

The background of the central section is a photograph of a beach. Waves are breaking onto a sandy shore. The sky is overcast and grey. The entire photograph is framed within a large, light blue, semi-circular arch that points upwards towards the logo.

# GENTLE PRESENCE RESOURCE

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PREPARED BY KINTSUGI HOPE

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## FOR:

Church Leaders and Small Group Leaders looking for material which answers 'what next?' after a Kintsugi Hope Wellbeing Group or after being inspired by Time to Talk Day or another awareness event.

## AIM:

Understand the biblical meaning of gentleness and how we demonstrate gentleness to those struggling with their mental health and to ourselves.

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE:

To get the best out of the resource, we recommend that you as the leader read pages 3 and 4 to familiarise yourself with the concept and theory of gentleness and gentle presence in the context of mental health.

To begin your session show the introductory video explaining what gentle presence is and then lead the group in the box breathing exercise. (page 5)  
You can then lead your group through the biblical content and principles for gentle presence, practising the gentleness ideas before ending with the breath prayers.

SCAN THIS QR TO WATCH AN  
INTRODUCTORY VIDEO



Where you see this icon, it's time for a discussion. You can either do this as a whole group or split into smaller groups.

# INTRODUCTION:

From the moment of birth, we were designed for gentleness. The key needs for an infant are to be kept safe and soothed when they cry, and to have their needs seen and met. We are instinctively gentle with babies; lowering our voices, cradling them softly, and ensuring their needs are met. As we grow older however, we are increasingly less sheltered from the harshness of the world; physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually. We come to expect less gentleness but don't outgrow the need for it to be shown. That is not to say that we don't need challenge, structure and consequences - but our nervous systems work best when we are grounded in the present, surrounded by a loving community and given the tools to return home to ourselves.

## WHY GENTLE PRESENCE?

Back in 2021 at the very beginning of the Mental Health Friendly Church Project, we commissioned the Christian think tank Theos to carry out some research concerning the attitudes of the UK church towards mental health; a key finding was that one of the most important ways the church can serve those who are struggling with their mental health is through this mode of care we called 'gentle presence'.

Being a gentle presence allows us to see one another's humanity, and not be overshadowed by labels and diagnoses. It demonstrates the need for us to journey alongside one another, not trying to fix or pressure but to create spaces of honesty, safety and vulnerability within our churches. It's not a one size fits all approach, but a call to love beyond our capabilities, be patient and be committed to caring for the duration. Sometimes this will mean sitting with someone as they cry, at others it will mean accompanying them to appointments - but at all times it will demonstrate radical acceptance and hospitality for those struggling.

We hope that this resource can be used whether or not you're struggling with your mental health, but as a way to connect with God and your community by exploring the gentleness of God and how we can show that gentleness towards one another.

# UNDERSTANDING GENTLENESS

There is a theory within neuroscience and psychology called the polyvagal theory which posits that we have a three-part nervous system which moves beyond the traditional fight-or-flight system to include social engagement.

At our most distressed and agitated (the least gentle but most in need of gentleness) is where our parasympathetic nervous system, (dorsal vagal complex) is activated; it's a state of hopelessness, shame and numbness. The next step down is our sympathetic nervous system (sympathetic nervous system) where we're in fight or flight; overwhelmed with feelings of panic, anger or fear. Beyond these states, however, is social engagement (the ventral vagal system); where we feel calm, open, grounded and safe.

Author K.J Ramsey highlights that there are two ways to activate the vagus nerve; 'breath and the attuned compassionate presence of someone else'. Being a gentle presence involves creating a space of safety, where we can help people regulate their breathing (we're going to use breath prayers) and show compassion.

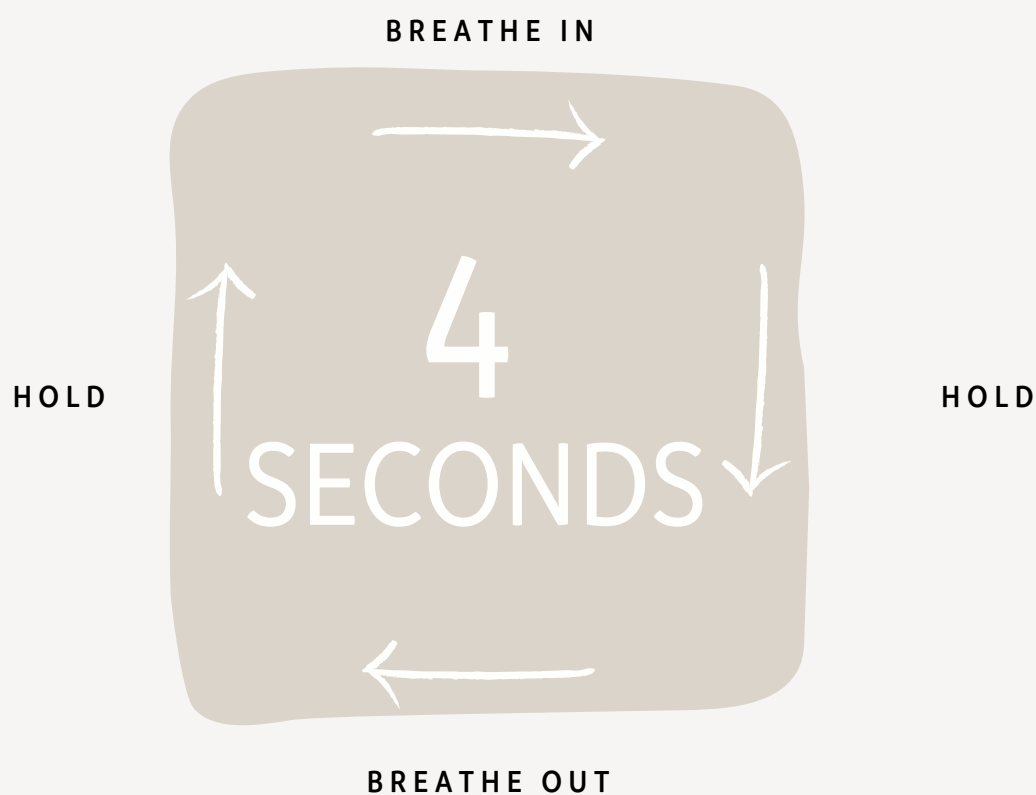
We've included some practices that will help us to be gentle with ourselves later in the session.

The quickest way for us to bring calm to our nervous system is through breathing, so we're going to start with a quick breathing exercise called box breathing.



## BOX BREATHING

Encourage everyone to get into a comfortable position and then begin with a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth to the count of 4 before holding and exhaling for 4. Repeat for a minute.





# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT GENTLENESS?

Gentleness is weaved throughout scripture because it is a characteristic of God; from the gentleness of God clothing Adam and Eve before they leave Eden, to how Jesus describes Himself, we have a lot to work with!

To begin with, read 1 Kings 19:1-13 and reflect together on how both the Angel of the Lord and God respond with gentle presence to Elijah's distress.

God's gentleness does not stand in contrast with His power, it is a part of it. In Psalm 18 and Isaiah 40 we read "Your gentleness exhorts me" and "He gently leads" alongside descriptions of God's might and being trained for battle.



Discuss: How do these seemingly contradictory parts of God's nature work together and what do they tell us about being a gentle presence today?



# THE GENTLE PRESENCE OF THE SHEPHERD

In Psalm 23, we are given this picture of God's gentleness through the imagery of the shepherd. In the Psalm, the Shepherd takes the initiative to lead the sheep to a place of safety, then as a place of welcome.

When thinking about God's gentle presence as our shepherd, we see that gentleness is not passivity. The job of the shepherd was not just cuddling fluffy sheep(!) but ensuring they had access to nourishment, were protected from the elements and were safe from predators.

This reminds us that gentleness is an active posture; as we saw in the story of Elijah, it involved attending to practical needs as much as emotional ones. Being a gentle presence toward those struggling with their mental health may involve collecting prescriptions and providing food alongside other traditional forms of pastoral care.

## EXERCISE



Read Psalm 23 and point out the actions taken by the Lord:

Discuss together what they might look like practically for today.

- He makes me lie down
- He guides me
- His rod and staff comfort
- He prepares a table
- He anoints with oil
- His goodness follows us



# THE GENTLE PRESENCE OF JESUS

Dane Ortlund points out that the only time Jesus describes Himself, He calls Himself 'gentle and lowly'.

It is, he writes

**“Christ’s very heart. This is who he is. Tender. Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing. If we are asked to say only one thing about who Jesus is, we would be honoring Jesus’s own teaching if our answer is, gentle and lowly.”**



Do you think of Jesus as gentle?

If not, are there particular reasons?





# PRINCIPLES FOR GENTLE PRESENCE

## LISTENING

One of the most powerful ways we can be a gentle presence for one another is through listening. All too often we listen only to speak – our minds are half focused on what we will say next, but listening with a gentle presence allows people to tell the story they want to tell without interruptions and sometimes, without advice.



Think together about times you have felt best  
listened to?  
How did that make you feel?

## NON -JUDGMENTAL

Being non-judgemental is the most counter-cultural part of being a gentle presence. It means we don't pick a side, or jump to quick conclusions – instead seeking to understand someone's reality and how it affects them.

## WELCOMING

A gentle presence is one of hospitality. As Henri Nouwen describes:

**“Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them  
space where change can take place. It is not to bring men  
and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not  
disturbed by dividing lines.”**



In what ways can you offer hospitality?  
These things may be practical like food – but they  
also might be through your attitudes towards  
someone who holds different opinions.

# PRINCIPLES FOR GENTLE PRESENCE

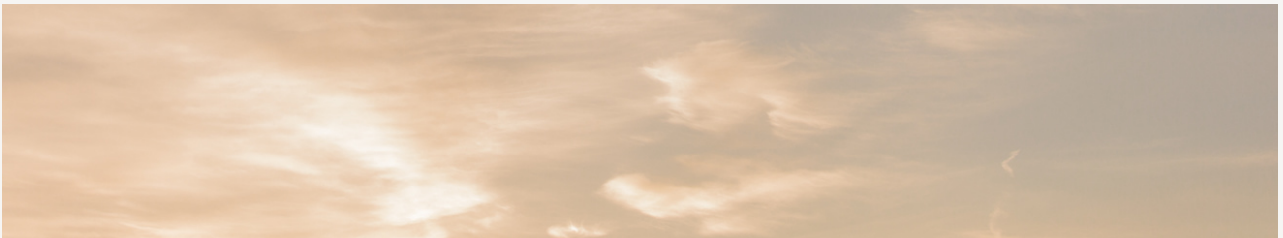
## CALM

Calm begets calm, so by trying to keep your tone of voice level, your pace steady and your own breathing regulated you can help others.



Think together about what makes a particular space calm. Is it the colour or temperature of the space?

How do you think you can practically demonstrate gentle presence if someone you know is struggling?



## EXERCISE

Read: Matthew 11:25-28 and bring to God in prayer and name, either on paper or in the quiet of your hearts the burdens, that Jesus is inviting you to leave with Him.

Listen: O Come to the Altar, Elevation Worship



# POTENTIAL GENTLENESS IDEAS:

## HAND SCRIPT

Turn over one of your hands and look at your palm. For one minute, you're going to study it like you've never seen it before and you are trying to find out everything you possibly can about the palm of your hand. If you think you have discovered everything, look again; how many things can you possibly notice about the palm of your hand? How many different colours, lines, shapes, marks, hairs. What happens when you move it? How does the skin move, fold, change shape, where are the bones, the muscles? Feel it with your other hand; where is it soft hard, hot, cold, smooth, rough? If at any point your mind wanders or you become distracted, come back to your hand and begin studying it again until the minute is up.



"See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands"  
Isaiah 49:16

## COLOURING

You could photocopy images of Bible verses and spend a few minutes colouring.



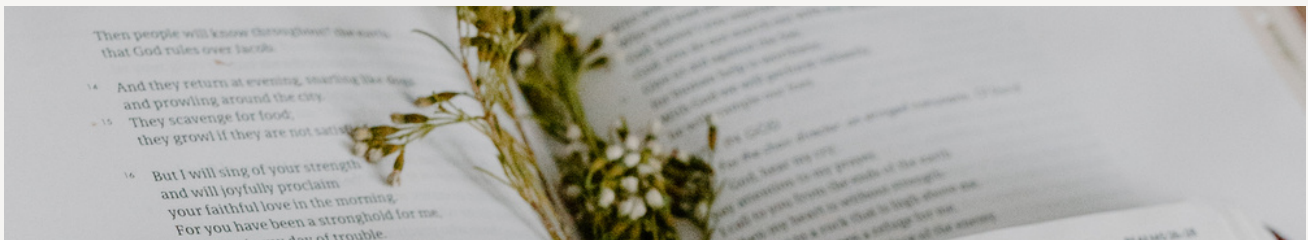
What did you feel before, during and after these activities?  
Discuss together.

# TO CLOSE

## BREATH PRAYER

Author Kayla Craig describes breath prayers like this:

“ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE, THESE SIMPLE PRAISES AND PETITIONS ACT AS CONNECTION POINTS, PROVIDING SPACE TO SLOW YOUR BREATHING AND BE PRESENT WITH GOD.”



Inhale: Breathe life

Exhale: Into these dry bones

Inhale: The Lord is my shepherd

Exhale: I shall not want