**Five Steps to Transform Negativity Through Prayer**

By  [**Brendan McManus, SJ**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/author/mcmanus/) <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/five-steps-to-transform-negativity-through-prayer>

St. Ignatius, who initially knew life as a vain soldier and courtier, was able to turn his superficial life around by attending to his inner life of thoughts, desires, and feelings. Ignatius offers us some helpful tips from his [***Spiritual Exercises***](https://store.loyolapress.com/the-spiritual-exercises-of-st-ignatius-revised?utm_source=ignsp&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=fsp21) that help us understand our humanity and make it work for our advantage in prayer. He shows us how daydreaming, desire, and reflection can be harnessed to change our lives and overcome negativity. God is always trying to reach us, and we need to be open to this. Ignatius outlines a process for disposing ourselves to God, based on his experience stumbling across God’s leadings while daydreaming.

1. The first step is **affirming that we are in the presence of God**. This means making a prayer or petition of our deepest desire: to connect with the loving God who holds us in being. Our superficial desires abound, of course—desires for comfort, security, wealth, or fame—but these are ultimately unsatisfying and deceptive. By contrast, our deepest desires are those things that really satisfy: helping others, changing our world, being an instrument of God’s love, or living free of our addictions and petty likes or dislikes. The amazing thing about starting prayer by acknowledging God’s presence is that, even when we don’t feel it, it taps into our [**deepest desire**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/our-deepest-desires-2/) for God and orients us to what will really satisfy us. There is something profound that occurs when I align my often weak and feeble desire with the great and constant desire that God has for me.

The prayer just has to be real and name a desire. For example:  
*Dear God, I don’t even know if you exist. My life seems so chaotic at times I’m not sure what is true. Help me to find a way, a purpose, a direction for my life, that I might live happy and free.*

2. The second step is **acknowledging that often we are not acting in freedom**. We have [**attachments**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/what-is-an-unhealthy-attachment/), addictions, or other dependencies that pull us away from God. Ignatius knew this reality of the problem of vanity and egoism that is so much a part of being human and which we need to work through if we are to move beyond ourselves and away from negativity. The Ignatian approach is to name our attachments and to ask for God’s help in overcoming them.

Make a prayer that captures this:  
*God, help me to be free from the excesses of this life. Let me not get caught up with the superficial desire for wealth or comfort. I believe I can be a better person with your help.*

3. The third step is **consciously reflecting on the past**, reminding ourselves of how God has worked with us in the past. We are part of an ongoing story or relationship that is developing and moving. The story will always have highlights and lowlights, peaks and troughs, but there is always a thread that indicates progress. It is often a matter of finding something to be grateful for despite the negativity that exists. We can choose to believe that there is purpose and meaning, and this choice changes the way we act and live. By remembering the past positively, I can affirm how God works for our good and trust that the future will also be good.

*Prayer suggestion:*  
Take a moment to find something in your past for which you are truly grateful. It could be a parent, teacher, friend, a moment of real joy, or a special place. Really feel that [**gratitude**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/tag/gratitude/), how as an emotion it is felt in the heart.

4. The fourth step is **reading the Word of God**, which reminds us how God has worked in the lives of the faithful throughout history. This is especially evident in the person of Jesus, as we see how God is compassionately present in the Gospels, relating to our humanity, person to person. Ignatius recommends using our human faculty of [**imagination to make the scenes come alive**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/), especially using our senses. The goal is to place ourselves in the presence of Jesus and recreate the dialogue and the interaction. The Word comes alive for us to transform our experience.

*Prayer suggestion:*  
Reflect on this passage: “I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10, GNT) How would you apply this to your life? What would this look like if it were true? Imagine Jesus or some other trusted figure saying these words to you personally; how would he say them and look at you?

5. The fifth step is **inviting Jesus to have a two-way conversation with us**. We can speak of our lives and reality and have dialogue about it. This is the conversation that we so want when we realize God’s great love and desire for us. Sweeping away all the distractions and distance, this is the prayer of the heart, [**speaking heart to heart**](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/21st-century-ignatian-voices/god-wants-our-friendship/) with the beloved.

*Prayer suggestion:*  
Find a safe place in your imagination where you can have this conversation. What is there that you need to say, get off your chest, or put into words? How would a loving God listen to you? What would you hear in return? How would that change how you feel about yourself or your life?