



PRAYING WITH THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

Exercise Overview

The executive functions are the mental and emotional tools with which we face a day's work; it's common to find lists of six, eight or twelve functions. I've been prayerfully considering a list of eight and how I might pray for my use of and growth in these areas of life. In no particular order, here are the eight executive functions I'm using for this exercise: **Self-Monitoring, Flexible Thinking, Emotional Control, Impulse Control, Organization, Working Memory, Planning & Prioritizing, Task Initiation.**

What follows is my first attempt to lay out a day of prayer for each with a prayer for the morning, for use throughout the day, and in the evening. There's also a brief scriptural meditation for each.

The plan is not to sit and pray through all eight executive functions at once. I've seen in my own life that seasons of need come and go, and daily tasks and requirements come and go. The plan is to recognize what is demanded by the time, and to pray for one or two needful functions.

These are my thoughts and prayerful responses to the eight executive functions listed above. As a Priest and a Spiritual Director I have a bit of experience with prayer. Since I'm not a cognitive or neuroscience specialist I have limited understanding and academic experience with the executive functions. Please take this work as an effort to faithfully pray and honor God in the work and flow of daily life, not as neuroscience in any form. That's not a dodge, but an invitation! Help me out with this project of prayer. What nuances could you bring to my understanding of the executive functions, as well as prayer or scripture? I'm always open to hear and learn from others as I swim in these deep waters.

May God be honored in all of this, and God's beloved world served by it. And please, Lord, help us all to be more joyful, peaceful, effective and productive in the daily intentions we bring to you in prayer! Amen.

With peace & prayers,
Rev. Todd Thomas

Self-Monitoring

What is this?

Self-Monitoring is our ability to pay attention to what is happening inside of us, our emotions and responses, so that we can regulate them as needed.

Prayers

In the Morning

Help me know when to slow down, catch my breath and hear myself, to become more aware of all that is happening inside of me.
As I find my footing in this moment, my current space and time, help me to slow down when feeling frantic and to move when I'm stuck.

Throughout the Day

Open my heart and mind to everything happening inside and around me.

In the Evening

The day is done and I give over any regrets to God's grace and care. May God's peace help me rest and do well in the coming day.

Scripture

Philippians 4:8 is a good foundation for thinking about self-monitoring, ***"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."***

How do I want to be? Who do I want to be? That verse is a powerful set of values and an intention to focus on them, both externally around us and internally within us. Set your intentions for the day with values like truth, justness and excellence in mind, and then watch for them in yourself and take note of what challenges your pursuit of them. Pause to take some time in the day to think, reflect and consider what values and inputs are driving your thoughts, words and actions.

Flexible Thinking

What is this?

Flexible Thinking is our ability to mentally and emotionally role with changes, making appropriate adjustments to our plans and expectations.

Prayers

In the Morning

May I rise to each occasion with energy and renewed drive, to have a greater capacity for meeting today's challenges. Help me to have the creativity and ability to see the good in all and to give the benefit of the doubt as things shift and change.

Throughout the Day

Let me greet challenges as opportunities, and not as threats.

In the Evening

The day is done and I need to breath deeply and rest. May God's Spirit help me rest well and awake refreshed.

Scripture

In **Psalm 19:14** we find a prayer worthy of any daily challenges we face, "***Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.***"

Whatever the day throws at us we want to keep our intentions intact. This simple prayer expresses that deep desire to be able to speak and think as we should, to repond and move in this life as God's beloved people. Changes and challenges can hit us from every direction, and with God's strength and help we can pivot to meet them without being swept away.

Emotional Control

What is this?

We will all experience a range of emotions in a given day; Emotional Control is how prepared and able we are to regulate our responses to those feelings.

Prayers

In the Morning

This day may come at me hard and fast and stir me up, but God, I would have your strength and peace to meet it all. Help me to wait for my mind to settle and the best time to speak, so I might honor my feelings and have time to truly know them.

Throughout the Day

Keep me open and honest, patient with myself and others.

In the Evening

The day is done; I've survived it and held on as best I could. God, help me now to quiet the internal conversations and get some rest.

Scripture

James 1:19-20 says, *"You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness."*

When things begin to shift and change around us it's too easy to become frustrated, angry and begin lashing out at the people around us. But we're better than that! You're better than that. Give yourself the time to hear, process and then respond. Not every challenge is a fight and not every change is a problem. Give yourself time to move past the flashes of anger and frustration.

Impulse Control

What is this?

Impulse Control refers to our ability to make well-thought and appropriate decisions when emotional impulses threaten to distract and derail us.

Prayers

In the Morning

God, help me remember to breath, to slow the racing of my heart and mind. May I have the wisdom and grace to accept myself, my feelings, and all my reactions, for they come from my experience and deep self. As I experience my feelings, give me wisdom to act on the best impulses..

Throughout the Day

Help me to stop, to consider and to move with wisdom and peace.

In the Evening

The day is done and I need some extra help to slow down and relax. Help me be ready and confident for tomorrow's demands and joys.

Scripture

I don't want to make too much of this, but I find it no surprise that Paul lists self-control at the end of the list of what the Spirit of God produces in us. He wrote in **Galatians 5:22**, "***The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.***"

It's not that self-control should be the last thing we work on or hope to find the Spirit of God doing in us, but I think it's truly built upon the other things like peace, patience and generosity. We need to begin each day reminded of God's peace and striving to carry that peace with us into the day. We need to begin each day with a commitment to patience and generosity for ourselves and others. Can we commit to giving the benefit of the doubt to those who will come at us without peace, patience or generosity? We're talking about being prepared to make our intentions a reality.

Organization

What is this?

Organization is our ability to orchestrate space, tasks and resources, and to use all the available tools to meet our goals in measurable steps.

Prayers

In the Morning

God, I would like to be proud of my effort today and my accomplishments. There may be setbacks and struggles, but I ask for focus and creativity. Give me your Spirit of joy and the tools I need to plan and do today's work. When I find myself stuck, help me take a deep breath and a next step.

Throughout the Day

Help me stay on course and achieve my intentions with energy.

In the Evening

The day is done and I must put down my plans, my wins and my losses. Help me find the rest I need to be open and ready for tomorrow's work.

Scripture

Jesus told an interesting story about a builder who wants to raise a tower, but doesn't plan for the cost of finishing. It's in **Luke 14:28-30**, ***"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"***

In the immediate context of his statements Jesus is speaking in some shocking terms about the cost of following him, and he wants those who would walk with him to be ready for all that is required of them. We want our days to be productive and useful, so the same wisdom applies: We should also organize our resources and plan well to meet the needs of the day.

Working Memory

What is this?

Working Memory is not just remembering, but building on memory to make connections, envision next steps and not drop any of the day's crucial pieces.

Prayers

In the Morning

This day I ask for all the help I can get to win the battle against distractions. Help me know when to set aside my phone, to minimize my e-mail and to focus. As I run this day's course I know that I will need to take breaks and stay fresh. As I run this day's course I would ask for the joy of moving with intention.

Throughout the Day

Let me be here and now. Open my heart and mind to all I should know.

In the Evening

The day is done; may I carry forward what I need, and leave behind all else. May tomorrow find me ready to engage, learn and create.

Scripture

Proverbs 4:25 says, *"Let your eyes look directly forward and your gaze be straight before you."*

The writer of Proverbs is trying to give us some wisdom on avoiding the path of evil, but can we also apply this to the path of distraction? We will probably find our days full of more distractions than evils, but whichever might come our way we want to be focused and ready. We want to be able to take in all that the day will bring us and create cogent thoughts, needed wisdom and the building blocks of solutions. This is an exercise of discernment, creatively sifting through the input of the day for the elements and connections which best move us toward the needs and demands before us. Take the time to stretch, to stay hydrated, to stay fresh and focused. Make sure you have the focus and fuel needed for the day.

Planning & Prioritizing

What is this?

Planning & Prioritizing is our ability to recognize what things need to get done and how we can arrange steps and tasks to meet those goals.

Prayers

In the Morning

God, help me to see what matters and to engage them with wisdom. Give me clarity to see what is important, what is urgent, what is both or neither. May my todo lists be robust and completed. May my priorities be clear. Help me creatively and joyfully map the day's needs and my intentions.

Throughout the Day

My next step matters; help me, God, to stay on course!

In the Evening

The day is done; I need to settle my mind and body and set aside my lists. Help me breath for a few moments, and then find my much needed rest.

Scripture

A scripture you might consider for this executive function is **Psalm 90:12**, "***So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.***"

That whole psalm is a song about how short our lives are and how we need help, steadfast love and wisdom to make our years count. Counting our days is beautiful way of expressing our need to value our time and to consider how we should best use it. How can we best use our time to meet goals and needs? What time do we have today, and what can achieve in it when we plan and make the best use of all our tools and resources? What pitfalls do I know I need to avoid today?

Task Initiation

What is this?

Task Initiation is our ability to recognize that something needs doing, and not only to rally the energy and resources to begin it, but also to take that first step.

Prayers

In the Morning

God, here at the beginning of a new day I ask for good beginnings, that I might have the energy and vision for needed first steps. I may trip and stumble, and my steps may be short, slow and hesitant, but you can help my first step lead to next steps and my stumbling to balance.

Throughout the Day

Help me break the chains of hesitation and make some good beginnings.

In the Evening

The day is done and my tasks must be set aside while I rest. Tomorrow is a new day to rise and strive; help me be ready!

Scripture

In **Zechariah 4:10** we have these words for the prophet to give the people, ***“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel’s hand.”***

Zechariah is a prophet to God’s people at a time of restoration when they are beginning the work of rebuilding the temple. His words remind them and us that even when a beginning seems small or inconsequential, it may be exactly what is needed. As the Chinese proverb reminds us, *“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”* God will honor our work and our first steps this day, even if they are small and just the barest of beginnings. Let’s go!