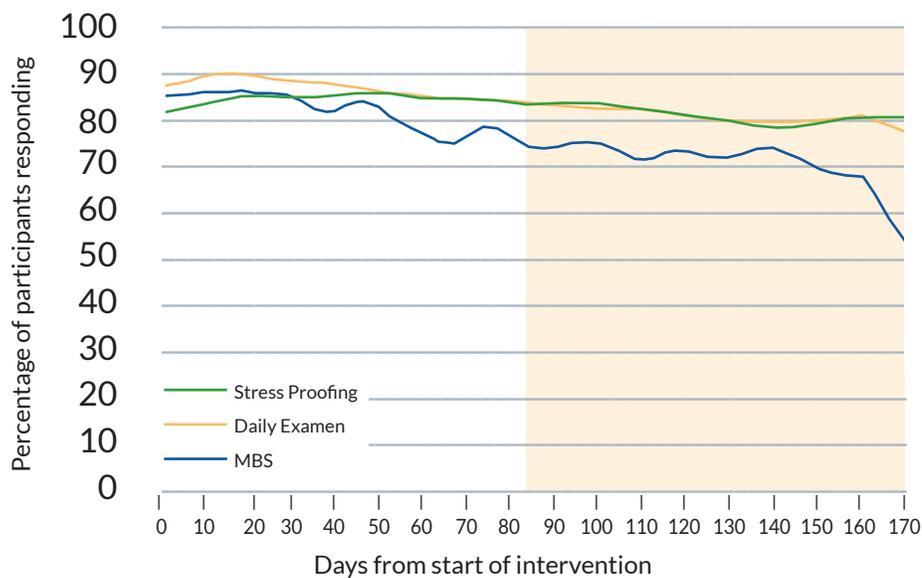
2 HEART RATE VARIABILITY

Heart Rate Variability is a biometric measure of the body's ability to recover after a stressful episode. It measures our nervous system's ability to respond to stressful events. Improvements in HRV are related to fewer strokes and cardiac events. Most participants were invited to wear a heart rate monitor for 48 hours—once before learning the practice and then again three months later. Each participant's average heart rate variability over this 48-hour period was compared between the baseline and follow-up time point to see if there were significant changes in HRV.

3 DAILY PRACTICE REPORTING

All participants submitted how much time they spent doing their stress management practice daily via text message for 180 days. This daily text message served both to prompt participants to engage in their practice as they developed a new habit and allowed us to understand if and how much pastors were engaging the program.

80-85% RESPONDED TO OUR DAILY TEXT MESSAGES FOR NEARLY 6 MONTHS



4 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

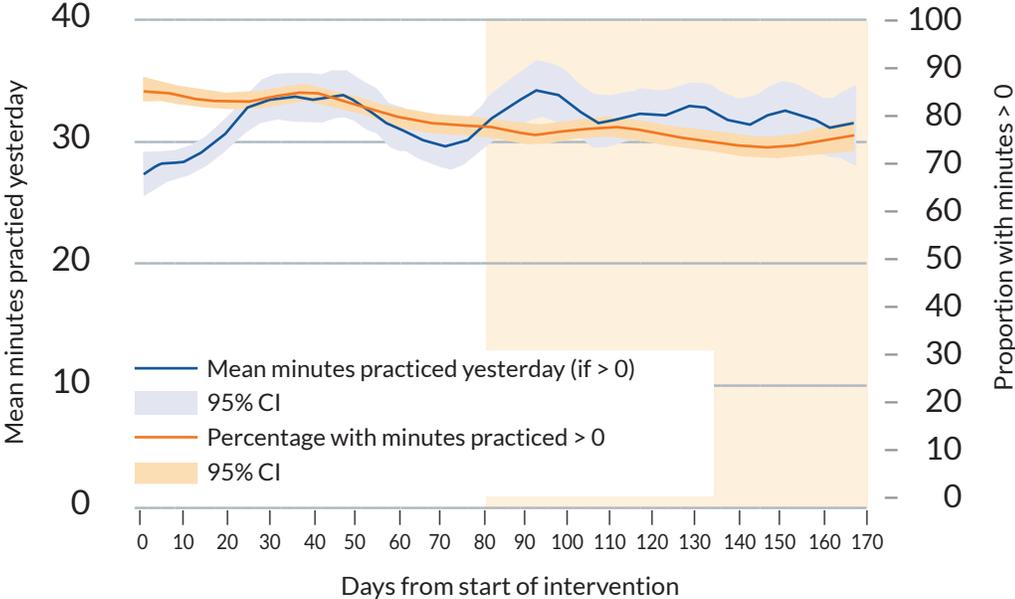
About 10% of our participating pastors were invited to be interviewed at various time points throughout the study. These 30-60 minute conversations gave us qualitative insight into how the practices were impacting clergy well-being.

What We Learned

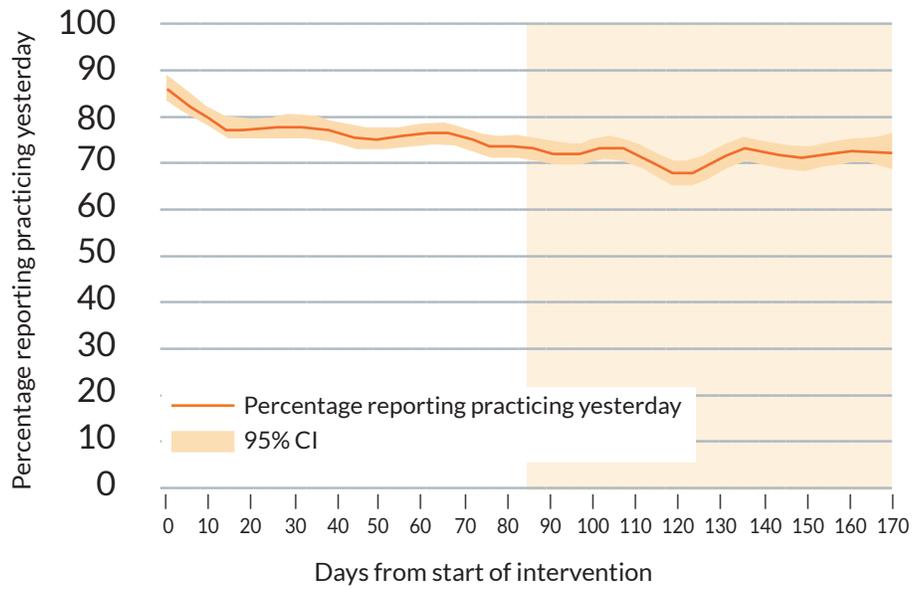
Will clergy actually make time for these practices? The answer is YES!

The goal of this project was to give clergy the tools to manage their stress so that they can show up for congregants. In a world with an abundance of stress-management tools available, we needed to identify effective programs that clergy would engage.

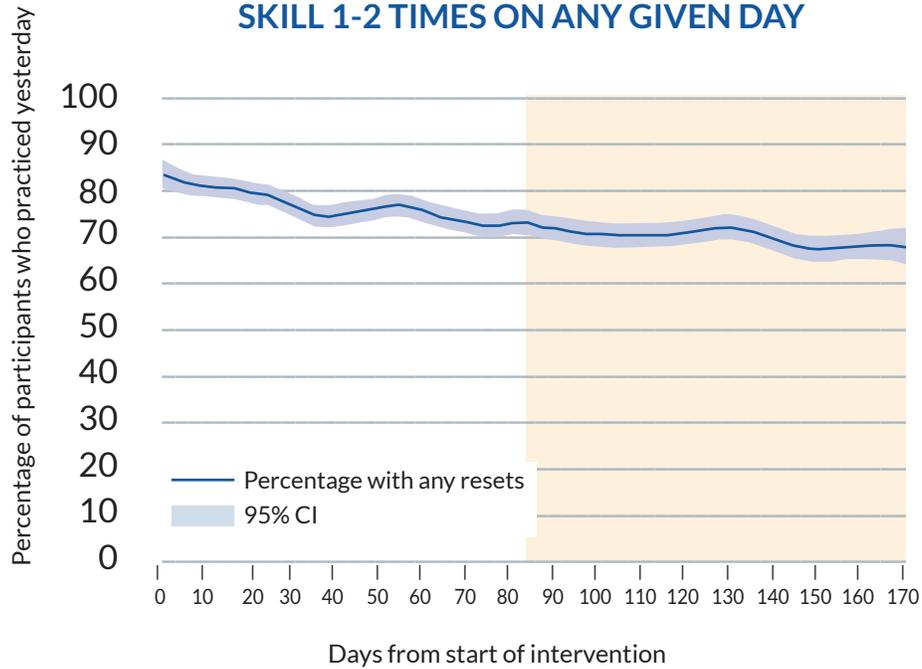
ABOUT 80% PRACTICED MINDFULNESS ON A GIVEN DAY, FOR AN AVERAGE OF 30 MINUTES



OVER 70% PRACTICED THE DAILY EXAMEN ON A GIVEN DAY

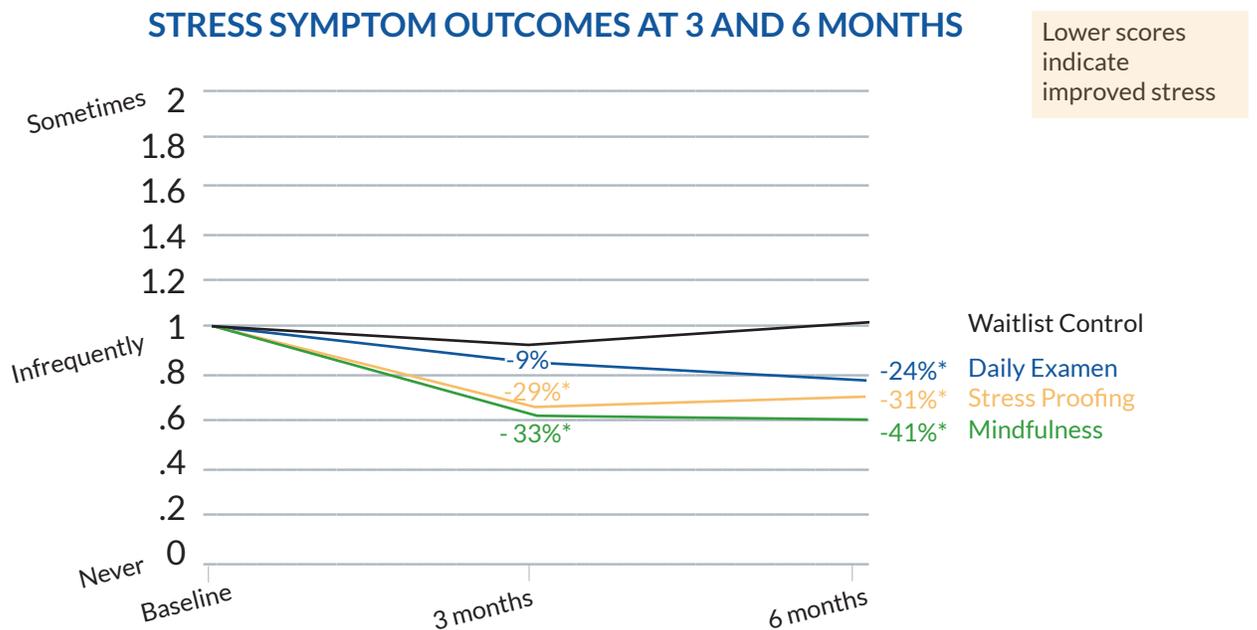


70% ENGAGED IN A STRESS PROOFING SKILL 1-2 TIMES ON ANY GIVEN DAY



Can these practices make significant changes in stress symptoms? The answer is YES!

Stress symptoms showed marked declines in their frequency at three months, with more significant reduction at 6 months, as compared to our waitlist control group. MBSR and Stress Proofing participants experienced significant reductions in stress symptoms at 3 and 6 months, and Daily Examen participants experienced significant reductions at 6 months.



* represents statistically significant change and ^ indicates a trend towards significance



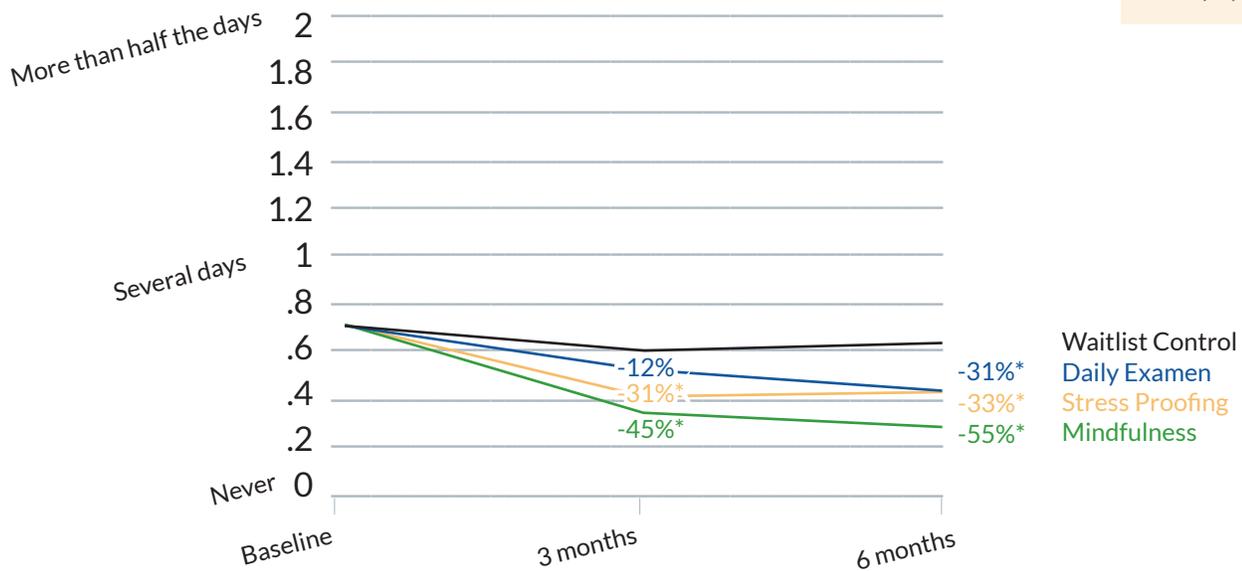
When we take care of ourselves, it gives other people license to do the same. This is a matter of survival. I'm not here because I'm good at Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, I'm here because I need it to survive."

Jason Villegas
Pastor, NCCUMC

Likewise, anxiety symptoms were monitored over the 6-month period for all participants and similar declines were measured for all three interventions. All three interventions saw significant changes at 6 months, and MBSR and Stress Proofing also saw improvements at 3 months.

ANXIETY SYMPTOM OUTCOMES AT 3 AND 6 MONTHS

Lower scores indicate improved anxiety symptoms



Often, the expectation for clergy so often is that we are the calm in the center of the storm. Learning practices that help me connect with the calm center and destress has been invaluable. I have been sharing them with people in my parish so that they too can better deal with our chaotic world.”

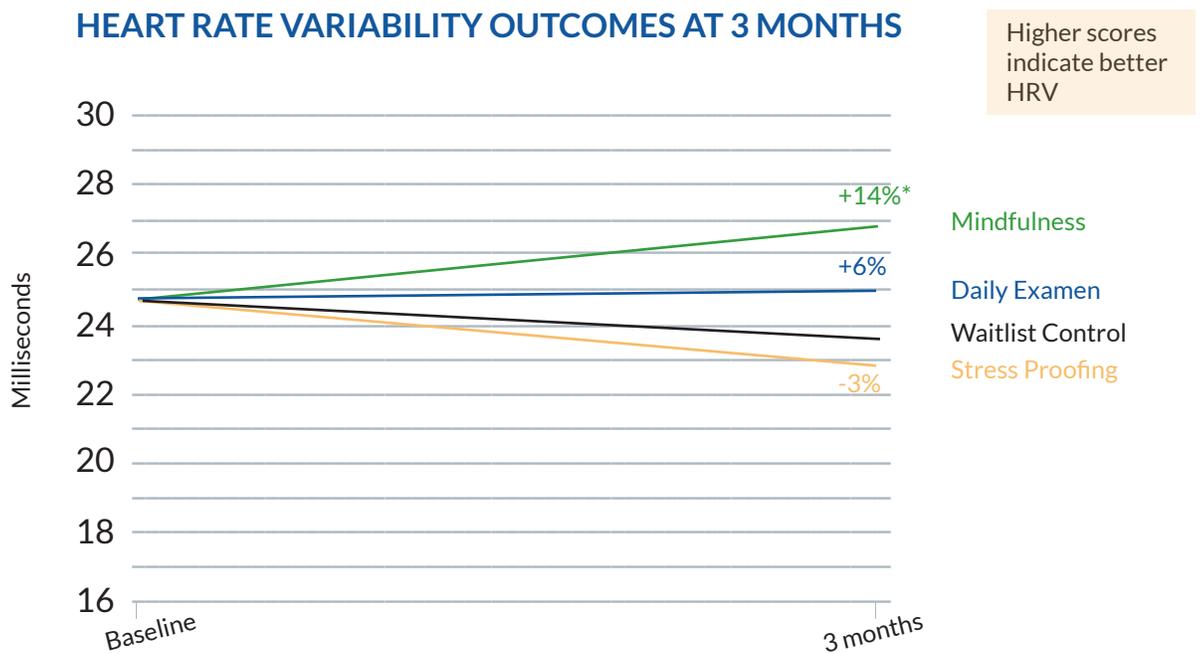
Amy Rio
Pastor, WNCUMC





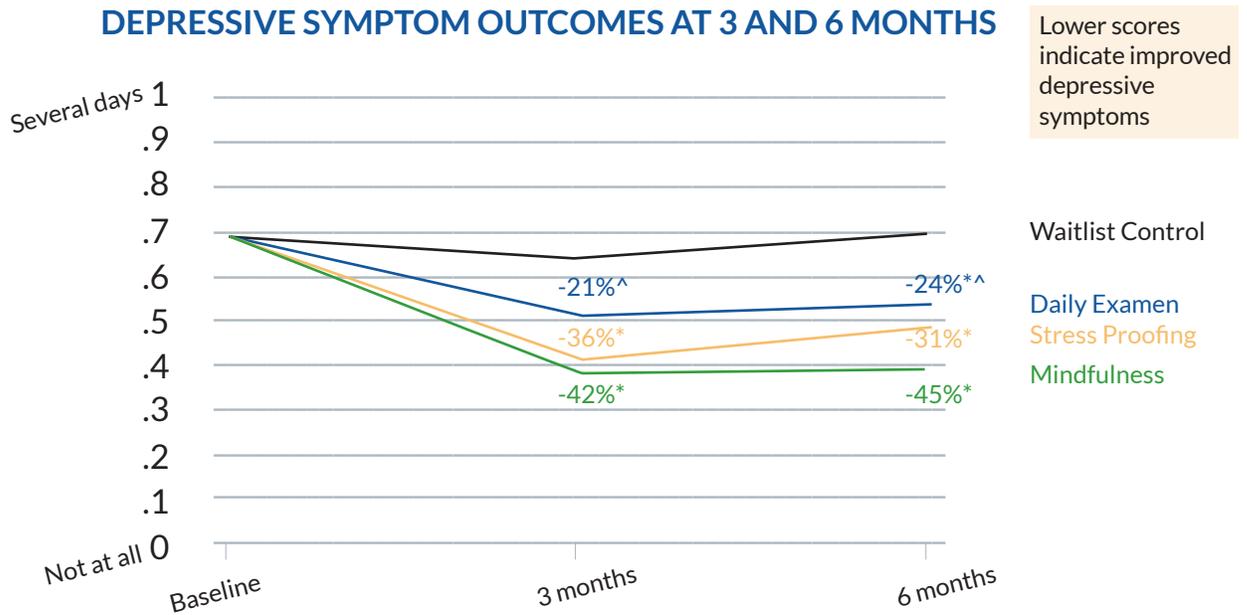
Can these practices change clergy physiologically? MBSR can!

Heart Rate Variability, the measure of the body's ability to recover in moments of stress, was measured prior to workshop attendance and then again 3 months into practice. Findings from this biomarker were particularly important to our outcome analysis as this data is not susceptible to one's expectations or self-reporting bias. MBSR, as indicated by the star, was the only intervention to create statistically significant improvements in HRV at 3 months, with an average 14% improvement in HRV.

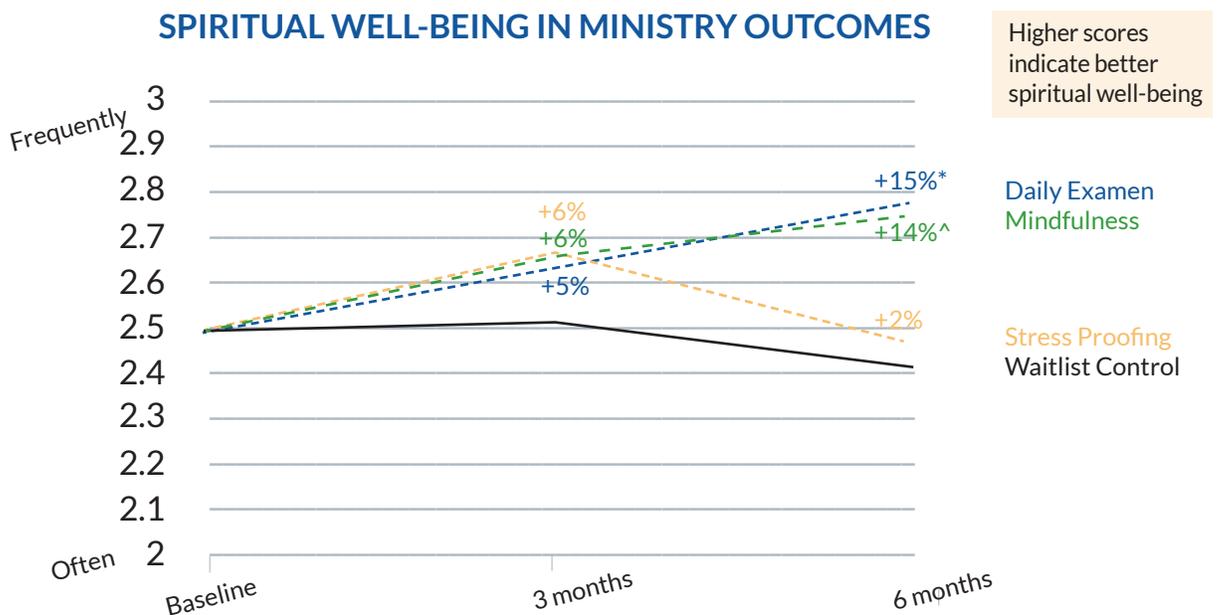


Can these practices make an impact on depressive symptoms or pastors' sense of spiritual well-being? The answer is YES!

Secondary goals of the study were to understand the impact of stress management practices on depressive symptoms and spiritual well-being. The depressive symptom reductions experienced by participants were significant for Stress Proofing and MBSR and showed trends in improvement for the Daily Examen.



Spiritual well-being in ministry was measured using an 8-item instrument whereby participants identified the frequency in which they experienced the power and presence of God when completing a variety of common ministry tasks. Daily Examen participants experienced significant increases, and MBSR participants saw a trend toward significant increases in spiritual well-being, although it took the full 6 months.



Project Takeaways

We tested 3 interventions. All of them are scalable and, based on the outcomes achieved, they are relatively inexpensive. Each intervention is safe to do. Some have clearer outcomes than others.

| **Selah Evidence-Based Interventions for Clergy**



1 MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION

- 8 online sessions
- 1 optional 4-hour online session
- Online & paper course materials
- \$350 per pastor

MBSR is a very promising intervention we believe should be rolled out to pastors because:

- Pastors will do it!
- It helps with perceived stress and the physiological ability to handle stress.
- It improves depressive symptoms.
- The course can be completed by individuals or arranged for groups.

Heart Rate Variability, the measure of the body's ability to recover in moments of stress, was measured prior to workshop attendance and then again 3 months into practice. Findings from this biomarker were particularly important to our outcome analysis as this data is not susceptible to one's expectations or self-reporting bias. **MBSR was the only intervention to create statistically significant improvements in HRV at 3 months, with an average 14% improvement in HRV.**



2 DAILY EXAMEN

- 5 online sessions
- Book and app
- \$200 per pastor

The Daily Examen is also a promising intervention.

- It's very affordable.
- It takes minimal time to learn and practice.
- Pastors found it to be a beneficial prayer practice that improved spiritual well-being in ministry.
- Encouraging pastors to engage in self-reflective prayer is a GOOD THING! Pastors are hard on themselves and it is important to help them find forgiveness where they fall short and look for God's redemptive work in their lives.
- The Examen helps with stress and anxiety. It takes more months of practice to see these results than MBSR does, but the practice is easier to learn and is fewer minutes per day.



3 STRESS PROOFING

- 5 online sessions
- Book and online portal
- \$250 per pastor

Stress Proofing created improvements in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. However, HRV saw no beneficial change. We will analyze the data to see if certain kinds of clergy benefited from Stress Proofing more than others, or if clergy who practiced more had better outcomes. Clergy who learned Stress Proofing and are still engaging in some of its practices are encouraged to continue, and also to consider learning.

If You Want to Take Action

| Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction

MBSR courses are widely available in both online and in-person settings. This program was completed in partnership with Duke Integrative Medicine’s Distance Learning Program and is available to the public. When searching for an MBSR course, you will want to look for programs that have certified instructors in the MBSR model and courses that are a minimum of 8 sessions.

| The Daily Examen

The Daily Examen can be learned through participation in a workshop or can be self-taught.

The instructors who provided the Daily Examen retreats in the trial can be reached through the **Redwood Center for Spiritual Care and Education**. They continue to offer Daily Examen retreats, including online retreats.

Many Spiritual Directors trained in the Ignatian tradition are also capable of leading instruction on the Daily Examen.

The book, *Reimagining the Examen* by Mark Thibodeaux and its accompanying mobile phone application, were used by clergy in the *Spirited Life: Selah* program.



In a year that became a strange combination of busyness and emptiness, participating in *Selah* with the Daily Examen helped me take time to regularly reflect on God’s presence and my response. I continue to see the results and benefits of this intentional time of reflection and connection to God.”

Nikki Ross
Pastor, WNCUMC

THE SELAH RESEARCH TEAM

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, PhD

David Eagle, PhD

Joshua Rash, PhD, RPsych

Carl Weisner, MA

Logan Tice, MA

Alyssa Platt, MA

Jia Yao, MA

Jessie Larkins, MDiv, MEd

THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS AND PARTNERS





Pause. Take a deep breath.

In the silence may you hear again
God's still small voice whispering

this eternal truth:

I am with you. I am for you.

May you be enfolded in God's
presence, grounded in God's grace,
and restored to peace.

Selah.

Spirited Life®
Selah