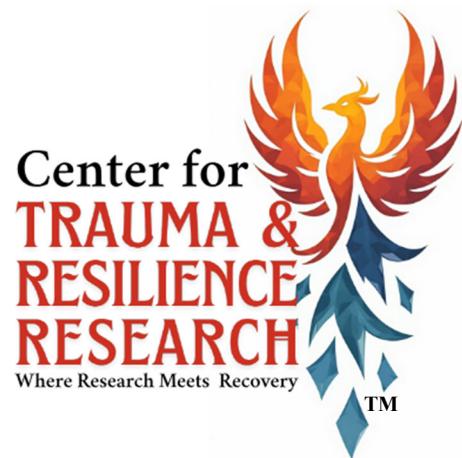


## **How Does Patience Feel in the Body?**

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## Abstract

Patience is commonly conceptualized as a moral virtue or cognitive skill; however, emerging research in neuroscience, psychology, and somatic theory suggests that patience is fundamentally an embodied experience. This paper explores how patience is felt and regulated within the body, integrating insights from autonomic nervous system functioning, interoception, trauma-informed care, and biblical theology. Drawing on Polyvagal Theory, interoceptive awareness, and heart rate variability research, the paper examines how patience manifests physiologically as parasympathetic activation, emotional regulation, and increased tolerance for uncertainty. Scripture is woven throughout as embodied wisdom, highlighting parallels between biblical calls to stillness, waiting, and gentleness and contemporary understandings of nervous system regulation. Special attention is given to trauma histories and perinatal or high-stress contexts, where patience may initially feel unsafe and require gradual somatic capacity-building. By bridging scientific research, clinical practice, and faith-based perspectives, this paper reframes patience not as passive endurance or suppression, but as an embodied state of presence, trust, and regulated engagement. The findings suggest that cultivating patience involves attending to bodily cues, fostering safety, and integrating spiritual practices that support nervous system resilience and emotional maturity.

*Keywords:* patience, embodiment, nervous system regulation, interoception, trauma-informed care, Polyvagal Theory, Scripture, emotional regulation, spiritual formation

## **How Does Patience Feel in the Body?**

Patience is often framed as a moral command or a cognitive skill, yet it is fundamentally an embodied experience. Long before patience becomes a conscious choice, it is registered in the body through changes in breath, muscle tone, nervous system activation, and internal awareness. Scripture, neuroscience, and clinical psychology converge on this truth: patience is not merely something we do—it is something we become, and the body plays a central role in that becoming. From both a biblical and biopsychosocial perspective, patience is not the suppression of urgency or discomfort, but the capacity to remain present, regulated, and faithful under pressure.

### **The Nervous System and the Physiology of Patience**

Physiologically, patience is associated with parasympathetic nervous system activation, particularly the ventral vagal pathway described in Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011). In this state, the body shifts away from fight-or-flight urgency and toward calm engagement. This shift is often felt as a deepening of the breath, a softening in the shoulders and jaw, and a steadier heart rhythm.

Scripture reflects this embodied calm. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, New International Version [NIV]) is not merely a spiritual instruction—it is a somatic one. Stillness here implies a settled nervous system, a body no longer braced for threat. Similarly, “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1, NIV) assumes a body regulated enough to respond rather than react.

Neuroscience supports this alignment. Increased prefrontal cortex engagement during patient states allows for impulse inhibition and reflective responding (Siegel, 2012). Somatically, this is experienced as steadiness rather than pressure to act. Heart rate variability (HRV), a

marker of autonomic flexibility, is often higher in patient, regulated states, indicating greater physiological capacity to tolerate delay and uncertainty (Thayer et al., 2012).

### **Interoception: Listening for Patience Within**

Interoception—the ability to sense internal bodily states—is central to recognizing patience as it unfolds (Craig, 2009). When patience is present, individuals often notice sensations of groundedness, warmth, and spaciousness. Time may feel slower, and there is less internal compulsion to resolve discomfort immediately.

Scripture consistently affirms this inward attentiveness. “Guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV) acknowledges that internal states shape outward behavior. Likewise, “Let your gentleness be evident to all” (Philippians 4:5, NIV) points to a quality that emerges from within rather than being forced externally.

Practices such as mindfulness, contemplative prayer, and breath prayer enhance interoceptive awareness and help individuals notice whether their body is responding from patience or urgency (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). In this sense, patience becomes less about willpower and more about listening—to the body and to God.

### **Patience, Trauma, and the Body’s Memory**

For individuals with trauma histories, patience may initially feel unsafe or unfamiliar. Trauma sensitizes the nervous system toward hypervigilance, making waiting or stillness feel threatening (van der Kolk, 2014). Biblically, this reality is reflected in the psalms of lament, where distress and waiting coexist: “I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits” (Psalm 130:5, NIV).

Trauma-informed patience is not passive endurance. It is the gradual expansion of the body’s capacity to remain present without escalating into fight, flight, or freeze. Somatically, this

may involve rhythmic breathing, grounding through the feet, or orienting to safety—mirroring the biblical invitation to trust rather than strive: “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31, NIV). Here, patience is felt not as collapse, but as supported endurance: a body learning that it can survive discomfort without being overtaken by it.

### **Patience as an Embodied Fruit of the Spirit**

Scripture explicitly names patience as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23, NIV), suggesting that patience is cultivated through relational connection with God rather than manufactured through effort alone. Embodiment research aligns with this spiritual framing. Practices that foster patience—such as compassion, prayer, and contemplative awareness—are associated with reduced inflammation, improved immune function, and greater emotional resilience (Davidson & McEwen, 2012).

In the body, patience often feels like openness rather than contraction, trust rather than vigilance, and receptivity rather than control. James writes, “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4, NIV). Maturity here is not rushed—it is formed through sustained, embodied endurance.

### **Conclusion**

Patience is not merely a virtue to admire or a behavior to perform. It is a lived, embodied experience shaped by the nervous system, informed by trauma history, and cultivated through spiritual formation. It feels like steadiness instead of urgency, softness instead of tension, and presence instead of reactivity.

By attending to how patience is experienced in the body—through breath, muscle tone, heart rhythm, and internal awareness—individuals can align psychological regulation with biblical wisdom. In doing so, patience becomes not a burden to carry, but a state of embodied

trust: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger” (Psalm 103:8, NIV)—an invitation for the human body and soul to follow the same rhythm. In the body, patience might show up as:

- Relaxed shoulders that want to tense
- A grounded stance—feet feeling heavier or more rooted
- A calm face while the mind is still active

Spiritually or existentially, patience often feels like:

- Surrender without giving up
- Waiting with intention, not passivity
- Choosing faith, wisdom, or love over urgency

***Importantly:*** patience is rarely comfortable. If it were, we’d call it ease.

- Patience is the strength to stay present while something is unresolved.
- A simple way to notice patience in real time:
- “I don’t like this moment—and I’m staying anyway.”

*That’s patience happening in your nervous system, your heart, and your will all at once.*

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