



## Guided Deep Breathing Exercises for Beginners

Many Christians today struggle with stress, anxiety, and a lack of joy, which can hinder the “abundant life” Jesus intends for us (John 10:10). In fact, anxiety disorders affect nearly one-third of Americans at some point in life, and global stress levels have surged in recent years <sup>1</sup>. While the Bible encourages us “*Do not be anxious about anything*” (Philippians 4:6-7) and promises the “*peace of God, which transcends all understanding*”, it’s often challenging to simply will ourselves into calm. This is where **guided deep breathing exercises for beginners** can be a practical God-given tool. By deliberately slowing and deepening our breath, we engage the way God designed our nervous system to work, triggering a relaxation response that can quiet anxiety and make space for the Holy Spirit’s comfort. Modern research confirms that slow, deep breathing is a simple, effective method to reduce stress and improve mood <sup>2</sup>. Best of all, it’s free, accessible to anyone, and pairs naturally with prayer and meditation on Scripture. In this article, we’ll explore the science behind deep breathing, learn beginner-friendly breathing techniques, and see how these practices can be integrated with Christian faith to cultivate peace and joy in Christ.

### The Science of Deep Breathing and Stress

When we experience a threat or worry, our bodies react instinctively with the “**fight-or-flight**” stress response. Heart rate speeds up, muscles tense, and breathing becomes rapid and shallow <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>. This is driven by the sympathetic nervous system, preparing us to confront danger. However, in modern life many stressors (traffic, work emails, family conflicts) continuously trigger this response, leading to chronic anxiety. **Deep breathing exercises** offer a simple way to break this cycle. By taking slow, controlled breaths, especially with extended exhales, we activate the body’s **parasympathetic nervous system** – the “rest and digest” side of the autonomic nervous system that calms us down <sup>5</sup>. Medical experts note that breathing techniques can play a huge role in shifting our physiology back toward tranquility <sup>5</sup>. Long exhales in particular stimulate the vagus nerve, which slows the heart rate and signals to the brain that it’s okay to relax <sup>6</sup>. Essentially, when you control your breath, you can directly influence your **overall stress response** <sup>7</sup>.

Importantly, breathing is unique because it’s both **involuntary** (we breathe automatically) *and* **voluntary** – we can consciously change it <sup>8</sup>. This means with a little practice, anyone can harness their breath to induce a calmer state. The American Heart Association notes that slow, deep breaths prompt positive physical responses: lowering blood pressure, reducing anxiety, and promoting calm <sup>9</sup>. Scientific studies back this up. For example, a 2023 clinical trial at Stanford found that just five minutes a day of structured breathing significantly lowered anxiety and **boosted mood**, even more than a mindfulness meditation exercise <sup>2</sup> <sup>10</sup>. Participants who practiced an extended exhale technique (called “cyclic sighing”) had the greatest improvement in feelings of joy and calm, which increased with each consecutive day of practice <sup>11</sup>. Similarly, a meta-analysis of 785 adults found that breathwork interventions led to measurable reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression compared to no-breathing control groups <sup>12</sup>. In plain terms, deep breathing is not just a myth or placebo – it produces real, biological changes. It counteracts the stress hormone surge, increases heart rate variability (a marker of relaxation), and helps “*support greater parasympathetic tone*” to balance out stress <sup>13</sup>. Over time, regularly practicing slow breathing can even train your body to handle stress better, making you more resilient if challenges arise <sup>14</sup>.



From a faith perspective, it's fascinating to see how **God's design of our bodies** allows us this built-in calming mechanism. Psalm 139:14 says we are *"fearfully and wonderfully made,"* and the ability to regulate our breath is one wonderful aspect of that design. By using deep breathing to care for our mental and physical well-being, we are stewarding the bodies God gave us and taking practical steps to *"be still, and know that [He is] God"* (Psalm 46:10). Next, let's look at some simple breathing exercises that beginners can try, and how to do them step by step.

*A simple exercise like "cyclic sighing" – taking a deep inhale (or two short inhales) followed by a slow, extended exhale – can rapidly trigger the body's relaxation response and relieve anxiety <sup>15</sup>. Guided breathing techniques help break the stress cycle by deliberately slowing the breath.*

## Guided Deep Breathing Techniques for Beginners

It's important to start with **basic techniques** that are easy to learn and don't feel overwhelming. The goal is to gently introduce your body to slower, deeper breathing and build confidence. Here are a few **beginner-friendly breathing exercises** that have proven effective:

- **Diaphragmatic Breathing (Belly Breathing):** This is a foundational exercise to train yourself to breathe deeply using the diaphragm (the muscle under your lungs) rather than shallow "chest breathing." *How to do it:* Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Inhale slowly through your nose to the count of 4, focusing on sending the air deep so that your belly rises (the hand on your abdomen should lift, while the hand on your chest stays relatively still). Then exhale gently through your nose or mouth for a count of 4, allowing your belly to fall <sup>16</sup>. Repeat this cycle for a few minutes. The belly movement indicates you're engaging the diaphragm. This method increases oxygen intake and signals your nervous system to relax. If you find it hard at first, try lying on your back – it can be easier to feel the belly expand in that position. Over time, diaphragmatic breathing will become more natural, even during your daily activities.
- **4-7-8 Breathing Technique:** The 4-7-8 breath (sometimes called the "relaxing breath") is a popular rhythmic breathing exercise for calming anxiety and promoting sleep. It was popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil and has roots in ancient pranayama yoga breathing <sup>17</sup>. *How to do it:* Sit up with your back straight. Inhale quietly through your nose for a count of **4** seconds. Hold your breath for **7** seconds. Then exhale slowly and completely through your mouth for **8** seconds, making a soft "whoosh" sound <sup>18</sup>. That completes one cycle. Aim to do 4 cycles in a row, then resume normal breathing. (If you feel lightheaded, pause and breathe normally; that sensation often passes as you practice.) This 4-7-8 pattern works by making the exhale significantly longer than the inhale, which enhances activation of the parasympathetic nervous system – effectively telling your brain that it's time to slow down <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. Many people find that 4-7-8 breathing helps quiet the mind at bedtime and can even improve insomnia. It's recommended to practice it twice a day for general relaxation, and also whenever you feel stressed.
- **Box Breathing (4x4 or "Square" Breathing):** This technique is so straightforward yet powerful that it's used by U.S. Navy SEALs and first responders to stay calm in high-pressure situations <sup>21</sup>. It involves an equal count for each phase of breathing, forming a mental "box" of four steps. *How to do it:* Begin by slowly inhaling through your nose for **4** seconds. Next, hold your breath for **4** seconds (with lungs comfortably filled). Then exhale through your mouth for **4** seconds, emptying your lungs

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in a controlled manner. Finally, with lungs empty, pause and hold for **4** seconds before the next inhale <sup>16</sup> <sup>22</sup>. Repeat this pattern for several minutes (even just 1–5 minutes can help). Box breathing not only delivers a rush of oxygen to the brain, it also increases carbon dioxide in the blood during the short breath-holds, which triggers a reflex that **slows heart rate** and induces calm <sup>23</sup>. Essentially, you are pressing the “reset” button on your autonomic nervous system. This method is excellent for managing acute stress – for instance, if you’re feeling panicky before a difficult conversation or trying to cool down anger in the moment. Because it’s simple and quiet, you can do it almost anywhere (e.g., in your car, at your desk, or even in the restroom for a quick break).

- **“Cyclic Sigh” (Extended Exhale Breathing):** This is the technique studied by Stanford researchers, which involves a double-inhale and prolonged exhale. It’s a twist on deep breathing that maximizes the calming effect of exhaling. *How to do it:* Inhale through your nose until your lungs are comfortably full, then briefly inhale *again* to fully “top off” your lungs <sup>15</sup>. Then exhale very slowly and steadily through your mouth until all the air is released. You can do a couple of these deep sighing breaths anytime you feel tension rising – even one or two can induce a sense of relief. To practice as a daily exercise, try cyclic sighing for about 5 minutes. Research indicates that doing this daily for a month led to steadily increasing improvements in mood and reductions in stress among study participants <sup>11</sup>. The key is emphasizing a long, drawn-out exhale, as “*exhalation activates the parasympathetic nervous system*” for an overall soothing effect <sup>6</sup>.

These exercises are just a starting point. **As a beginner**, it’s wise to pick one technique and practice it consistently, rather than trying too many at once. Even **5–10 minutes per day** of deep breathing can make a noticeable difference in your stress levels and emotional health. Consistency matters: the more regularly you engage in slow breathing, the more your body learns to **enter a calm state more quickly** <sup>24</sup>. If you like, you can use a smartphone app or an online guided audio to help pace your breathing until you get used to the counts. Some people also find it helpful to combine breathing with imagery – for instance, picturing a peaceful scene while inhaling and imagining stress leaving the body while exhaling.

Finally, remember that while breathing exercises are very safe for most people, you should *always listen to your body*. If you ever feel dizziness beyond mild lightheadedness, or if you have a respiratory condition that might complicate breath-holding (like severe asthma or COPD), consult a healthcare professional about how to adapt these techniques. Generally, though, deep breathing is a natural and gentle practice that can be adapted to any fitness level or lifestyle. As the American Heart Association emphasizes, **you can control your breathing with just a little effort, and gain the benefits whenever you need them** <sup>25</sup>.

## Biblical Insights on Breath, Peace, and Prayer

It’s remarkable how the concept of “breath” is woven through both **Scripture and science**. In the Bible, the very **breath of God** is life-giving – “*the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*” (Genesis 2:7). The words for “breath” in the original languages (Hebrew *ruach* and Greek *pneuma*) also mean “spirit” or “wind” <sup>26</sup>. This linguistic link reminds us that our physical breath carries spiritual symbolism. Every breath we take is an opportunity to remember the presence of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus compared to wind (John 3:8). When we slow down and breathe deeply, we can recall that God’s Spirit is as near to us as our own breathing – sustaining us and giving us peace. As one Christian writer put it, “*describing God’s action as part of the most basic of human actions – breathing – can reignite an intimacy with the One who is closer to us than our very breath.*” <sup>27</sup> In other words, paying attention to our breathing can become a way of recognizing God’s closeness and care.

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Throughout Scripture, we also see an emphasis on **stillness, calm, and trust** in God during anxious times. *“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him”* (Psalm 37:7) and *“In quietness and trust shall be your strength”* (Isaiah 30:15) are gentle commands that imply slowing down and finding rest in God’s presence. Practically speaking, it’s hard to “be still” internally when our body is in full panic mode – racing heart, fast breathing, churning thoughts. This is where deep breathing can aid our spiritual obedience. By calming our physical state, we put ourselves in a better position to *“know that He is God”* (Psalm 46:10) and to sense His peace. Jesus Himself often sought out moments of solitude and prayer, which no doubt involved calm and steady presence of mind (Luke 5:16). We can follow His example by using a few moments of slow breathing as a transition into prayer or scripture meditation.

One powerful way to merge breathing with faith is the practice of **“breath prayer.”** Breath prayers are short, simple prayers that you pray in rhythm with your breathing. This idea has deep roots in Christian history. As early as the 3rd century AD, desert Christian monks practiced the **Jesus Prayer** – repeating *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God”* on the inhale and *“have mercy on me (a sinner)”* on the exhale <sup>28</sup>. This practice, also known in the Eastern Orthodox tradition as the **Prayer of the Heart**, was a way to fulfill the Apostle Paul’s exhortation to *“pray without ceasing”* (1 Thessalonians 5:17) <sup>26</sup>. By tying prayer to each breath, believers could literally pray continually throughout the day. The simplicity of a breath prayer (often just a few words) prevents prayer from feeling overwhelming even in busy moments, and it unites body and spirit in devotion <sup>29</sup>.

You can easily incorporate breath prayers into your daily routine. The basic approach is: **choose a brief line – usually a Bible verse or a Christ-centered phrase – that resonates with you.** Divide it into two parts: one to think or whisper on the inhale, and one on the exhale. For example, you might inhale with the words *“Be still and know”* and exhale *“that I am God”* (from Psalm 46:10). Or inhale *“Jesus, fill me with Your peace”* and exhale *“Thank You for Your presence.”* You could use a line of Scripture like *“When I am afraid, I trust in You”* (from Psalm 56:3), breathing in *“When I am afraid”* and breathing out *“I trust in You.”* Another popular one is the Jesus Prayer mentioned above. **Match the words to a comfortable breathing pace**, not rushed – the goal is to maintain slow, deep breaths. As you repeat the cycle, let your mind focus on the meaning of the words and your relationship with God.

Breath prayers help shift our attention toward God throughout the day <sup>30</sup>. Instead of emptying our mind (as some non-Christian meditation does), we are *filling* our mind with truth and with the presence of Christ, while simultaneously calming our physical stress. This brings a double benefit: “the same science that helps athletes transform their stress also stands behind the ancient spiritual practice of Breath Prayer,” one pastor observed, noting he has seen breath prayer *“transform responses to both daily distress and complex trauma, as well as deepen devotion to God.”* <sup>31</sup> In practicing a breath prayer, we intentionally invite God into our anxious moments. It’s a conscious way to **“partner with God in healing”** our physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds <sup>31</sup>.

*Deep, slow breathing can become a form of prayer. The Hebrew word “ruach” (breath) also means Spirit – a reminder that God’s Spirit is as close as our breath* <sup>26</sup>. *By praying short verses in sync with our breathing, we quiet our bodies and open our hearts to God’s presence.*

Consider setting aside a few minutes in your morning or evening routine for a **guided devotional breathing exercise**. For instance, find a quiet spot, close your eyes, and begin breathing slowly. On each inhale, mentally say, *“Holy Spirit, come”*; on each exhale, *“calm my heart.”* As distractions arise, gently return to the words and your breath. This kind of prayerful breathing can lead to a profound sense of God’s peace.

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Many believers find that after such an exercise, their mind is clearer and more receptive to hearing God – whether in Scripture reading or in sensing His guidance. It's a beautiful way to *"cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7) while actively slowing down your racing thoughts and heartbeat.

## Real-Life Example: Finding Calm and Joy through Breathing and Prayer

To see how these principles play out, let's look at a real-world example. **Sarah** (not her real name) is a 38-year-old church volunteer and mother of two who had been feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and distant from God. On a typical day, she would rate her anxiety around 7 out of 10, and often at night she struggled with racing thoughts that disrupted her sleep. She longed to *"feel the joy of the Lord"* again and not be constantly on edge. Her pastor suggested she incorporate a simple deep-breathing routine into her day as a way to quiet her mind and reconnect with God. Skeptical but desperate, Sarah committed to try diaphragmatic breathing combined with a breath prayer each evening before bed.

For the first week, Sarah spent 10 minutes nightly practicing **belly breathing** while repeating Psalm 23:1 as her breath prayer – inhaling with *"The Lord is my shepherd"* and exhaling with *"I lack nothing."* Initially, she noticed it was hard to slow down, and her mind wandered. But she persisted, and by the second week, she began to feel a change. The physical act of slow breathing made her body feel more relaxed; she described it as a *"wave of calm"* after each session. Objectively, Sarah tracked her anxiety in a journal and saw it move from around 7/10 on average down to about 4/10 by week four. Over the course of six weeks, her improvements continued: she experienced only one full-blown panic attack in that period (where before she had multiple per month), and she reported sleeping through most nights without her mind racing. In her own words, *"I feel like I can finally breathe again – not just physically, but spiritually. Slowing my breath while focusing on Jesus brought me back to a place of peace. I'm smiling more during the day and have the energy to play with my kids, which is a huge answer to prayer."* This kind of testimony echoes what research has found on a larger scale – for instance, clinical studies have documented significant reductions in anxiety symptoms when patients consistently practice breathwork techniques alongside their usual care <sup>32</sup>. For Sarah, the combination of God's truth in Scripture with the God-designed mechanics of breathing became a pathway to regain joy and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

It's worth noting that Sarah's journey also involved **other supports**: she talked with a Christian counselor who helped her work through some underlying thought patterns, and she had friends praying for her. Deep breathing was not a magic cure-all, but it was a *catalyst* that enabled her to be more receptive to those other forms of help. By calming her body, she could engage therapy and prayer without being clouded by constant panic. This holistic approach – using physical tools like breathing and seeking emotional/spiritual support – is often the most effective.

## Faith and Modern Medicine: A Balanced Approach

As Christians, we believe that ultimate healing and peace come from God, yet we also recognize that God works through practical means, including medicine and science. It's important to state that practices like deep breathing and prayer *complement* professional medical care; they aren't opposed to it. If you suffer from severe anxiety, depression, or any other mental health condition, you should feel no shame in seeking help from doctors or therapists. Using a breathing exercise to calm yourself is not an indication of weak faith – it's a wise use of the abilities God built into your body. Likewise, taking medication for anxiety or



depression can be, in many cases, a **“gift from God”** for healing, just as much as taking insulin is for a diabetic <sup>33</sup>. The Bible does not forbid the use of medicine; in fact, Luke (the author of one of the gospels and Acts) was a physician (Colossians 4:14), and Scripture mentions medicinal remedies positively (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:23). **Medication and therapy, when needed, can provide stability** that allows you to then pursue spiritual growth and healthy practices more effectively. One Christian counselor wrote, “Medicines, at their best, are tools to counteract some of the harmful aspects of the Fall...Medicines are not sinful, and there is no biblical restraint against using them” <sup>34</sup> <sup>33</sup>. In other words, using anxiety medication or attending counseling is not a sign of lacking trust in God – it can be an expression of good stewardship of one’s health.

Deep breathing exercises can be one tool in your toolkit, alongside others. Some days, prayer and breathing might be enough to center you; other days, you might need to call a friend, exercise, or take an as-needed medication. The key is to approach your well-being holistically: **body, mind, and spirit**. God cares about all of these aspects of you. He created the science behind your breath and nervous system, and He also provides comfort through His Word and Spirit. By integrating spiritual practices with proven stress-reduction techniques, you stand in a long Judeo-Christian tradition of caring for both soul *and* body (Psalm 42:11 acknowledges the interplay of spiritual and emotional turmoil, while 3 John 1:2 expresses a prayer that one may *“enjoy good health, as it goes well with your soul.”*).

## Conclusion: Breathing in God’s Peace

Learning guided deep breathing exercises as a beginner can open the door to a more peaceful and joyful life in Christ. In moments of panic or anger, a simple slow breath can interrupt the spiral and help you respond with grace instead of reacting in fear <sup>7</sup>. In the long term, habitual breathing practice can lower your baseline stress so that you can more readily *“rejoice in the Lord always”* (Philippians 4:4). Remember that joy and calm are fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) – sometimes we need to quiet ourselves to taste those fruits. Taking time each day to breathe deeply, while meditating on God’s promises, is a practical way to *“draw near to God”* (James 4:8).

If you’re new to this, start small. Maybe begin and end your day this week with 5 minutes of deep breathing prayer. Pick a scripture about peace or joy, and let it soak into you as you inhale and exhale. You might keep a journal of how you feel before and after – many people are surprised at how tangibly God’s peace can *“guard your heart and mind”* (Philippians 4:7) when they actually slow down to give Him room. Be patient with yourself, as it takes time to develop any new habit. And if you miss a day or still feel anxious, don’t beat yourself up – Jesus is compassionate and understands our frame (Psalm 103:13-14). Simply return to *“the one thing needful”* (Luke 10:41-42) – sitting at His feet, perhaps literally breathing and resting for a moment, trusting that He is in control.

Incorporating guided deep breathing exercises into your life is not about some trendy wellness fad; it’s about embracing a God-given means of grace to help your body and spirit align. In the words of one theologian, *“We are psychosomatic whole persons, made in the image of God”* <sup>35</sup> – our physical and spiritual selves are interconnected. So as you care for your body through breathing, you are also caring for your soul. May each deep breath you take be a reminder of the breath of the Almighty giving you life (Job 33:4) and the presence of the Holy Spirit who fills you with *“love, power, and a sound mind”* (2 Timothy 1:7). Take a deep breath now, thank the Lord for sustaining you, and go forward into your day a little calmer and more centered in Christ.





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