

Variations That Are Still Immanuel Approach (Potato Salad Analogy)

(Copyright 2024 Karl D. Lehman MD, New 6/28/24, Last modified 2/24/26)

One can make potato salad with regional/cultural variations. For example, you can add some chili powder and make Tex Mex potato salad, you can add some curry powder and make Asian Indian potato salad, and you can add some panang red curry paste and make Thai potato salad. But if you bring me a dish that has slices of banana, chunks of pineapple, strawberries, blueberries, and slices of orange -- oh, and no potatoes at all -- then please do not call it potato salad. If you are making fruit salad, then call it fruit salad.¹

I want to encourage Immanuel Approach facilitators and trainers to be flexible, to learn, to experiment – I want our providers to adapt the Immanuel Approach to fit best in their particular context. But I also want our providers to facilitate and teach the Immanuel approach as opposed to something else -- I want our providers to make potato salad as opposed to fruit salad. It is important for the Immanuel Approach community to care for both of these concerns -- it is important for the Immanuel Approach community to be creative, flexible, and adaptable *while still making potato salad as opposed to fruit salad.*

Possibly the most important force driving healthy potato salad variation is that all providers facilitate sessions and develop training materials with adjustments that reflect their specific cultural settings, the specific logistical challenges they are dealing with, and their own personal experiences with the Immanuel Approach.

1. Emphasis on visual imagery (potato salad variation #1): The amount of emphasis we place on different aspects of the process is especially affected by our own experience. For example, those who have clear, strong, vivid visual imagery tend to place more emphasis on this aspect of the process. They usually have clear, strong, detailed visual imagery when they are receiving, and focusing on the details of their visual imagery with respect to Jesus consistently increases the strength of their connections with him. Not surprisingly, these providers tend to place more emphasis on this piece when they facilitate sessions, and also when they teach others about the Immanuel Approach.

In contrast, my visual imagery is usually faint and vague—whether I am recalling a memory, whether I am picturing internal mental scenes to go with a book I am reading, or whether I am generating mental images to go with some imaginary scenario I am thinking about, my visual imagery tends to be faint and vague. And my visual imagery with respect to Jesus *especially* tends to be faint and vague. Even in my nature memories where I recall and include many visual details, my visual images of Jesus are still usually faint and vague -- I can tell where He is, where His attention is focused, and what He is doing. And I usually have a sense of his facial expression, and can tell that He has a beard. But my imagery of Jesus is almost always black and white, I get only enough faint detail regarding his eyes to

¹ Thank you to pastor Patti Velotta for this helpful analogy/metaphor.

give me a sense of His facial expression and emotion, and my perception regarding what He is wearing is usually just a faint, vague sense of “Bible robe.”

However, while my *visual imagery* with respect to Jesus is usually faint and vague, I usually have a clearer, stronger perception of what He is thinking and feeling, and I sometimes have a poignant, profound experience of actually sharing His thoughts and emotions. Not surprisingly, when I am receiving, it dramatically increases the strength of my perception and connection to focus on what Jesus is thinking and feeling, and especially to focus on any way in which I am sharing His experience. Coaching me to focus on these details is very helpful. In contrast, coaching me to spend a lot of time focusing on the visual details with respect to Jesus tends to focus my attention on how vague and faint my imagery is, which can actually become discouraging and distracting as opposed to helpful. Correspondingly, I tend to place less emphasis on this piece when I facilitate sessions and when I teach others about the Immanuel Approach.

Good news regarding this particular potato-salad variation is that we can avoid any potential downsides with a bit of awareness and care. For example, we can briefly explain this variability with respect to visual imagery when we teach about the Immanuel Approach, we can ask recipients what they find to be most helpful, and then we can adjust our emphasis accordingly—we can spend more time coaching to focus on and describe visual details for those who find this to be helpful, and we can place less emphasis on this piece for those with experiences similar to my own. Another way to present this last point is that *we should all learn how to serve both of these potato salad variations*. People like me, who tend to emphasize visual imagery less, can learn to emphasize this component more for recipients who have strong visual imagery and experience more emphasis to be helpful. (For example, I can invite the recipient to notice and describe visual details that often enrich the perception and connection with Jesus for these recipients). And people who tend to emphasize visual imagery more can learn to emphasize this component less for recipients who have a better experience with less emphasis on visual details. (For example, they can coach along the lines of, “Describe any visual details that you can perceive, and don’t worry if your visual imagery is faint or vague.”)

2. Emphasis on body sensations (potato salad variation #2): Again, the amount of emphasis we place on different aspects of the process is especially affected by our own experience. Coaching recipients to focus on body sensations provides another example.

For many, coaching to focus on their body sensations has been consistently helpful, and has enable them to connect more strongly with their positive memories, to stir up more robust appreciation, and to increase the intensity of their perception and connection with Jesus.²

² Coaching to focus on body sensations is actually a very common therapy technique, and is based on good brain science regarding linkages between our relational circuits and awareness of body sensations. For example, studies using functional MRI (fMRI) have shown overlapping brain regions involved in social cognition and the awareness

These people who have good experiences with coaching to focus on their body sensations will understandably place more emphasis on this aspect of facilitating Immanuel Approach sessions, and they will teach others to do the same.

In contrast, my experience tends to be very different as a result of my various chronic illness issues. If someone coaches me to focus on my body sensations as I am connecting with positive memories and Jesus, I can get a few positive pieces: “I feel relaxed.... Warm.... Satisfied.... I feel a pleasant calm, relaxed heaviness.” But after the first seven seconds of focusing on these positives, if someone coaches me to continue focusing on my body sensations, I get, “Well I’m aware of the ringing in my ears that I have had 24/7 for the past twenty years; I’m aware of my sore throat, that has been present to varying degrees almost continuously for the past 40+ years—since a chronic virus first settled in; I’m aware of my hoarse voice, that goes with the sore throat and that has been getting slowly but steadily worse for the past ten years; I’m aware of background fatigue throughout my body; I’m aware of numbness, pain, heaviness, and weakness in my arms and shoulders that have all increased recently due to progressive nerve and muscle damage; I’m aware of a headache, which comes and goes with variable intensity, but has been present much of the time for the past 40+ years; I’m aware of mild nausea, which sometimes smolders in the background for months at a time; and I’m aware of tendonitis in my elbows and shoulders and neck and lower back and hips and knees.”³

In my personal experience as a recipient, coaching to focus on my physical sensations is much more likely to cause trouble than to provide any benefit. Understandably, I place much less emphasis on this aspect of facilitating Immanuel Approach sessions, and I often forget to mention the possible value of coaching to focus on physical sensations when I train others. Furthermore, when I am facilitating I am very sensitive to the possibility that coaching to focus on physical sensations might actually be detrimental for recipients with significant medical concerns; and when I am training, if I remember to mention the possible value of coaching to focus on physical sensations I will also mention these concerns and cautions.

3. Starting session with relaxation (potato salad variation #3): Another example of variations that reflect the providers specific cultural settings, logistical challenges, and

of internal sensations in the body, suggesting a shared neural basis. (See, for example, A. D. Craig, “How do you feel—now? The anterior insula and human awareness,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jan 2009), pages 59–70. doi:10.1038/nrn2555.) Other research has demonstrated connections between training in body awareness and improved social skills and empathy. (See, for example, S.L. Shapiro, G.E. Schwartz, and G. Bonner, “Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and premedical students,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (Dec 1998), pages 581-599. doi:10.1023/A:1018700829825.)

³ I welcome prayer, and it is fine to let me know that you are praying for me, but it is burdensome to have hundreds of people asking me for updates. (There is no short answer to “How’s your health?”) So please do not ask me about my health. (If I ever experience significant healing, I will certainly send out a “Good new, and thank you for your prayers!” note in our newsletter.)

personal experiences is the use of relaxation techniques, especially right at the beginning of the session.

If a recipient is significantly anxious when he comes into a session, his anxiety will make it more difficult for him to find and connect with a positive memory. If you first help the recipient to calm his anxiety, it will be easier for him to find a positive memory, connect with it, and stir up appreciation. And if most of your recipients come in with a lot of anxiety, this issue will be coming up constantly. Not surprisingly, people who work with populations with lots of anxiety, such as InterVarsity staff who work with college students who are experiencing an epidemic of anxiety, often decide to just include a simple relaxation exercise at the beginning of every session.

Also, many of the Immanuel Approach providers who emphasize relaxation at the beginning of each session have had training in these techniques as part of their mental health training, and they use these techniques regularly in their therapy work. They are totally familiar with the theory and practice, and they can just about explain the theory and coach a recipient through the process in their sleep. Furthermore, many of the people who emphasize relaxation at the beginning of each session have struggled with anxiety themselves, and have used relaxation techniques as important coping/managing tools in their own lives. To these facilitators/trainers, this relaxation piece seems very simple, both conceptually and practically. So their assessment regarding the beginning of the session is something along the lines of: “Just coach the person through a simple relaxation exercise at the beginning of each session. Why use precious time and add unnecessary complexity by teaching beginning facilitators to care for anxious recipients with Dr. Karl’s intermediate/advanced techniques for persistent, directive coaching regarding the initial positive memory?”

In contrast, I have spent a lot of time learning and practicing the skills of finding and connecting with the details of positive memories, and this works very well for me. If I persist with recalling, focusing on, and describing the many different details of a positive memory, I have *always* found that when I really connect with the positive memory, I calm down as I feel appreciation. With my thorough, rigorous approach for connecting with the initial positive memory, I have never had trouble with anxiety blocking my relational circuits coming on or blocking my ability to perceive and connect with Jesus.

I have also developed a lot of knowledge, skill, and confidence/capacity with respect to coaching recipients to find and connect with positive memories. Even when I am working with someone who is having difficulty, and requires very persistent, very directive coaching, this all flows very easily and smoothly to me. Furthermore, this approach *always* works for me. In literally *thousands* of Immanuel Approach sessions, I have never once needed to

coach the recipient through a relaxation exercise at the beginning of the session so that she would be able to find and connect with a positive memory.⁴

To me, the positive memory piece seems very, very simple, both conceptually and practically. So my assessment regarding the beginning of the session is something along the lines of: “Just coach the person to focus on and describe the details of their positive memory until they *feel* appreciation. Why use precious time and add unnecessary complexity by teaching beginning facilitators to include a relaxation exercise at the beginning of each session?” Furthermore, I did *not* learn relaxation techniques as part of my therapy training, I have not used them much in my own experience, and as just mentioned above, I never use them in my private practice when facilitating Immanuel Approach sessions. When I occasionally include this piece in a teaching setting, It feels clunky and effortful to explain and lead the relaxation exercise.

An understandable result of all of this is that I underestimate the knowledge, skill, and capacity required to coach positive memories as effectively as I do, and I underestimate the complexity of this component for people who are having difficulty with finding and connecting with a positive memory. Furthermore, including the relaxation piece feels burdensome – it feels like a significant additional burden to remember how to explain, demonstrate, and lead the recipient through it--it does *not* just flow smoothly and effortlessly. I am much more aware of how routinely including relaxation exercises at the beginning of the process takes additional time in sessions, and adds more content and complexity in training.

An equally understandable result is that those who regularly use relaxation techniques have an opposite experience to mine. Those who have lots of training and experience with relaxation techniques, who regularly include this in their sessions with recipients, and who have had positive experiences with relaxation techniques in their own healing/growth journeys – these people underestimate the knowledge, skill, and confidence required to smoothly explain and lead relaxation exercises at the beginning of each session. Also, they might have less knowledge, skill and experience with the kind of persistent, directive positive-memory coaching that I employ if the recipient is having difficulty – the intermediate/advanced positive memory coaching that I sometimes employ feels like a significant additional burden--it does *not* just flow smoothly and effortlessly. These people are much more aware of how my intermediate/advanced positive memory coaching takes additional time in sessions, and adds more content and complexity in training.

4. Deliberate-appreciation focusing on goodness of God (potato salad variation #4): Yet another example of a valid variation is for the recipient to explicitly focus on Gods goodness

⁴ NOTE: It *is* easier for recipients to find and connect with positive memories if they are calm instead of anxious at the beginning of the process, but my perception is that my knowledge, skill, confidence, and persistence with coaching positive memories has always been sufficient to overcome any difficulties caused by initial anxiety.

as an additional part of the positive-memory-and-deliberate-appreciation step. With this variation, the recipient first recalls, describes, and appreciates the positive memory; and then, after recalling and connecting with the details of the positive memory, she speaks directly to the Lord to name and appreciate attributes of his character and heart that are demonstrated by the positive memory.

This variation works well for recipients who are already believers and who do not have triggered negative reactions associated with the Lord. For these recipients, this variation that focuses explicitly on the goodness of God and speaks directly to God is especially relational *with God*, and thereby provides additional benefit for the recipient's ongoing relationship with the Lord.

In contrast, recipients who have distorted perceptions regarding the Lord's character and heart often have difficulty with focusing their appreciation on the attributes of God's character and heart. This was certainly my experience—before resolving the large pile of memory-anchored distorted perceptions described in chapter forty-two, any kind of spiritual growth exercise that asked me to talk about my personal experience with God being wonderful would usually trigger an intense negative reaction from the child memory places in my heart where I perceived the Lord to be absent and/or incompetent and/or toxic, as opposed to wonderful. Before I had resolved these memory-anchored distorted perceptions, trying to use the variation of the positive-memory-and-deliberate-appreciation step that focuses on the goodness of God would have quickly triggered a messy hindrance instead of helping me to feel appreciation and connect with Jesus.⁵ Recipients who are not yet believers also have difficulty with focusing their appreciation on the attributes of God's character and heart.

The variation that focuses on the details of the positive memory is also a bit simpler to explain and easier to implement, which are particularly helpful attributes when working with beginner recipients and when working with limited time.⁶ Finally, I find that formulating appreciation specifics as attributes of God's character and heart takes me into my left brain and away from the experiential details of the positive memory, and thereby reduces the emotional intensity of my connection to the memory. I find that I get a stronger connection to the memory, and thereby establish a stronger safety-net anchor, if I just focus on the specifics of the memory.

⁵ In fact, my experience was that focusing especially on the details of the positive memories, and *not* being expected to say positive things about the Lord's character and heart that did not yet *feel* true, helped to avoid my triggered negative reactions so that I could start building positive experiences with Jesus without my trauma-anchored distorted perceptions derailing the process.

⁶ As the reader will remember from chapter six of the big lion book, with the variation that I use and teach, the facilitator just coaches the recipient to picture herself inside of the positive memory, and then coaches her to describe the experience in as much detail as possible.

In light of the fact that I often train providers who will be working with non-believers, that I often train providers who will be working with limited time and with beginners, and that I often train providers who will be working with especially intense trauma (and therefore need especially strong safety nets), and in light of my own experience with distorted perceptions of God's character and heart, it is understandable that I use and teach the variation of the positive-memory-and-deliberate-appreciation step that just focuses on the details of the positive memory.

5. Group exercises--large group vs pairs/trios (potato salad variation #5): Yet another example of a valid variation of the Immanuel Approach has to do with group exercises -- specifically with respect to the question of whether the exercise is done all together as a large group, where everybody goes through the exercise at the same time and then afterwards each person gets a turn to describe their experience; or whether the larger group is divided into practice pairs/trios, with each person in the small practice group having a turn to go through the exercise with a facilitator, so that they can describe their experience with each step in the process immediately after going through it.

Going through the exercise together (no practice pairs/trios): Some people have clearer, stronger, more vivid Immanuel Approach experiences as their usual baseline, and these people usually have good success with doing exercises in a large group setting where the participants all go through the exercise at the same time, and then afterwards each person gets a turn to share about their experience. Even without describing their internal experience out loud to another person at each step in the process, these people still usually have good overall outcomes – they perceive the Lord, connect with the Lord, and then interact with the Lord clearly enough and strongly enough that they have good overall experiences.⁷

Also, there are BIG logistical advantages to having all of the participants just go through the exercise together, at the same time, without breaking up into practice pairs/trios. In light of both their own positive experiences and the big logistical advantages, it is not surprising that these people who have good experiences in group settings will be much more likely to facilitate this kind of group exercise, and to train others to do the same.

Practice pairs/trios, taking turns going through the exercise individually: In contrast to those who usually have good experiences with group exercises that do not include dividing the larger group into small practice teams, many people (such as myself) usually do NOT have good experiences with this approach. With any kind of Immanuel Approach exercise, my internal experience is usually initially very faint/vague. Even after years of practice and

⁷ Even with those who have good experiences with group exercises, close to one-hundred percent tell me that they have even better experiences when they work in a small practice group where they can describe their internal mental content at each step in the process. They consistently perceive God's presence more clearly, they have stronger interactive connections, and they are much more likely to take some kind of important step forward – the whole experience is consistently more meaningful, powerful, and fruitful.

removing hindrances, the process barely works if I go through it in a group setting without practice pairs/trios. *However*, if I go through the process with taking turns in a practice pair/trio, so that I can describe my faint/vague internal experience immediately after each step in the process, then I am MUCH more able to feel the importance and recognize the meaning of subtle manifestations of the Lord's presence and subtle content from the Lord, and the overall experience is always much stronger, much more satisfying, and much more meaningful.⁸ Early in my Immanuel Approach journey, this one piece would often make the difference between frustrating, disappointing, "it's not working" experiences with group exercises, and positive, satisfying, successful experiences.

Not surprisingly, it is very easy for me to remember these aspects of the brain science and these aspects of the process, and I always design group exercises to include dividing the larger group into smaller practice pairs/trios.

NOTE: if a person leads an exercise without dividing the larger group into small practice teams, but they talk about the importance of how our brains work best in community, they remind participants to make sure to work with a facilitator if the group exercises are disappointing, and they talk about including sessions with a practice partner or facilitator as a *necessary* component of a larger Immanuel Approach lifestyle, then I consider their group exercise to be an acceptable variation of potato salad. *HOWEVER, if this approach to group exercises is being used without these additional pieces, then I no longer consider this to be true Immanuel Approach/potato salad.*⁹

6. Context for perceiving and connecting with Jesus (potato salad variation #6): And one more example of a valid variation of the Immanuel Approach has to do with the context in which the recipient establishes her initial connection with Jesus. As described in detail in chapter eight of the big lion book, some recipients most easily establish their initial connections in the context of their positive memories, some recipients most easily establish their initial connections in the context of their ministry sessions in the present, some

⁸ Again, our brains have been designed to work best in community. Describing our internal mental content out loud to another person will increase our ability to feel its importance and recognize its meaning, which will enable us to recognize subtle manifestations of the Lord's presence (*that we might otherwise miss*), and enable us to receive subtle content from the Lord (*that we might otherwise miss*).

⁹ As mentioned above, even those who have good experiences with group exercises still have experiences that are less meaningful, less powerful, and less fruitful. And as also mentioned above, there are many who have disappointing/confusing experiences with Immanuel Approach group exercises. But my biggest concern is not just that some will have less meaningful, powerful, fruitful experiences and that others will have disappointing/confusing experiences – my biggest concern is that these people will be inoculated against the true/real/full Immanuel Approach. Even those with positive experiences will think, "Well, that was interesting. But not nearly as meaningful, powerful, or fruitful as I was led to expect." And those with negative experiences will conclude, "Wow. That was painfully disappointing!" Going forward, the positive-experience participants will have decreased interest in pursuing Immanuel Approach further, and the negative-experience participants will have active resistance against anything to do with the Immanuel Approach. Very expensive.

recipients go back and forth between these two options, and some recipients establish their initial connections in both places at the same time.¹⁰

Again, each provider facilitates sessions and develops training materials with adjustments that reflect their specific cultural settings, the specific logistical challenges they are dealing with, and their own personal experience with the Immanuel Approach. This is a powerful, universal phenomenon. I think being aware of this phenomenon will help to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, confusion, and division, and help us to keep learning and growing together as a community. Especially as facilitators and trainers, it is helpful to be aware that others have different experiences with respect to these aspects of the Immanuel Approach, and it is important to make space for these people who have different experiences from our own.

¹⁰ Karl Lehman, *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life* (Evanston, IL: Immanuel Publishing, 2016), chapter eight, “Putting It All Together” section, pages 111-113.