



Help with Prayer: Integrating Faith, Neuroscience, and Mental Health for a Joyful Life

Struggling to live a joyful life in Christ is a challenge many believers face – and often the struggle is intertwined with difficulties in prayer. Prayer is meant to be a source of strength and joy for Christians, yet in practice we may find it hard to pray or feel no joy even when we do. The good news is that help with prayer is available, and it comes from an integrated perspective: combining timeless biblical wisdom with insights from psychology, neuroscience, and even modern medicine. In this article, we'll explore how prayer deepens our relationship with Jesus and promotes emotional well-being, what science says about prayer's effects on the brain and mental health, and how spiritual practices, therapy, and lifestyle strategies can all work together to restore joy.

Prayer is **not** a simplistic cure-all, but it is a powerful channel of God's grace that transforms us. The Danish philosopher **Søren Kierkegaard** aptly noted, *"The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays."* In other words, prayer changes **us** – our mindset, our heart, and even our brain – in ways that can lift us from despair to hope. As we'll see, this idea is affirmed both by Scripture and by scientific research. By the end of this article, you'll have a deeper understanding of why prayer is so vital for a joyful Christian life and practical steps to enrich your prayer life, all supported by both biblical teaching and empirical findings. Let's dive in.

The Importance of Prayer for a Joyful Christian Life

Prayer is absolutely central to the Christian life. It is our direct line of communication with God – a conversation with the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior. Through prayer, we **"draw near to God"** (James 4:8) and invite His presence into our daily struggles. The Bible links prayer closely with experiencing God's peace and joy. For example, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers: *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, NIV). Notice how **rejoicing**, **prayer**, and **thanksgiving** are tied together – a prayerful life is meant to be a joyful and thankful life.

Jesus Himself emphasized prayer's role in a life of joy. He said, *"Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete"* (John 16:24, NIV). Our Lord modeled a life of prayer; the Gospels frequently mention Jesus withdrawing to solitary places to pray (e.g. Luke 5:16). Even in the darkest hour at Gethsemane, Jesus prayed fervently, honestly pouring out His anguish to the Father (Matthew 26:36–44). After that agonizing prayer, He found the strength to face the cross, and *"for the joy set before him"* endured it (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus teaches us that prayer is where we bring **every** burden – *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28, NIV). Through prayer, we trade our anxieties for His peace. Philippians 4:6–7 (NIV) famously instructs: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* The promise is that *"the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

That "peace...beyond understanding" is exactly what so many hurting Christians long for. It's a peace that can coexist with trials and lead to **joy** even in hardship (James 1:2–3). King David, no stranger to depression



and despair, often began his psalms in turmoil and ended them rejoicing – the turning point was **prayer**. For example, in Psalm 13 David starts in anguish (“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?”) but ends with, “*I will sing the Lord’s praise, for He has been good to me.*” David’s circumstances hadn’t changed in those few verses, but **prayer changed David’s heart**. Many of the Psalms show this therapeutic pattern of honestly lamenting to God and then finding renewed hope and joy through that very act of intimate prayer. Prayer is thus a **God-given outlet** for our negative emotions – a safe space to cry, complain, confess, and then be comforted by truth. “*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you,*” Scripture urges (1 Peter 5:7, NIV). When we do so in prayer, we experience the care of God and the “*joy of the Lord*” that becomes our strength (Nehemiah 8:10, NIV).

It’s important to note that this joy through prayer isn’t about denying problems or forcing a fake happiness. Biblical joy is deeper than surface happiness; it flows from knowing we are beloved by God and **never alone** in our struggles. Jesus affirmed, “*Surely I am with you always*” (Matthew 28:20). In prayer we consciously “*abide*” in Christ (John 15:4–11) – remaining in His love and thereby tapping into His joy. Jesus said that as we abide in Him and obey His teachings, “*my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*” (John 15:11, NIV). In essence, **prayer keeps us connected to the source of true joy – Jesus Himself**. It’s like a branch drawing life from the vine (John 15:5). Cut off from prayer, we wither spiritually; connected through prayer, we bear the **fruit of the Spirit**, which pointedly includes **love, peace, and joy** (Galatians 5:22).

Despite knowing all this, many Christians still find prayer difficult or discouraging. You might feel like your prayers hit the ceiling, or you’re too depressed to muster words. You are not alone. Even great saints have walked through “dark nights” where prayer felt dry. Yet those seasons are precisely when we are invited to persevere in prayer (Luke 18:1) and also to seek new ways to refresh our prayer life. Here’s where insights from **neuroscience and psychology** can actually reinforce and illuminate the ancient practices of faith. Far from being opposed to faith, modern research often **echoes biblical truths**, showing how prayer benefits our minds and even bodies. Let’s examine what studies have found – it will encourage you that your prayers are not in vain, **they are changing you** in real, tangible ways.

Prayer and Psychological Well-Being: What Research Shows

Beyond the spiritual benefits, **prayer has significant positive effects on mental health** – and this isn’t just anecdotal. Decades of research in the psychology of religion have documented that people who engage in religious practices like prayer tend to have better mental health outcomes on average. In fact, a large body of studies indicates that **religious involvement predicts lower rates of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of well-being, hope, and purpose** ¹. Dr. Harold G. Koenig of Duke University, a leading researcher on spirituality and health, reviewed **hundreds of studies** over 40 years and found consistent links between faith practices and positive mental health. According to his summary, people active in their faith suffer **less depression, suicide, and substance abuse, and report greater happiness and social support** than less religious people ¹. To be clear, not every individual study finds a strong effect (and a few find negative correlations in certain cases), but the **overall trend** is strongly positive ¹. The takeaway: living out your faith (prayer, worship, community participation) is generally **good for your emotional health**.

What about prayer specifically? Several fascinating studies have focused on prayer’s impact on **stress, anxiety, and depression**. In clinical settings, prayer has shown promise as a complementary intervention for mental illness. For example, in one randomized controlled trial published in the *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, researchers tested the effect of **interpersonal prayer** on individuals diagnosed with



depression and anxiety disorders. One group of patients received weekly one-hour prayer sessions with a person praying for and with them, while a control group did not. The results were striking: **those who received the prayer sessions had significantly improved depression and anxiety scores** by the end of the 6-week trial, and also reported higher optimism and daily spiritual experience, compared to the control group ² ³. Perhaps most encouraging, the prayer group's improvements **persisted at least a month** after the sessions ended ³. The control group, who did not receive focused prayer support, showed no significant changes ². The researchers concluded that *"direct person-to-person prayer may be useful as an adjunct to standard medical care"* for patients with depression and anxiety ⁴. In simpler terms, **prayer was a beneficial add-on** that helped relieve psychological distress.

These findings align with many believers' personal experiences – when someone prays with or for us, we often feel comforted and uplifted. But it's powerful to see scientific evidence that this isn't just imagination or a temporary placebo. Something real is happening when we pray: anxiety loosens its grip and hope re-enters the mind. Even **brief, private prayers** can have measurable effects. A 2015 review of studies noted that **various forms of prayer help manage anxiety and depression, boost feelings of gratitude, and even improve our ability to cope with pain** ⁵. People who pray frequently also tend to have **better stress management and resilience** over time, which translates into improved mental health and even physical health. Prayer's positive correlation with mental well-being is so established that mental health professionals are increasingly paying attention. The American Psychological Association has recognized that incorporating a client's religious beliefs (including prayer) into therapy can be beneficial for those who value faith, and guidelines for integrating spirituality into counseling are being developed. In fact, **religiously-integrated therapies** have shown outcomes **as effective as standard secular therapy – and sometimes better for people of faith**, since they address spiritual needs along with emotional ones ⁶ ⁷.

One meta-analysis (a study of many studies) reviewed 46 clinical trials of spiritually-integrated psychotherapy. It found that patients who received therapy that included their spiritual beliefs had **equal mental health improvement** compared to those in secular therapy, but also gained **greater spiritual growth** and coping skills ⁸. In other words, **inviting prayer and scripture into the healing process did not dilute the effectiveness of therapy – it enhanced it** in domains like hope, forgiveness, and meaning. This is encouraging news for Christians: you do not have to check your faith at the door when seeking mental health treatment. On the contrary, your faith can be a **powerful asset** in recovery. Therapists are finding creative ways to integrate prayer into evidence-based treatments. For example, in an approach called **Religiously Integrated Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (RCBT)**, Christian clients might learn to challenge negative thoughts by using biblical truths and prayer, e.g. replacing *"I'm worthless"* with *"I am God's beloved child"* and praying for trust in that truth ⁶ ⁹. This combination of **cognitive restructuring + prayer** taps both psychological technique and spiritual power.

Importantly, research also shows that **prayer doesn't only help believing people because of "hope" or placebo effects**. In one remarkable study at Rush University, researchers found that *belief in a loving, caring God* significantly improved depression treatment outcomes. Patients with clinical depression who believed strongly that God cared about them were **75% more likely to get better on antidepressant medication** than those who lacked such belief ¹⁰ ¹¹. The researchers initially thought maybe it was just general optimism or hope at play – but they measured hope levels, and hope itself did **not** account for the difference ¹² ¹³. It was specifically the **faith in a concerned God** that predicted better response. This suggests that **spiritual faith adds a unique therapeutic factor**. When you pray and truly believe *"God is with me and cares for me,"* it can amplify the benefits of any other help you're receiving. The lead author, Dr. Patricia Murphy (a chaplain and researcher), said, *"Clinicians need to be aware of the role of religion in their*



patients' lives. It is an important resource in planning their care." ¹⁴ In short, secular medicine is learning what Christians have known for ages: **prayer and faith are potent resources** for healing.

To sum up, modern research validates prayer as a boon to mental health: it **reduces anxiety and depression symptoms**, improves coping and optimism, and can work synergistically with therapy or medication. Of course, prayer is not a magic wand – it doesn't automatically eliminate all suffering (nor does medicine, for that matter). But the evidence affirms that those who pray and cultivate their relationship with God tend to fare better emotionally than those who don't. It's as if we were **designed** to thrive when our **body, mind, and spirit** are in harmony. This leads us to examine how prayer affects the brain and body – the "hardware" of that design.

The Neuroscience of Prayer: How Prayer Affects Your Brain and Body

In recent decades, neuroscientists have turned their attention to what happens in the brain during prayer and meditation. The field of "**neurotheology**" has yielded some awe-inspiring insights that reinforce the value of prayer. Brain imaging studies – using MRI, EEG, and other technologies – show that engaging in deep prayer activates and changes **multiple brain regions** in ways that promote well-being. **Dr. Andrew Newberg**, a pioneer in this field, has scanned the brains of people during intense prayer (such as Franciscan nuns in contemplation or Pentecostals praying in tongues) and found **increased activity in the frontal lobes**, the area behind your forehead responsible for focus, planning, and emotional regulation ¹⁵ . At the same time, activity in the **parietal lobes** (the part that helps orient you in space and process self-awareness) tends to **quiet down** during deep prayer ¹⁶ . This combination – heightened focus and diminished self-focus – correlates with the subjective feeling of "**getting lost**" in prayer or **feeling united with God**. Neurologically, it appears that intense prayer can shift the brain into a state where **one's sense of isolation decreases and a sense of connectedness increases** ¹⁶ . It's fascinating that when people say they "*felt one with God and others*" in prayer, the scans actually reflect a brain state consistent with that: the boundaries of self-perception blur. Such a state might foster compassion and empathy, as Newberg speculates – if prayer makes you feel connected to all humanity under God, it could naturally increase love and reduce aggressive impulses ¹⁷ .

Beyond these cerebral effects, prayer also triggers **neurochemical and nervous-system changes** linked to improved mood and health. Researchers have found that regular prayer and meditation practices can **lower the body's stress response**. When you pray earnestly (especially prayers of surrender or trust), your brain may signal a shift out of "fight or flight" mode. The **sympathetic nervous system** (which produces the adrenaline-fueled stress state) calms down, and the **parasympathetic nervous system** (which promotes relaxation and healing) kicks in. Harvard cardiologist **Dr. Herbert Benson** famously dubbed this the "relaxation response." In his classic studies, people who prayed or meditated experienced **reduced heart rate, lower blood pressure, slower breathing, and decreased oxygen consumption**, indicating a deep state of rest ¹⁸ . Essentially, **prayer can induce the opposite of a stress panic attack** – it can be like a soft reset for your physiology. Over time, practicing such prayerful calming has cumulative benefits: it may **reduce chronic stress hormones** that wreak havoc on the body. For instance, levels of **cortisol** (the primary stress hormone) tend to drop when someone enters a state of prayerful peace ¹⁹ ²⁰ . One write-up from the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality & Healing explains that when prayer uplifts or soothes us, it "*inhibits the release of cortisol and other [stress] hormones, thus reducing the negative impact of stress on the immune system.*" ¹⁹ . Lower stress hormone levels mean less inflammation and better immune

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function, which might be why **prayer is linked to health benefits** like improved recovery from illness and even longer lifespan in some studies.

Consider some other mind-body effects scientists have observed from prayer (and closely related practices like meditation on Scripture):

- **Improved Brain Function and Resilience:** Neurologist Dr. Mario Beauregard and others have found that **regular spiritual practice can actually reshape the brain** through neuroplasticity ²¹ ²² . One study by Dr. Caroline Leaf (a cognitive neuroscientist) indicated that as little as **12 minutes of focused prayer each day for 8 weeks** can cause measurable changes in the brain, strengthening areas involved in **memory, empathy, and emotional regulation** ²³ ²² . Brain scans of people after several weeks of prayer training show increased thickness in the **prefrontal cortex** (the brain's decision-making and self-control center) ²⁴ . A healthier prefrontal cortex is associated with better concentration, mood stability, and compassion – essentially the capacities we need to live out Christ-like character. This finding echoes the biblical call in Romans 12:2 to *“be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* In a very literal sense, **prayer helps “renew” the mind by reinforcing positive neural pathways.**
- **Anxiety Relief and Emotional Balance:** Multiple studies demonstrate that prayer can reduce symptoms of anxiety. One mechanism is by increasing activity in brain regions that help **regulate emotion** and quiet the amygdala (the fear center). As mentioned above, prayer tends to engage the frontal lobe – which not only focuses attention on God, but also helps **modulate runaway emotions**. One church devotional summarizing neuroscience findings noted that **people who pray regularly show lower levels of stress hormones like cortisol and report more feelings of peace** ²⁰ . Prayer is effectively teaching your brain a healthier *baseline* state. Instead of constantly being in high-alert worry mode, prayer practice trains your system to return to calm. In fact, **prayer elicits a relaxation response** so reliably that some doctors recommend it (or similar meditative techniques) as part of stress-management programs ²⁵ . When you turn your concerns over to God – *“casting your cares on Him”* – you are both spiritually and physiologically **letting go** of that toxic stress. One experiment even found that people had lower spikes in blood pressure and anxiety during a lab stress task if they spent time praying beforehand ²⁶ . It's as if prayer provides a protective buffer to stress.
- **Enhanced Cognitive Abilities:** Surprisingly, prayer might make you **mentally sharper** in certain ways. Research cited in the magazine *Broadview* notes that prayer not only boosts mood but *“enhances our capacity to absorb and retain information”* ⁵ . This could be due to the improved attention and working memory that come from regular contemplative practice. Additionally, long-term meditators (including those who pray deeply) show **increased “gyrification” in the cortex** – essentially, more folding of the brain's surface, which correlates with greater processing power ⁵ . In short, prayer is a workout for the brain, potentially keeping it younger and more adaptable. There's evidence that a life of faith and prayer is associated with a **lower risk of cognitive decline** in old age, possibly owing to the mental engagement and community support that come with religious involvement.
- **Pain Tolerance and Healing:** Another intriguing line of research suggests that prayer can make people more resilient to pain. In some studies, devout individuals endured pain stimuli longer when engaged in prayer, likely because prayer shifts focus and imbues suffering with meaning or comfort.

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Prayer is also the **most commonly used non-drug pain management strategy** among patients with chronic pain, according to surveys ²⁷ . Many find that praying helps them cope with pain by providing a sense of presence (God's comfort) and reducing the anxiety that makes pain worse. While prayer is **not a substitute for medical pain relief**, it can complement it. The act of prayer releases endorphins (natural painkillers) and instills hope, which can tangibly improve one's experience of pain. Doctors like Harold Koenig have remarked that prayer offers a *"triple preventative"* effect – *"peace, power, and health"* – that guards against anxiety and disease ²⁸ ²⁹ .

To be clear, **prayer is not about manipulating brain chemistry** for our benefit; it's about relationship with God. But how wonderful that God designed this relationship such that *when we pray, it also nourishes our brains and bodies!* It's a beautiful integration of the spiritual and physical. Our increasing scientific knowledge is, in a sense, **catching up to the wisdom of Scripture**. Proverbs 17:22 noted long ago, *"A cheerful heart is good medicine."* Now we see that prayer – which cultivates gratitude, trust, and a cheerful heart in God's presence – literally acts as medicine by lowering stress and building up brain health. Conversely, *"a crushed spirit dries up the bones,"* the proverb concludes – chronic stress and despair can indeed wreak havoc on the body (we know stress contributes to many illnesses). Prayer is a God-given antidote to a crushed spirit. By praying, **we cooperate with the way God wired us for wholeness**.

In summary, **the neuroscience of prayer shows that prayer engages many parts of the brain, promotes a relaxation/healing state in the body, and can lead to long-term positive changes (neuroplasticity) that improve mental and emotional functioning**. Far from the outdated notion that faith is irrational or opposed to science, we find that faith practices like prayer work in harmony with our biology. The more we learn, the more we see that **loving God with all our mind and heart (Matthew 22:37)** has benefits that ripple through every level of our being.

Integrating Prayer with Spiritual Disciplines and Lifestyle Strategies

While prayer is powerful on its own, it's most effective as part of a **holistic approach** to drawing near to God and caring for your well-being. Think of prayer as one piece – albeit a central piece – of a tapestry that includes **Scripture meditation, fellowship, healthy living, and wise self-care**. God has provided multiple means of sustaining our joy, and they work best together. Here we will discuss how to integrate prayer with other spiritual disciplines and practical lifestyle strategies to help restore joy and peace.

1. Praying with Scripture (Meditation on God's Word): One way to enrich your prayer life is to incorporate **Bible reading and meditation** into it. God speaks to us through Scripture, and reflecting on His promises can profoundly reshape our thinking. When you pray, try including a time to slowly read a passage of Scripture, then pray it back to God or ponder its meaning. For example, if you struggle with negative self-image, you might meditate on a verse like Psalm 139:14 ("I am fearfully and wonderfully made") or Romans 8:1 ("no condemnation for those in Christ"), and then **pray in agreement with that truth**: *"Lord, help me believe what You say about me."* This practice aligns with the principle of **"renewing your mind"** found in Romans 12:2. In therapy terms, you are replacing distorted thoughts with truthful, healthy thoughts – a technique akin to cognitive-behavioral therapy, but powered by God's Word. Research shows that **spiritually grounded cognitive reframing** (identifying lies and countering them with faith-based truths) can reduce depression and anxiety ⁶ ⁸ . Many Christians find **praying the Psalms** especially therapeutic, since the Psalms cover the full range of human emotion. When you pray Scripture, you allow



God's voice to guide your prayer, preventing it from spiraling into mere rumination. **Christian meditation** – quietly pondering a verse or an attribute of God – has similar stress-reducing effects as secular mindfulness meditation, with the added benefit of drawing your heart toward God. In fact, a **study on centering prayer** (a form of silent, word-focused prayer) found it produced calm and improved emotional regulation in participants, much like mindfulness techniques ²⁵. So don't hesitate to use the Bible as part of your "therapy" in prayer; it is **living and active** (Hebrews 4:12) and able to penetrate to our deepest hurts.

2. The Discipline of Gratitude and Praise: *"With thanksgiving, present your requests to God"* (Philippians 4:6) – gratitude is a crucial, if sometimes overlooked, aspect of prayer. When life is hard, giving thanks can feel forced, but even finding one small thing to thank God for can start to shift your perspective. Psychology research has shown that **practicing gratitude** (like keeping a gratitude journal or thanking someone daily) can significantly improve mood and reduce depression. For Christians, gratitude is more than a mental exercise; it's directed toward God, acknowledging His grace. We see this pattern in Scripture: many psalms of lament still include a statement of trust or praise at the end (e.g. Psalm 13, 22). Cultivating gratitude in prayer – even simply thanking God for a new day, for the food you have, or for His character – **elicits positive emotions** that counteract depressive thought patterns ³⁰. Studies noted earlier confirm that prayer tends to **elicit feelings of compassion, forgiveness, and hope** alongside gratitude ³⁰. All these emotions are healing. A practical tip is to **begin your prayer time with praise and thanks**, before petition. This doesn't mean ignoring your problems; it means first anchoring yourself in the goodness of God. As an example, try writing down three things you're grateful for each day and incorporate that list into your prayers. Over time, this discipline can rewire your brain to notice blessings more than burdens. Remember, *"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you"* (1 Thess. 5:18). Gratitude-rich prayer has a way of opening our eyes to God's presence and lifting our spirits.

3. Honest Lament and Confession: On the flip side of gratitude, **honesty in prayer about your pain** is equally important. Some Christians feel they shouldn't complain to God or that negative feelings are unfaithful. Yet the Bible is full of faithful people candidly pouring out sorrow, anger, and confusion to God. **Job** vented his misery, **Jeremiah** wrote a whole book of laments, and on the cross Jesus Himself cried, *"My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Matthew 27:46). God invites us to bring **all** our emotions to Him. Psychologically, this is critical: repressing emotions can fuel depression and anxiety, whereas **expressing them in a safe place leads to release and insight**. Prayer is the safest place of all – God already knows what we feel (Psalm 139:2), so telling Him is for our benefit. If you are depressed, your prayers might for a season be mostly cries for help or even wordless groans. Romans 8:26 reassures us that *"the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans"* when we don't know what to pray. Thus, simply coming before God and sighing or weeping **is prayer** – and it is effective. King David said, *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted"* (Psalm 34:18), and *"I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears"* (Psalm 34:4). Notice he doesn't say the Lord scolded him for those fears – instead God **met him in that honest plea**. Likewise, **confession** of sin or burdens can be freeing. Guilt and shame often accompany depression, whether warranted or not. Telling God *"I'm sorry"* or *"I feel guilty about..."* and hearing His promise of forgiveness (1 John 1:9) lifts a huge weight off the psyche. In therapeutic terms, confession in prayer helps resolve internal conflicts and self-condemnation. It replaces toxic shame with grace. Many have testified that after confessing and praying, they felt as if a dark cloud lifted. So, part of "help with prayer" is **permission to be brutally honest with God**. As one author put it, *"God can heal what you reveal."* When you bring the deepest wounds and ugliest feelings into the light of prayer, God's love and truth can begin to heal them.



4. Community and Intercessory Prayer: Praying with others is another powerful way to bolster both your prayer life and your joy. We are not meant to walk the Christian journey alone. Jesus said, *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:20). There is a unique strength and comfort when believers unite in prayer – whether in a small group, a church service, or even over the phone with a friend. From a mental health perspective, this brings in the well-documented benefit of **social support**. Research shows that people with strong supportive relationships recover faster from depression and are more resilient to stress. The church is ideally a built-in support network. When you’re too weak to pray, let others carry you in prayer – much like the paralytic man whose friends lowered him through the roof to Jesus. Their faith helped secure his healing (Mark 2:4-5). In the same way, **intercessory prayer** (praying for each other) can buoy your faith when you’re running on empty. It also combats the loneliness that often comes with emotional struggles. Joining a prayer group or simply having a prayer partner can keep you accountable and encouraged in prayer. Additionally, praying for others can lift your spirits, too. It shifts focus from your own troubles to caring about someone else, which often provides a fresh sense of purpose and gratitude. The Bible encourages mutual prayer: *“Pray for each other so that you may be healed”* (James 5:16). There’s an interesting reciprocity – as you pray for others’ healing, you experience healing. So, **don’t isolate**. Reach out to a trusted friend, a pastor, or a counselor and pray together. Even the act of verbalizing your prayer request to someone is therapeutic; it breaks the secrecy and stigma of what you’re going through. God often touches us *through* the prayers and presence of His people.

5. Healthy Lifestyle Supports (Sleep, Exercise, Diet, and Mindfulness): While spiritual disciplines are vital, we must remember that our bodies and minds need care too. It’s hard to have a vibrant prayer life when you are utterly exhausted or malnourished. Physical and mental self-care actually **support your spiritual well-being**. For example, adequate **sleep** is critical for mood regulation – even Elijah, when he was suicidal, first needed a nap and a meal provided by an angel before he could hear God’s gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:5-12). Sometimes the most “spiritual” thing you can do to improve prayer and joy is to get a good night’s sleep! Regular **exercise** is another God-given mood booster. Exercise releases endorphins and can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety almost as effectively as medication in many cases ³¹. Going for a walk or run can also become a prayer time – many people pray while walking in nature, combining the calming effect of God’s creation with physical movement. It’s a great way to clear mental fog and feel God’s presence. **Diet** plays a role too: our brains need proper nutrition (like omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, etc.) to produce neurotransmitters that regulate mood. While the Bible doesn’t give a diet plan for mental health, it does call our body the **temple of the Holy Spirit** (1 Corinthians 6:19) and encourages moderation. Eating regularly and hydrating well can stabilize blood sugar and energy, which prevents irritability and low mood that make prayer harder. Additionally, **mindfulness techniques** can complement prayer. Mindfulness (paying nonjudgmental attention to the present moment) is actually very compatible with Christian practice when centered on God. Techniques like slow deep breathing, relaxation exercises, or Christian yoga/stretching can calm the body and prepare the mind to focus in prayer. Some Christians practice a breath prayer – inhaling with a phrase like “Abba, Father” and exhaling “I trust You” – to synchronize breathing with surrender to God. This not only slows the heart rate but also centers your mind on the Lord. Overall, **taking care of your body’s needs and practicing calming routines** will support your prayer life. You’ll find it easier to pray when your brain chemistry isn’t crashing from skipping meals or when your anxiety is lowered by a brisk walk. It’s all connected: caring for **body, mind, and spirit** together is the wisest approach.



To recap these integration points, here's a **checklist of practical strategies** you can start incorporating to deepen your prayer life and improve joy:

- **Set a regular prayer routine:** Aim for a consistent daily prayer time, even if short. Routine helps make prayer a habit that your mind and body come to expect and crave.
- **Use Scripture in prayer:** Read a passage (like a psalm or Gospel story) and turn it into a personal prayer. This anchors your thoughts in truth and breaks negative thought cycles.
- **Keep a prayer journal:** Write down your prayers, or list burdens and then surrender them to God in writing. Also record answers to prayer. Journaling serves as both emotional release and faith-building record.
- **Practice thanksgiving:** Start or end each prayer by listing things you're thankful for. In hard times, thank God for His character (e.g. "God, I thank You that You are faithful even now."). This primes your brain towards hope.
- **Try breath prayers or silence:** If your mind races, use a simple repeated prayer (e.g. "Lord Jesus, have mercy") in time with slow breathing. Or sit in silence imagining yourself in God's loving arms. This contemplative prayer can deeply calm your soul.
- **Pray with others:** Don't hesitate to ask for prayer from friends or church leaders. Schedule a weekly check-in prayer with a friend. Knowing someone else is praying for you is comforting and keeps you accountable.
- **Incorporate worship music:** Singing or listening to worship songs is a form of prayer that engages the heart and often lifts emotions. Many find that playing a gentle worship song during prayer helps usher in peace.
- **Serve or encourage someone:** Odd as it sounds, one way to combat your own darkness is by praying for and helping another. It takes the focus off self and allows God's love to flow through you, which brings joy. Volunteer at church or simply pray for a friend in need.
- **Attend to physical health:** Ensure you're sleeping 7-8 hours, eating balanced meals, and getting some physical activity most days. Taking a walk in nature while praying combines exercise, sunlight (Vitamin D), and communion with God – a powerful mood booster. Limit alcohol or caffeine if those worsen your anxiety or sleep.
- **Seek beauty and rest:** Sometimes our souls are drained by nonstop work and digital noise. Follow Jesus's example to **"come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest a while"** (Mark 6:31). Spend time in creation, enjoy a hobby, or simply rest. These things can rejuvenate you and translate into more heartfelt prayer and praise.

By weaving together these spiritual and practical threads, you create a **strong net of support** that can catch you when you feel like you're falling. God works through *all* these means – His Word, His people, and



even the natural mechanisms of our bodies. Embracing this holistic view is not a lack of faith; on the contrary, it's acknowledging God as Lord over every aspect of life.

When Prayer Alone Isn't Enough: The Role of Therapy and Medicine

What if you've been praying and doing all you know to do, yet the darkness isn't lifting? It's crucial to understand that **seeking professional help or medical treatment is not a sign of weak faith – it can be an expression of wisdom and God's provision.** We live in a fallen world where illnesses (including mental illnesses like major depression, anxiety disorders, etc.) are realities that sometimes require targeted treatment. Utilizing therapy or medication, alongside prayer, is often the **most loving thing you can do for yourself and your family.**

The Bible does not condemn using medical means for healing. Luke, the author of one Gospel and Acts, was a physician by trade (Colossians 4:14 refers to him as *"our dear friend Luke, the doctor"*). In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul actually advises Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach ailment – essentially a first-century medicinal remedy. These examples show that **faith and medicine are not mutually exclusive.** God frequently works through human knowledge and treatments. If you had a broken leg, you'd pray *and* go to the doctor for a cast; if you have diabetes, you'd pray *and* take insulin. Similarly, if you have severe depression, you can pray fervently *and* take an antidepressant or see a counselor – and **God can work through both avenues to heal.**

Many Christians struggle with guilt over taking psychiatric medication or seeing a therapist, fearing it means they don't trust God enough. If that's you, let's lay that burden down. As Christian counselors often emphasize, **the decision to use medication is a wisdom issue, not a moral or spiritual failure** ³². It takes wisdom to discern when additional support is needed. When someone has a chemical imbalance or trauma that prayer alone hasn't lifted, choosing to try therapy or meds can be a wise step of faith – faith that God can use **all good gifts** for our healing (James 1:17). One article from a Christian perspective puts it this way: *"They recognize that medication is a blessing, when it helps, but recognize its limits...Medication can change physical symptoms, but not spiritual ones."* ³³ ³⁴. This balanced view is key. Medication (such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs) can correct biological factors – for example, raising serotonin levels – which might give you enough relief to then more effectively engage in prayer, Scripture, and life. It can "clear the fog" so that hope is within reach again. However, medication alone can't instill purpose, address deep heart issues, or connect you to God – that's where prayer and Christian fellowship continue to play an irreplaceable role. So we use medicine as **one part** of the solution, undergirded by faith.

Therapy, especially with a professional who respects your faith, can also be a gift from God. A skilled Christian therapist or pastor can help you process pain, challenge unbiblical thinking (e.g. *"God must hate me"* – a lie many depressed people feel), and practice coping skills in line with Scripture. Techniques like **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** are very compatible with Christian repentance and renewal of the mind. In fact, as we discussed, explicitly integrating prayer and scripture into CBT (for those who desire it) often yields outcomes **as good as or better** than standard therapy for believers ⁶ ⁷. For instance, in religiously-integrated therapy, you might pray at the end of sessions, use Biblical narratives to reframe your story, or find spiritual meaning in your trials – all of which can accelerate healing. **Group therapy or support groups** at church (like Celebrate Recovery or a grief-share group) can add the benefit of community support and shared prayer on the journey.



If you are dealing with serious conditions like **clinical depression, an anxiety disorder, PTSD, or bipolar disorder**, please know that **prayer is essential but it's often prayer plus treatment that brings the best outcome**. There is no shame in that. God often chooses to heal through a **combination** of spiritual and medical means. Consider the biblical story of **Elijah** again in 1 Kings 19: the prophet was so depressed he prayed for death. How did God respond? Not by saying "snap out of it," but by **sending an angel with cake and water** to nourish Elijah's body, then letting him sleep (twice!). Only after addressing Elijah's physical exhaustion did God engage him in a gentle whisper to address the spiritual/emotional side. This story beautifully illustrates **holistic care** – body and soul. We should follow that model. If you've been praying but feel utterly depleted, **check on your physical needs and don't hesitate to get help**. Maybe you need a sabbath rest or a sabbatical from overwhelming duties. Maybe a doctor's evaluation is needed to see if a health issue (thyroid, vitamin deficiency, etc.) is contributing to your depression. Or perhaps a season of counseling could help carry the load. Seeking these helps **is** trusting God – it's availing yourself of the tools He has allowed humankind to develop, much like using technology or education.

Some Christians worry that therapy or medication might alter their personality or numb their spirituality. A proper use of these resources should **never hinder your relationship with God** – rather, by alleviating the extreme symptoms, they **free you** to pursue God more effectively. A good therapist will encourage your spiritual growth, not detract from it. And a rightly prescribed medication will simply correct an imbalance (like providing insulin to a diabetic), not turn you into a different person. If anything, it helps restore **your true self** that has been buried under depression or anxiety. You'll still experience normal ups and downs and need God daily – the medicine just takes the edge off the debilitating lows that make it hard to function or pray.

Above all, continue to **pray for God's guidance** in any treatment decisions. James 1:5 promises that if we ask for wisdom, God will give it generously. You can pray, *"Lord, should I see a doctor? Lead me to the right one. Should I try this medication? Please let it help and not harm. Give me peace about my choices."* In doing so, you're involving God in the healing process every step of the way. Many have found that a combination of **prayer, Scripture, supportive relationships, therapy, and when needed, medicine** is what God uses to bring them back to a place of joy. There is no one-size-fits-all formula – each person's path is unique – but the common thread is that **God's grace is sufficient**, and He will use every means to work for your good (Romans 8:28).

Let's also address a subtle spiritual pitfall: sometimes we might idolize either prayer **or** medicine, expecting one or the other to be a magic fix. In reality, our hope should ultimately be in **God Himself**. He is the healer (Exodus 15:26) whether He heals via miracle in prayer or via Prozac and psychotherapy. Keep your eyes on the Giver, not just the gifts. As you pursue holistic healing, maintain a posture of *"Lord, I trust You to lead my healing. I will obey Your promptings, whether that's to persevere in prayer, to humble myself to see a counselor, or both."* This humble reliance invites God to orchestrate your care in a beautiful way.

Case Study: A Journey from Despair to Joy

To see how these principles come together in real life, consider the story of "John," a composite of many true cases. **John** is a 45-year-old Christian man who for years served faithfully in his church. After a series of stressful events – a job loss, a health scare, and increasing financial strain – John fell into a deep depression. He felt numb and exhausted all the time. Prayer, which used to come easily, now felt impossible; he would sit down to pray and end up just staring at the wall, flooded with anxious thoughts or just emptiness. He also felt guilty – *"A good Christian should be full of joy. Why am I so down? Maybe I lack faith."* John withdrew

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from friends and even stopped attending men's Bible study because he didn't want to burden others with his problems. **His joy in Christ was all but gone.**

At his lowest point, John saw no way out. Thankfully, his wife gently intervened and suggested he get **professional help**. John met with a Christian counselor, who diagnosed him with **major depressive disorder**. Together, they made a plan: John would start seeing the counselor weekly for therapy, and also visit his doctor to discuss an antidepressant to jump-start his recovery. This was a hard step for John – he had to overcome pride and the feeling that “Christians shouldn't need antidepressants.” But he prayed about it and sensed God giving peace to move forward. His pastor reminded him that using medicine was like using any other tool God provides and prayed with him for the treatment to work.

John began taking an SSRI medication and attended therapy. **In therapy**, they integrated his faith: the counselor opened sessions in prayer, and they often examined John's thoughts in light of Scripture. One key exercise was identifying John's core belief that *“I'm a failure and God is disappointed in me.”* This thought had fueled a lot of his despair. The counselor had John list evidence against that thought from a biblical perspective – for instance, God's declaration *“You are My beloved son”* (Galatians 4:7) and *“nothing can separate us from the love of Christ”* (Romans 8:39). They practiced a form of **prayerful CBT**, where John would catch himself thinking *“I'm a failure,”* then immediately pray, *“Lord, I feel like a failure, but I give You that lie – replace it with Your truth that You still have a purpose for me.”* Over time, this began to rewire John's thinking.

Meanwhile, after about 4–6 weeks on the **medication**, John noticed his energy improving and his mood swings leveling out. He still had some low days, but the crushing heaviness was less frequent. **Quantitatively**, when John started, his score on the PHQ-9 depression questionnaire was a 18 (moderately severe depression). After two months of combined therapy, medication, and renewed spiritual discipline, his PHQ-9 score had dropped to a 5 – which is essentially **remission**, or no significant depression. More importantly, John **felt** hope again. He began re-engaging in prayer and Bible reading, not as a duty, but as a lifeline he actually desired. He started going back to his small group and even opened up about his journey, asking for prayer. Instead of judgment, he found support – a few other men admitted they too had struggled in similar ways.

John also embraced some lifestyle changes as part of his healing. He took daily walks (sometimes with his wife, where they'd pray as they strolled). He cut back on late-night screen time to improve sleep. And he rekindled an old hobby of woodworking, finding that working with his hands in silence became a sort of active prayer time for him. Piece by piece, the joy of the Lord returned to John's life. He found himself laughing again, something he thought he might never do. **Spiritually**, he felt closer to Jesus than ever – having gone through the valley of despair, he now intimately knew God as his Comforter.

John's story illustrates a few key points: **(a)** Prayer was central (even when he couldn't feel God, he had others pray for him and gradually found his way back to personal prayer). **(b)** Therapy and medicine were critical tools that God used to lift the darkest cloud so that John could re-engage spiritually. **(c)** Community support and honesty broke the power of isolation and shame. **(d)** Patience and persistence paid off – it was a few months of consistent integrated effort, not an overnight fix. And **(e)** John's faith emerged stronger; he now ministers to others dealing with depression, offering both empathetic prayer and practical encouragement. As 2 Corinthians 1:4 says, God *“comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”*



Every person's journey will look different, but John's case shows that **a multifaceted approach – blending prayer, Scripture, clinical treatment, and healthy habits – can bring significant improvement, even in serious depression.** If you're in a similar pit, take heart that there is hope. It may require humility to try new avenues of help, but you are worth it and God is with you each step.

Conclusion: Embracing the Gift of Prayer in Wholeness

We've explored a lot of ground – from Bible verses to brain scans, from ancient spiritual practices to modern therapy techniques. It all converges on a simple truth: **Prayer is a divine gift that works powerfully within us – heart, soul, and mind – to draw us into the joy and wholeness God intends for His children.** If you are struggling to live joyfully or to maintain a deep relationship with Jesus, know that He has not left you without help. Through prayer, He invites you into His healing presence. And through the wisdom He's given in fields like medicine and psychology, He provides additional channels of grace. Far from being at odds, **faith and science can collaborate** in God's plan to restore us. As the Christian thinker **All truth is God's truth** reminds us, we can embrace insights about our nervous system or cognitive habits as part of understanding how to steward our bodies and minds for God's glory.

In practical terms, this means you don't have to choose between praying or seeing a doctor, between reading your Bible or taking a walk outside to clear your head. Do **all of the above** as you are able! A rich prayer life thrives when we are caring for our whole selves. Conversely, any therapy or medication will be far more effective when covered in prayer and aligned with God's truth. So, pursue an **integrated strategy.** Pray for God's guidance, utilize the tools and helpers He sends, and keep your eyes on Jesus throughout.

Remember that **joy is a fruit of the Spirit** (Galatians 5:22). It ultimately comes from God's presence. So the aim of all these efforts – prayer, study, fellowship, self-care – is to help you **abide in Christ**, because that's where joy is found. Jesus said in John 15:5, *"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."* Picture a branch connected to a vine; the branch doesn't strain to produce fruit, it simply stays attached and the sap (life) flows into it. In a similar way, as you stay connected to God through prayer (and remove obstacles to that connection, like unaddressed depression or overwhelming stress), **His life and joy will increasingly flow into you.** It may happen gradually, but it will happen because God is faithful. *"Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy,"* promises Psalm 126:5, and many who have walked this journey can attest that our God turns mourning into dancing in due time (Psalm 30:11).

Lastly, be encouraged that you are **not alone** in your struggle. Not only is the Holy Spirit called the Comforter who is always with you, but countless other believers have walked through the valley of emotional darkness and come out the other side. Church history is full of "saints" who battled depression or anxiety – Charles Spurgeon, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther, to name a few – yet clung to God in prayer and found Him sufficient. Even the apostle Paul wrote of being so utterly burdened that he despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8), but he learned through it that he must rely on God, *"who raises the dead"* (1:9). The same God who raises the dead can **raise you from the pit** of despair. Through prayer, He invites you to participate in that resurrection power on a daily basis, bit by bit renewing your mind and restoring your soul.

In closing, **help with prayer** is really about opening yourself to the many ways God wants to help you. It's about saying, *"Lord, I need You,"* and then being willing to receive His help however it comes – through a scripture that jumps off the page, through a friend's counsel, through a therapist's tool, through a medication that balances your brain, or through a miraculous peace that descends during prayer. All of

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these are gifts from the Father's hand. Take them with gratitude. As you do, you will likely find, as the hymn says, *"Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."* Your relationship with Jesus will deepen as you see Him care for you in multifaceted ways. And your life will increasingly reflect the truth that **the joy of the Lord is your strength** – a joy not rooted in circumstance, but in the unchanging love of God experienced through prayer and the journey of healing.

"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." – Romans 12:12 (NIV)

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