

The Vagus Nerve

The Vagus Nerve is the longest cranial nerve in your body and is part of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). It connects your brain to many organs in the body, including the heart, lungs, stomach and intestines.

The PNS is the “rest & digest” part of your nervous system. It influences heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, and breathing and can affect your mental health.

To help your body come out of a stressful state or “fight or flight” mode, activating your PNS can help you feel calmer and allow your body to rest.

Things to try to stimulate your vagus nerve and activate your PNS:

1. **Diaphragmatic breathing** – focus on pushing out your diaphragm with your inhale, and trying to stretch out your exhale. Typically, an efficient breathing rate is 8-12 breaths per minute. Don't worry if you breathe more than that. Try to slow down your rate of breathing over time; this will help stimulate your vagus nerve and lower stress in the body.
2. **Self-Compassion or “Lovingkindness” Meditation** - this can help regulate your nervous system, lower your breathing and heart rate and reduce stress. Try: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/loving_kindness_meditation
*see attachment for another self-compassion script.
3. **Diving Reflex/Cold Exposure** – Try splashing cold water on your face, holding an ice cube/ice pack against your skin. The sensation of cold and slow down your heart rate and help you relax. Use your sense of touch and sight to explore what happens during changes in temperature.
4. **Social Connection** – Being around people can help you feel connected and calmer. If it is too much to interact with someone, invite them to sit with you or be in the same space as you.
5. **Singing, Humming or Gargling** – By doing these actions you stimulate the vocal cords and the muscles around the back of your throat and stimulate the vagus nerve.

6. A couple of simple exercises to try:

The Basic Exercise

1. Lie on back
2. Interweave fingers on both hands and place behind head
3. Without turning your head, look to the right
4. Remain here until you spontaneously yawn or swallow
5. Return to the neutral state with head and eyes straight
6. Repeat on the other side

The reason you move your eyes is there is “direct neurological connection between the eight suboccipital muscles and the muscles that move our eyeballs.”

The Half-Salamander Exercise

1. Eyes looks right without turning head
2. Tilt head to the right towards shoulder
3. Hold for thirty to sixty seconds
4. Then eyes and head straight back to neutral
5. Eyes look left without turning head
6. Tilt head to the left towards shoulder
7. Hold for thirty to sixty seconds
8. Then return to neutral state

A variation is to look in the opposite direction of the head tilt so the head tilts left and eyes look right and vice versa. Both hold their necks thirty to sixty seconds.

(Exercises from “[Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve](#)” by Stanley Rosenberg)