



breathe

*21 Days to Stress
Less and Transform
Chaos to Calm*

B O N N I E
G R A Y

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Loosen Your Grip

How to Relax When You Feel Anxious

How do you relax when you feel anxiety? This is the most common question I get when I speak with women and men about wellness and detoxing from stress.

When I first started experiencing my body tightening with tension, my heart pounding with rapid palpitations, I had no idea what to do. I just told myself what I always did: *I'm fine*. But this time, it wasn't true. I wasn't fine. I read my Bible and journaled my prayers every night before bed, but I started having trouble falling asleep. "Please, God, you know how tired I am. Help me!" I whispered as the hours ticked away. I was exhausted, afraid, and alone. *Why isn't God answering my prayer?* I wondered.

Have you ever felt your body tell you that you aren't okay...no matter how often you tell yourself you're fine? You're not alone, friend. We are all under a tremendous amount of stress, and it comes at us from all different directions. We expect ourselves to continuously pour out with little or no downtime to catch our breath. Instead of being gentle with ourselves when we're stressed, we push ourselves harder. *Don't complain. Just keep going.* We are afraid that if we stop for a moment, if we are honest about how we are feeling, we'll rock the proverbial boat and send waves sloshing over the sides.

We find it easier to frazzle ourselves rather than prioritize our well-being and risk being called selfish, needy, or lazy.

So we courageously soldier on, numbed by stress, because we've learned to live with it for so long. We don't want to fall behind, fall short, or disappoint anyone.

Sometimes we are such strong thinkers, pushing through taking care of others and constantly in hypervigilant mode getting work done and juggling our responsibilities, we can get stuck in a state of heightened alertness. We don't even realize that we are actually very stressed.

Even though we might say we're fine, God understands the toll stress takes on you. God doesn't turn away when we're feeling paralyzed by worries and discouraged. God turns toward us in times of emotional turmoil. He sees you when you wake up feeling stuck behind a wall of worries and stress. He feels the anxiety that grips your chest so badly you can hardly catch a breath. In those moments, God draws you close.

You are not forgotten. God is here. And God loves you.

The Stress Response: Fight, Flight, or Freeze

God designed our bodies, like diagnostic lights on a car's dashboard, to tell us when we need to slow down and seek care, nourishment, and attention. When we experience overwhelming stress—and each person's threshold for stress is unique—the body's natural and God-designed reaction is to prepare to fight, flee to safety, or freeze. This stress response is called “fight-flight-freeze.”

When the fight-flight-freeze response is activated, cortisol and adrenaline releases into your system. Your blood pressure soars, your breathing speeds up, your muscles tighten, jaw clenches, hands sweat, and your stomach tenses. Your body is ready to spring into action and get you to safety! But did you notice that these are also classic symptoms of anxiety?

The human nervous system is not only activated by life-threatening events but also by daily stressors, such as work or parenting demands, family dysfunctions, bad traffic, or memories of past traumas. The cortisol and adrenaline flooding our systems to help us overcome adversity? Those same naturally

released chemicals also keep us from relaxing and sleeping. They put our bodies in constant hyperalert mode. Then our concentration frazzles because the razor-sharp focus that helps us problem-solve under stress starts holding us hostage to obsessing over every detail. As a result, we can't turn our brains off. Our bodies get stuck in stress-out mode.

The impact of emotional or verbal stress or trauma has the same effect to our nervous system as physical stress and trauma! What an empowering truth that frees us from shame. We can stop being critical of ourselves when we struggle with anxiety. We can stop beating ourselves up for worrying. This is the body's natural stress response. Instead, when stress or anxiety grips us, we can recognize it for what they are: signals for us to take action to restore calm, to let our bodies know we're safe.

For too long, I pushed through my stress without addressing the underlying problems it was signaling. It was time to replace "survival mode" with new rhythms that would help me to flourish. God was inviting me on a new journey of faith—one that would detox my body, mind, and soul from the lingering effects of worry and anxiety.

Are you ready for that journey too? I'd love to show you the way.

The Rest and Relaxation Response

God designed a powerful counterbalancing force to combat the effects of the fight-flight-freeze response. We can activate our body's natural way of slowing down to create a sense of calm and safety called the nervous system's parasympathetic response. It's also referred to as the rest and relaxation response.¹ Once a situation is resolved, your body starts to relax. Your muscles unclench, and your breathing and heart rate slow down.

This is how your body naturally transitions from anxiety to calm after a temporary moment of stress, threat, or danger. Unfortunately, when we live under stress too long, our bodies stay stuck in the fight-flight-freeze response.

So how do you relax when you feel stressed and anxious? It isn't accomplished by pushing through, ignoring the stress, or telling yourself to stop stressing by sheer willpower. The key to de-stressing your emotions and thoughts and lowering anxiety is to activate your body's relaxation response.

Take simple actions to enjoy what gives you peace and joy, and you will activate this God-given calming relaxation response.

Breathe in Truth

God's Words of Affirmation: Loosen Your Grip and Relax

Nurturing yourself and prioritizing your well-being can feel like speaking a foreign language. I had no idea what it meant practically to experience peace in my body and emotions when I was stressed. So I started praying differently.

Instead of praying, “Help me sleep” or “Take away my anxiety,” I asked God, “What does it mean to rest? Teach me how to relax. I don’t know what that looks like.” And with this new prayer, God put a curiosity in me to learn about soul care—the practice of letting God nourish and tend to our bodies and emotions.

One of the first scriptures I asked God to help me understand better was a verse we often hear quoted:

“Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Although well-intentioned, a lot of people would share this verse to tell me to stop worrying or stop being anxious. But even when I did still myself, I felt no relief.

A word study digging into the original meaning of the passage changed how I responded.

Be still. I discovered that the Hebrew word for the command is *raphah*, which literally means “to loosen your grip” or “relax.”

Know. The word in Hebrew is *yada*, which conveys knowledge that comes from “a personal experience.”

“Be still and know” doesn’t mean sitting around doing nothing. It’s the opposite! *Being still* means doing whatever helps you loosen your grip and relax, to personally experience God.

I began taking action to do things that helped me relax, exploring practices

that brought me peace and joy as a way to personally experience God. I started with simple, small steps—like trying different herbal teas (peppermint turned out to be my favorite) and taking walks out among the trees. I also began calming my heart with breath prayers, to remind myself of God's promises using the rhythm of my breathing to activate my body's relaxation response. As I breathed in and out, God's truths lifted my heart and refreshed my memory with his goodness, stopped the spiral of negative thoughts, and steadied my soul.

Sometime today, take an action that helps you experience what peace and joy feels like for *you*. (It's very unique to your personality, the way God made you!) If it's an especially hard day, rest in the thought of Jesus holding you close in his arms. He is with you at this very moment—loving you, ready to carry your burdens each and every day.

Being still means doing whatever helps you loosen your grip and relax.

Be Mindful When You're Pressured to Fit In: You Already Belong

Today, when you're feeling anxious and pressured to fit into a mold, stop. Simply relax and breathe. Know that in God's embrace, you are safe. In God's love, you are beautifully complete. Release those expectations—they are not for you. You do not need to fit into anybody's mold or expectations for you. You belong to God. You are his beloved daughter.

God's Promises for You

"Do not fear, for I am with you... I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8 NKJV).

Breath Prayer: When You Feel Anxious

Put aside your work and worries for a moment, right where you are. Notice any tension in your body, relax your shoulders, and loosen your fingers. Let go of any anxious thoughts as Jesus holds you close. Use your breathing as a way to exhale your stress and draw near to God. Imagine God folding your hand into his, drawing you near. For he is. Whisper this breath prayer using the word *relax* as your calming focus. Yep, *be still* literally means relax, loosen your grip.

Inhale

Relax.

Exhale

Loosen my grip, Jesus.

If anxious thoughts return throughout the day, it's okay. God will continually help you. Simply whisper this breath prayer, and you will activate your body's natural relaxation response to calm and lower stress levels. Choose any one word or phrase from Scripture as the calming focus for your breath prayer, for whatever you need.

Soul Care Challenge: Savor a Cup of Tea

Today, try one of the simplest actions of all: Make a cup of tea. Even the ritual of brewing a cup releases a calming response, associated with the anticipation of enjoyment. Tea has therapeutic benefits—in one study, a cup of tea reduced anxiety levels in participants by up to 25 percent after they experienced a stressful moment.

Try a cup of chamomile, which is excellent for a good night's sleep. Even the fragrance of chamomile reduces anxiety! Peppermint likewise has a calming effect, easing headaches and digestive pain. And black teas contain an amino acid that reduces cortisol after stressful events. Take a few moments to brew a cup, stir in a spoonful of honey or a splash of cream, and pray your breath prayer as you sip and savor a pocket of rest with Jesus.

Soul Care Tip

*A cup of tea
can soothe your
mind and relax
your body.*

Pull Up a Chair

1. How do you tend to respond to stress? What stress, expectation, or situation is God gently inviting you to let go of, to loosen your grip on?
2. What helps you relax when you feel anxious? How does your body respond when you whisper the breath prayer *relax*?