



How to Calm Your Nervous System Before Sleep

Many Christians struggle with racing minds and tense bodies at night, wondering **how to calm your nervous system before sleep** so they can rest. Physically, stress triggers our “fight-or-flight” response, making it hard to drift off. Spiritually, anxiety can rob us of the peace God intends for us. The good news is that Scripture and science both offer guidance to quiet our nerves and prepare for restorative sleep. In this article, we’ll explore why your nervous system might feel “wired” at bedtime, how biblical principles of peace and rest can help, and practical techniques (backed by both the Bible and research) to calm your body and mind before you sleep.

Understanding the “Tired but Wired” Nervous System

When you’re stressed or anxious, your body’s sympathetic nervous system (the *fight-or-flight* mechanism) stays activated. Heart rate and stress hormones remain elevated, essentially keeping you on alert even if you feel exhausted – a state many sleep experts call “tired but wired.” Research shows that people with insomnia often have higher levels of this nervous system arousal, including increased nighttime adrenaline and a faster heart rate, which can significantly disrupt sleep onset and quality ¹ ² . In healthy sleep, the opposite branch of the nervous system – the parasympathetic (“rest-and-digest”) – should take over, slowing your breathing and heart rate and preparing the body for sleep ² . If you lie in bed with your mind racing or your muscles tense, it’s a sign your body is stuck in a hyper-aroused state. Chronic stress can lead to a vicious cycle: stress leads to poor sleep, and poor sleep increases the body’s stress response ³ ⁴ .

Physiologically, calming your nervous system before bed means reducing *sympathetic* activation and increasing *parasympathetic* activation. In practical terms, it means helping your body transition out of *go-go-go* mode into a relaxed state. Modern science is catching up to what Scripture noted long ago: a calm heart promotes rest, while an anxious one feels like “life up in the air.” King Solomon observed, “An anxious heart weighs a man down” (Proverbs 12:25), and many of us know that heavy feeling of worries at night. But God’s design is that we not live in perpetual anxiety. By addressing both the physical and spiritual aspects of stress, we can break out of the *tired but wired* trap.

The Biblical Promise of Peaceful Rest

The Bible portrays sleep as a *gift from God* and a sign of trust in His protection. **Psalm 4:8** declares, “*In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.*” This simple verse shows the connection between peace of mind and the ability to sleep. When we remember that God is watching over us, our nervous system can finally stand down. Similarly, **Proverbs 3:24** promises, “*When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.*” Scripture consistently frames **peaceful sleep as a result of trusting God**. We can sleep soundly because God never sleeps – “*Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep*” (**Psalm 121:4**). Knowing that our Lord is awake and guarding us means **both you and God don’t have to stay up**; you can rest, because He is on watch. In fact, “*He gives to his beloved sleep*” (Psalm 127:2) – a reminder that rest is a provision from a loving Father, not something we have to earn by worry.



Yet, Christians are not immune to anxiety. The early Christians were instructed, *“Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:7). Bringing our worries to God in prayer is a vital step in calming our souls. As we do so, we experience what Philippians 4:6-7 describes: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* This *peace of God* is exactly what a frazzled nervous system needs. It acts like a guard at the door of your heart and mind, gently easing that adrenaline-fueled vigilance. From a spiritual perspective, **an anxious mind finds rest by trusting in God’s presence and promises**. Jesus Himself invited, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28, ESV). As believers, we seek not just a technique for relaxation, but the deeper **rest that comes from Christ’s peace reigning in our hearts** (Colossians 3:15).

Practical Strategies to Calm Your Nervous System Before Sleep

While faith provides the foundation, the Bible also encourages practical wisdom. We are embodied creatures, and calming our *physical* nervous system can go hand-in-hand with spiritual rest. In fact, modern treatments for insomnia emphasize relaxation and routine as much as any medicine. Here are several proven strategies – blending scriptural wisdom with scientific research – that you can incorporate into your nightly routine:

- **Pray and Surrender Your Worries:** Use the quiet moments before bed to talk to God about your day and your concerns. Instead of stewing in anxious thoughts, *“cast your anxieties on Him”* in prayer (1 Peter 5:7). This isn’t just a pious idea; it has real psychological benefit. **Prayer has been shown in studies to reduce stress and anxiety**, providing comfort and a sense of support from God ⁵. Many believers find that after praying, their racing thoughts calm down because they’ve handed those worries over to God. You might pray through a Psalm (for example, read Psalm 23 or 91 slowly) or simply pray aloud your thanks and concerns. As you pray, **breathe slowly** (try inhaling deeply and saying, “Lord, I trust you,” then exhaling and saying, “I release my worry”). This combines prayer with a physical signal to your nervous system that you are safe. Remember, Jesus modeled prayer in anxiety – in Gethsemane He prayed earnestly through His distress and afterward was able to face rest (Luke 22:39-46). Similarly, we can pray our way to peace.
- **Meditate on Calming Scripture:** Instead of scrolling your phone or watching TV in bed (which can stimulate your brain), fill your mind with God’s Word. Reading and meditating on Scripture can physiologically and spiritually calm you. Isaiah 26:3 says God keeps in *“perfect peace”* the one **whose mind is fixed on Him**. Try a **bedtime Psalm** – Psalm 4, 23, 91, or 131 are excellent for cultivating trust. You can also memorize a short verse that brings you peace and repeat it slowly as you lie down (for example, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled”* – John 14:27). This acts like a form of **Christian meditation**, focusing your thoughts on God’s truth rather than the day’s worries. Many Christian sleep resources use this approach: the Abide meditation app, for instance, frames **calming bedtime stories around Scripture** to “lull you into a peaceful slumber” by refocusing your mind on God’s promises ⁶ ⁷. By aligning our thoughts with God’s Word, we “take every thought captive” (2 Corinthians 10:5) and usher in a sense of security that helps the nervous system unwind.
- **Deep Breathing Exercises:** Deliberate slow breathing is one of the most powerful physical techniques to signal your nervous system to relax. Scientific research has found that **slow, deep breathing can directly counteract the stress response**. When you breathe deeply and slowly (for

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example, inhaling for 4-5 seconds, holding briefly, then exhaling for 6-7 seconds), you stimulate your vagus nerve – which tells your body to shift into a parasympathetic, calm state. One landmark study suggested that practicing slow breathing at about 0.1 Hz (around 6 breaths per minute) before bed helped people fall asleep faster and improved sleep quality by increasing vagal tone and reducing the body's hyper-arousal ⁸ ⁹. In fact, **slow breathing boosts melatonin production**, the hormone that makes you sleepy, and lowers the fight-or-flight hormones ¹⁰. Try techniques like the “4-7-8” breath (inhale for 4, hold for 7, exhale for 8) or simply breathing deeply into your belly. As you exhale, consciously release tension. Even 2-3 minutes of deep breathing can induce a measurable calming effect – some people feel their heart rate slow and their muscles loosen. This is a practical way to “be still” (Psalm 46:10) in God's presence, using the breath He gave you to quiet your body.

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a technique where you systematically tense and then relax each muscle group in your body, from your toes up to your forehead. It's a proven method to reduce physical tension and anxiety. As you lie in bed, you might follow a routine: for example, clench your feet and toes for a few seconds, then release; tighten your calves, then release; and so on up the body. This helps you **become aware of any areas of tension and actively let it go**. Harvard Medical School notes that PMR can “quiet a racing mind or relax a tense body,” preparing you for sleep by *gradually releasing muscle tension* ¹¹ ¹². Research backs this up: in a 2024 clinical study, healthcare workers who did 30 minutes of PMR each night for a week saw significant improvements in their sleep quality and anxiety levels compared to before the intervention ¹³ ¹⁴. Their average sleep quality scores improved (PSQI score from 10 down to 8) and anxiety scores dropped (HAMA score from 8 down to 6) after just one week of nightly relaxation ¹³. This technique works by *damping down the sympathetic nervous system activity* – essentially telling your body it's OK to move out of high alert. As an added benefit, you can combine PMR with prayer: as you relax each muscle, you might say “Thank you Lord for relaxing my [feet/legs/etc]. I release all stress to You.” This blends physical relaxation with spiritual surrender.
- **Create a Calming Bedroom Environment:** Our external environment sends powerful cues to our nervous system. Take a cue from the Bible's concept of a *sanctuary* – make your bedroom a peaceful haven dedicated to rest. Dimming the lights in the evening, playing soft worship music or gentle instrumental hymns, and keeping the room cool and comfortable can all signal your body that it's time to wind down. Avoid bright screens or stressful tasks at least 30-60 minutes before bed, as blue light and mental stimulation tell your brain to stay alert. Instead, engage in calm activities: read a devotional or a calming book, take a warm bath, or stretch lightly. The Christian meditation experts at Abide suggest **establishing a “sanctuary of peace” in the evening** – for instance, **turn off harsh lights, maybe light a candle, and read Scriptures that bring comfort** and calm ¹⁵. This not only honors God's gift of rest but also follows good sleep hygiene practices recommended by sleep therapists. Research shows that consistent bedtime routines and a dark, quiet environment improve sleep quality and help condition your body to relax at the same time each day ¹⁶ ¹⁷. You might think of this as preparing your “outer sanctuary” (your room) and “inner sanctuary” (your heart) for the night. By intentionally designing a tranquil atmosphere, you cue your nervous system that it's safe to let go.
- **Journal Your Thoughts and Gratitudes:** If anxious thoughts tend to flood your mind at night, it can help to **externalize** them onto paper earlier in the evening. Take 10-15 minutes after dinner or before getting into bed to write down what's on your mind – your worries, to-do list for tomorrow, or anything weighing on you. Then, **write a prayer entrusting those items to God**. Physically writing



"God, I trust You with [XYZ situation]" can be very freeing. Additionally, write down three things you're thankful for each day. Gratitude has been shown to improve sleep by shifting focus away from stress. This practice echoes Philippians 4:6's instruction to pray *"with thanksgiving."* From a physiological view, journaling can reduce rumination, which lowers stress hormone levels. It's much easier to relax when your brain isn't trying to keep track of a dozen worries. By **"casting your cares"** onto paper (and up to God), you clear your mind. In the Psalms, we often see David pouring out his anxious thoughts to God and then being able to rest (see Psalm 3: he voices fears but ends with "I lie down and sleep; I wake again because the Lord sustains me" – Psalm 3:5). A nightly journal can be your way of doing the same, so that when you lie down you have a lighter heart.

- **Gentle Exercise and Stretching:** Engaging in very gentle physical activity in the evening can help release tension. This isn't the time for intense cardio (which might spike adrenaline), but slow stretching, a short walk, or a few yoga-like poses can activate the body's relaxation response. For example, some people practice "legs up the wall" pose (lying on your back with legs up against the wall) for a few minutes, which can be calming. Others do a series of slow neck and shoulder stretches to relieve muscle knots from the day. The idea is to get rid of physical stress stored in your body. Even **10 minutes of relaxed movement and stretching can lower cortisol (stress hormone) levels**, preparing you for sleep. This aligns with biblical wisdom that our bodies carry our stress – and sometimes a physical act is needed to symbolize release. (Think of how kneeling in prayer or prostrating can bring a sense of surrender; similarly, stretching out can symbolize releasing stress.) Always pair these movements with slow breathing and a peaceful mindset (perhaps listen to a quiet worship song or simply enjoy silence with the Lord as you move). By the end of it, your limbs should feel looser and your mind calmer.
- **Wind Down with Trust, Not Tech:** A common modern obstacle to nervous system calm is the smartphone or TV that stays on until late. The barrage of news, emails, or social media can keep your brain in a reactive state. Try to **end your day with a habit of trust instead of information input**. For example, you might set a time (say 30 minutes before bed) to **stop all screen use**. In that last half hour, do something that builds your trust in God: read a chapter of the Bible or a devotional, listen to a faith-based relaxation audio, or sit quietly in prayer. Some people find it helpful to physically **kneel by the bedside and symbolically "leave" their burdens with God** before climbing into bed. Jesus said, *"Do not worry about tomorrow"* (Matthew 6:34), yet scrolling on our phones often makes us worry about tomorrow's problems or the world's chaos. Instead, close the day by acknowledging God's sovereignty ("God, You are in control tonight; I release everything to You"). Adopting this spiritual discipline each night can slow your thoughts and heart rate. It's the modern equivalent of the age-old practice of evening prayers. By cutting out stimulating tech and choosing trust, you break that cycle of constant alertness and guide your nervous system into God's peace.

Each person may find a different combination of these strategies most helpful. The key is consistency: just as Daniel prayed three times a day regularly, we benefit from a **regular wind-down routine**. Over time, these habits train your body and spirit that nighttime is a safe, sacred time to relax. It's not selfish to take these steps – even Jesus withdrew to rest and pray. Think of calming your nervous system as part of good stewardship of the body God gave you, preparing you to serve Him better tomorrow.



Example: From Anxious Nights to Restful Sleep (A Case Study)

To see how these principles can work together, consider the example of “Jane,” a 38-year-old Christian working mom (a composite of many real cases). Jane often went to bed exhausted but on edge. As soon as her head hit the pillow, her mind replayed the day’s problems and tomorrow’s to-do list. She would toss and turn for hours, getting by on maybe 4-5 hours of fitful sleep. This went on for months, leaving her irritable and spiritually drained.

When Jane sought guidance, she realized she needed to address both her *routine* and her *heart*. She decided to implement a new evening plan step by step. First, she set a rule for herself to turn off the TV and silence her phone by 9:30 p.m. Before, she would often fall asleep reading anxious news on her phone – now she replaced that with quiet activities. Next, she created a **wind-down ritual**: at 9:30, she makes a cup of herbal tea, dims the lights, and spends 10 minutes writing in her prayer journal. She writes down the worries that are on her mind – for example, a conflict at work or concern for her children – and then writes a short prayer handing each burden to Jesus. She also notes a few things she’s grateful for that day, cultivating a positive and trusting mindset.

By 9:45, Jane moves to her bedroom. She plays a gentle worship song (**soft instrumental hymns**) while doing a few stretches and **breathing exercises**. She especially likes the 4-7-8 breathing technique and notices that as she practices it, her racing heartbeat slows down. Then, around 10:00, Jane climbs into bed and reads a few verses from the Psalms. Psalm 4:8 and Psalm 91 have become favorites – she reminds herself that God is her refuge and will keep her safe through the night. She spends a couple of minutes in **prayer, thanking God** for being in control and asking for His peace as she sleeps.

Initially, Jane still felt some restlessness (years of habit don’t vanish overnight), but she persisted. After two weeks of this routine, she found she was falling asleep faster – sometimes within 20-30 minutes instead of hours. By six weeks, Jane was regularly sleeping a solid **7 hours per night**, a big improvement from before. Equally important, she woke up feeling more refreshed and less anxious during the day. On nights when her mind still tried to rev up with worry, she noticed that the combination of deep breathing and reciting Philippians 4:6-7 in prayer would steady her thoughts. In her words, *“It’s like I’ve trained myself that ‘bedtime is peace time.’ I give my cares to God each night, and in return I actually feel His peace settling me down. I’m a happier mom and more focused at work now that I’m finally sleeping!”*

Jane’s story illustrates a key point: **integrating faith and practical calming techniques can transform your sleep**. It’s not that she never has stress – but she has learned to approach the night differently, as a time to restore and trust, rather than fret. Her case also shows that improvement can take a few weeks of consistency, but the effort is worth it. By God’s grace, what once was a nightly struggle has become an opportunity to experience God’s promise: *“I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”*

When Standard Approaches Aren’t Enough: Seeking Help is Wise

What if you’ve tried many of these strategies and you’re still struggling to calm down at night? First, don’t despair or blame your faith. **Persistent insomnia or anxiety may indicate an underlying issue** – and it’s important to remember that seeking professional help is not a lack of trust in God, but a means of utilizing



the wisdom and resources He provides. In fact, medical and therapeutic interventions often work *with* these strategies, not against them.

Consider speaking with a doctor or counselor if insomnia or anxiety is severely impacting you. There could be medical causes for insomnia (like thyroid issues or sleep apnea) that need addressing. A Christian therapist or a support group might help you process deeper anxieties or trauma that keep your nervous system on high alert. One highly effective treatment for chronic insomnia is **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)** – a structured therapy that teaches you how to change unhelpful thoughts about sleep and establish better sleep habits. Leading health organizations like the American College of Physicians and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine actually **recommend CBT-I as the first-line treatment for chronic insomnia**, even before medication ¹⁸ ¹⁹. Studies have shown that CBT-I can be as effective as sleeping pills in improving sleep, with longer-lasting benefits and without the side effects ²⁰. Through CBT-I, patients learn techniques like *cognitive restructuring* (for example, replacing thoughts like “I’ll never sleep” with truthful ones like “I might not sleep well tonight, but I’ll be okay and can rest tomorrow”) and sleep scheduling strategies. If anxiety is a major component, therapists might also use CBT techniques to manage worry (such as scheduling a “worry time” during the day so that bedtime is kept clear for relaxation).

In some cases, **medication or supplements** can be a helpful short-term tool to break the cycle of sleeplessness. There is no shame in this. As Christians, we sometimes wonder if taking an anxiety or sleep medication means we lack faith. The truth is, the Bible acknowledges the use of medicines (1 Timothy 5:23, for instance, where Paul advises Timothy to take a form of medicine for his stomach). **God has allowed medical knowledge to grow, and there is no biblical prohibition against using legitimate medicine for relief.** One Christian counseling resource addresses this directly: *“Is it a sin to use medication for mental health? No. God often uses medicine in the healing process... God has chosen to allow the practice of medicine to progress, and there is no biblical reason not to avail ourselves of it.”* ²¹. In other words, **using a sleep aid or anti-anxiety medication is not “unspiritual”**; it can be viewed as a gift from God when used wisely. Of course, medicine alone is seldom a permanent solution – it’s best seen as one part of a holistic plan. As another source notes, medication can provide symptom relief, but true healing also involves emotional and spiritual growth alongside it ²². So you might use a prescribed sleep aid for a short season while you also work on lifestyle changes and spiritual support. Always consult with a healthcare professional about what’s appropriate and follow their guidance.

Some common options doctors might suggest include **melatonin supplements** (a synthetic form of the sleep hormone). Melatonin can nudge your body toward sleep, especially if your rhythm is off, but it should be used carefully. (Even though it’s over-the-counter, it’s potent – and can cause grogginess or headaches in some ²³.) There are also prescription medications for insomnia or anxiety. If you are prescribed something, you can pray for God’s blessing on it and for wisdom in its use. Remember, *“Ultimately, God is the Great Physician”* ²⁴. We trust Him first and foremost for healing, but we can also thank Him for the tools He provides, whether that’s therapy, medicine, or advice from experts. Seeking help is often an act of stewardship of your health and an answer to prayers for wisdom.

In addition, don’t overlook the value of **community and support**. Sometimes talking with a pastor, a prayer partner, or a support group can ease anxiety. Others can pray with you and for you. Galatians 6:2 urges us to *“carry one another’s burdens.”* If nighttime anxiety is one of your burdens, let a trusted friend or spouse know. Have them check in or even sit and pray with you on particularly hard nights. There’s power in **not**



facing it alone. The act of someone else praying over you as you try to sleep can itself be very calming, knowing someone is interceding on your behalf.

Embracing God's Gift of Rest

Calming your nervous system before sleep is ultimately about **embracing the gift of rest that God intends for you.** In a world that prizes constant activity, choosing to rest can feel counter-cultural – even counter to our anxious instincts. But rest is woven into God's creation and commanded for our good. When we intentionally calm our bodies and minds at day's end, we are in a way practicing a form of Sabbath each night: we cease striving and acknowledge that **God is God and we are not.** As one wise saying goes, "God gave us sleep to remind us we are not Him." Each night, we relinquish control and trust that the world will keep spinning safely in His hands while we sleep.

By applying the practical techniques – breathing, relaxation, routine, and so on – we cooperate with the way God designed our bodies to unwind. By pairing those techniques with prayer, Scripture, and trust, we nurture our souls at the same time. This holistic approach can lead not only to better sleep, but also to a more joyful, faith-filled life. When you sleep better, you have more emotional margin to rejoice in the Lord during the day. And when you cultivate faith and peace in the evenings, that peace tends to carry into the morning. It's a virtuous cycle: peaceful nights beget happier days, which in turn make it easier to sleep the next night.

Remember that progress may be gradual. If you've been living in a state of high stress for a long time, your nervous system might take a few weeks to "reset" into a new pattern of calm. Be patient with yourself and celebrate small improvements. Perhaps tonight you only fell asleep 15 minutes sooner than before – thank God for that step. Perhaps you woke at 3 AM but instead of panicking, you breathed and prayed and managed to fall back asleep – that's a victory. **God is with you in the process.** Even King David, a man after God's heart, had sleepless nights of anxiety. He prayed in Psalm 77: *"You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak... I thought about the former days"* – but by the end of that psalm he finds peace by meditating on God's faithfulness.

In the same way, you can journey from *turmoil to tranquillity*. Use the wisdom of Scripture ("cast your cares," "be still and know," "He gives His beloved sleep") as both spiritual comfort and practical strategy. Use the insights of science and medicine as tools God has made available – lower the lights, slow your breathing, maybe utilize a therapy or supplement if needed. And above all, rest in the knowledge that **the Lord loves you and watches over you.** Each night is an opportunity to trust the One who never sleeps nor slumbers, and to echo the psalmist's confidence: *"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."* With God's help, you can calm your nervous system before sleep – and enjoy the gift of deep, rejuvenating rest as He intended.

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