News
Spirituality

Lobsang Tseten meditates and practices breathing exercises alone to maintain social distancing at a playground, Wednesday, March 25, 2020, in New York. Meditation and mindfulness apps have boomed in the last decade, part of the trend of the year that Apple noted in 2018: self-care apps, particularly those focused on mental health. (AP/John Minchillo)

Emily McFarlan Miller

Contributor

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Rachael Reynolds is a busy wife and mom of three who, like many, suddenly has been tasked with home-schooling her children and managing the anxiety of a pandemic.

Reynolds, 34, also is a registered nurse and works three or four night shifts a week in the labor and delivery department at a Texas hospital. That adds the stress of keeping her patients and herself safe from the spread of the novel coronavirus.

In those times when she has a few moments to herself, or when she's trying to drift off to sleep as everyone else is beginning a new day, Reynolds finds herself tapping on one of the meditation apps on her phone — like Abide, which calls itself the No. 1 Christian meditation app to "stress less and sleep better."

"Grounding myself with the Word of God, and the truth and the promises he offers me there, I find to be much more effective for grounding myself mentally and spiritually," she said.

Meditation and mindfulness apps like Calm and Headspace have boomed in the last decade, part of the trend of the year that Apple noted in 2018: self-care apps, particularly those focused on mental health.

Christian meditation apps — with names like Pray, One Minute Pause and, for Catholics specifically, Hallow — have entered the scene more recently, adding prayer and Scripture to the digital landscape of soft voices and nature sounds.

Several of those Christian apps have reported spikes in searches for meditations on topics like anxiety since the pandemic started.

"It's sort of really exploding right now," said Bobby Gruenewald, pastor and innovation leader at Life.Church, which added a YouVersion Rest skill for smart

speakers on its Bible app last month after noticing users were listening to Scripture late at night.

"We definitely know that people turn to Scripture when they're in different times of need. … I think they see the Bible as a point of stability, truth and substance that helps them kind of center."

Author and therapist John Eldredge launched the app One Minute Pause late last year to accompany his latest book, "Get Your Life Back: Everyday Practices for a World Gone Mad."

As a therapist, Eldredge said, he was troubled by the rise in anxiety and depression he saw even before the pandemic struck.

People were on "empathy overload" amid news of disasters around the world. Christians — including Eldredge himself — weren't having the experience of deep rootedness expressed in the Psalms, he said.

Mindfulness, or focusing one's attention on God, is "an ancient Christian practice, but we need help back to it because our attention has been shattered," he said.

Abide has been around about five years, since two former Google employees who were Christians decided to leave the tech giant and use their skills instead "for the kingdom," according to Russ Jones, its executive producer of content.

It offers users a daily meditation and a library of prayers on different topics — most popularly, worry and anxiety. In recent weeks, it has added a number of healing prayers, too, including a 12-minute coronavirus healing prayer asking God "that those who have the virus will be healed and that its spread would slow and that it would soon be eradicated."

But an app is no replacement for a church, Jones said.

"People need to be in a local body," even if that's meeting from a safe distance through the current pandemic, he said.

"We are that place that people can go in the dark night of the soul at 2 o'clock in the morning when the pastor is not available in churches. We're that place where people can go on the run in their busy lives and still be in Scripture."

Another app, Pray, launched in 2017 with a vision to become "the digital destination for faith," according to creator Steve Gatena.

Amid the pandemic, Pray is offering its meditations for free, as well as content for kids who now are home from school and other services for churches that suddenly find themselves meeting online. And it's seeing a rise in the minutes users spend listening to the app and in new subscribers, according to Gatena.

"With stress levels climbing by the day, we believe everyone deserves access to programs that help reduce anxiety levels," he said.

Pray's meditations always start with Scripture, Gatena said. But, he said, he knows the word "meditation" can raise eyebrows for Christians.

Some evangelical Christians have fretted that practices like meditation and mindfulness aren't Christian, but rather New Age or Buddhist.

Some Buddhists have been critical of the app craze, too, noted Sarah Shaw, an Oxford lecturer and expert on Buddhist history who traces the history of mindfulness in her book "Mindfulness: Where It Comes From and What It Means."

The "new wave" of mindfulness and meditation does come from Buddhism, according to Shaw.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who introduced the idea of mindfulness as therapy, had prior experience with Buddhism, she said. And Andy Puddicombe, co-founder of Headspace and an ordained Buddhist monk, launched the app on a mission to bring the training he'd received to the masses.

But, she said of mindfulness, "I don't think anybody owns this word."

Many religions have different aspects of meditation and mindfulness, according to Shaw.

In fact, the term "mindfulness" was first introduced to the English language in the 14th century Wycliffe Bible, she said.

Reynolds, the nurse, said millennials like herself seem "more open and willing to see how mental health and emotional health really ties into us as beings holistically," compared to previous generations.

She downloaded the Abide app about a year ago after she experienced meditation and guided Scripture readings at a retreat. She has used it several times a week — even more since the coronavirus began its march across the U.S.

She especially likes the meditations on the app that are pulled from Scripture, she said.

To her, they bring together physical, mental and spiritual health. Like other meditation apps, she said, they decrease the stress she feels, slow her thoughts and help her sleep better. They also keep her centered and grounded in Scripture and in what she believes to be true about God.

"I really love that people are now learning that the God who created us physically also created the spiritual and emotional and mental sides of us, and those deserve to be fed and treated well, just like we would with eating right and exercising our physical bodies," she said.

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