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Vagal Nerve Toning Strategies

The **vagus nerve** represents the main component of the **parasympathetic nervous system** (rest and digest). Starting in the brain stem, the vagus nerve travels down both sides of the neck, through the stomach and intestines, enervating your heart and lungs, and connecting your throat, neck, ear, and facial muscles.

Stimulating and toning the vagus nerve helps activate and regulate the nervous system, sending signals of safety and overseeing a vast array of crucial bodily functions

- The immune system and its response in difficult times
- Heart rate and breathing
- Digestion
- Mood

Exercises to tone the vagal nerve can help build your window of tolerance as you navigate daily life and challenging situations requiring resilience.

Basis Vagus Nerve Reset

- Turn your head from side to side and notice if there is any tension to be felt.
- Cradle skull
- With head, center turn eyes to R 30 sec hold, turn eyes to L 30 sec hold

Advanced Nerve Reset: breaking up tension

- Face front
- Right hand to the top of head and tip the right ear to the right shoulder
- Eyes up to the left for 30 secs
- Do you notice a sigh, swallow, or deeper breath
- Repeat on the other side
- Breaking up patterns of tension

Taking lower to rib cage

- As above, take the left hand to pull the ribs away.
- The spine will bend into a C shape
- Same thing with eyes–up and hold for 30 secs

Less is more. Smaller doses help make cumulative changes over time.

Ear and Neck Massage

- Massage behind the ears and the neck to the jaw area

Breathing

- Deep breathing stimulates and tones the vagus nerve and activates your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Working from a place of primal connection, breathing is activated by the muscles of the abdominal girdle. Release is activated with a SPLAT breath.

Exercise

- **Imagine breathing through a straw –**
Inhale for a count of six
Hold for a count of six
Exhale for a count of eight
Hold for a count of four
Release and repeat!

Cold Exposure

- Cold exposure activates the parasympathetic nervous system
- Cold water is one of the simplest ways to stimulate your vagus nerve and improve vagal tone.

Exercise

- **Splash cold water on your face and neck or hold a zip lock bag full of ice against your face for 30 seconds.**
- **Drink cold fluids.**
- **Take a 30-second cold shower or take a warm shower and finish with 30–60 seconds of cold water at the end.**
- **Cold water on pulse points**
- **Go for a swim!**

Singing, Humming, Chanting

- Your vagus nerve passes through the vocal cords and inner ear. The vibrations of sound, including singing or humming, can stimulate the vagus nerve by engaging it through the throat, diaphragm (as you breathe), and even the heart. Singing initiates the work of a vagal pump, sending relaxing waves through your body.

Exercise

- **Sing, hum, or chant!**
- **Hum with a sustained ‘voo.’**
- **Hmmm**
- **Yawn sigh**

Supporting Gut Health

- Your vagus nerve connects your gut and brain, known as the gut-brain axis, and sends both physical and biochemical signals in both directions. Supporting gut health and the healthy balance of gut bacteria (also known as gut microbiome) helps support the parasympathetic nervous system.

Eat a Healthy Diet

- **A healthy diet that includes a variety of plants and vegetables, along with probiotics, has been shown to support the healthy function of the parasympathetic nervous system.**

Exercise and Physical Movement

- Exercise helps to activate the parasympathetic state. Any physical movement enhances healthy oxygen and blood flow, stimulating the vagus nerve, which travels through the lungs and the heart.
- Animals dissipate stress by physically shaking to release stress hormones once a danger has passed. Moving your body helps release and discharge stress hormones and shift out of fight-or-flight mode and into the parasympathetic state.

Exercise

- **Go for a walk or run**
- **Swim**
- **Attend a dance or Zumba class**
- **Whatever you do, have fun exercising!**

Yoga

- Yoga activates the parasympathetic nervous system. It incorporates poses and breathing exercises that connect the back of the throat to the breath and movement, stimulating the vagus nerve and turning on the parasympathetic system.

Exercise

- **Pranayama or alternate-nostril breathing can also help balance the left and right branch of your vagus nerve. Start by sitting up straight with a lifted spine. Using your thumb and pinky finger, close off one nostril with your thumb and inhale/exhale through the open nostril for one complete breath. Then, use your pinky finger to close off the other nostril and inhale/exhale through the open nostril for another complete breath. Alternate left and right nostrils for a total of 9 complete breaths.**

Sunlight

- Sunlight is the primary source of energy on Earth, and energy derived from sunlight powers everything on Earth, including the healthy function of your body. Exposing your skin to sunlight for at least 20-30 minutes at a time, ideally first thing in the morning, helps to activate your parasympathetic nervous system.

Exercise

- **Go for a walk in morning sunlight.**
- **Turn off artificial light close to sleep time.**

Grounding

- Grounding is a technique that helps you connect to the healing energy of nature and the Earth, helping balance heart rate variability and activating the parasympathetic nervous system.
- A study published in the Journal of Cardiology found that being in nature, even for a few hours, has a calming effect on the mind and body, lowering blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension,

and the levels of stress hormones like cortisol in the bloodstream. With the reduction in cortisol, the body automatically returns to the parasympathetic state.

Exercise

- **Grounding, also called Earthing, is easy to do. You can connect to the Earth by walking barefoot on grass, beach, or ceramic tile.**
- **Yoga facilitates grounding, as does meditation and the consumption of plants grown on the Earth, either as food or essential oils derived from plants.**

Essential Oils

- The vagus nerve can be stimulated with natural, non-invasive essential oils applied over specific acupuncture and reflex points.
- Essential oils have olfactory (smell) and transdermal (topical application) qualities. For example, inhaling essential oils such as bergamot and lavender has improved heart rate variability, a key indicator of vagal tone.

Exercise

- **Topically applying stimulatory essential oils, like a combination of clover and lime, behind the earlobe is an easy, natural, non-invasive remedy for accessing and stimulating the vagus nerve through the skin.**
- **Take a bath in lavender oil to relax.**
- **Apply essential oils directly to a tissue and breathe in.**
- **Use essential oils in a vaporizer.**
- **Use roll-on essential oil throughout the day.**

Laugh and Smile

- Laughter truly is the best medicine as it helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system. Laughter creates movement in your face, chest, diaphragm, and stomach, naturally engaging your parasympathetic nervous system to regulate breath, heart rate, and blood pressure.

Exercise

- **Laughter releases the “happy hormone” endorphins throughout your body, which help relieve pain and reduce stress.**
- **Similarly, smiling helps to boost your mental state and activate your parasympathetic nervous system. The vagus nerve extends into the muscles of the face. You can increase vagal tone by relaxing the muscles of your face and then slightly turning up your lips. This practice helps to engage what Dr. Stephen Porges calls the “social nervous system,” branch of the vagus nerve.**
- **Smiling through difficult situations can make them more bearable!**

Social Connection

- Your parasympathetic state can be activated through social connection. It’s important to note that your vagus nerve physically connects to your mouth and eyes, helping to both trigger and respond to safety cues from others, like smiling and eye contact. Our social connection helps us feel safe and turns on the parasympathetic state.

Exercise

- **Connect to others as often as you can, especially when you need emotional support.**
- **Play and perform for others.**

- **Social connection, be it in person or over the phone, helps activate your parasympathetic nervous system and support health and longevity.**

Emotional Freedom Technique

- Emotional Freedom Technique, also known as **tapping**, is a proven, easy, and accessible approach to instantly calm your nervous system and activate your parasympathetic nervous system
- By using your fingers to gently tap on specific energy meridians on your head and torso, you help to release stored energy that is blocking the healthy flow of information. Stagnant physical and emotional energy correlates with dysfunction or dysregulation in your nervous system.
- This balances activity between the sympathetic and parasympathetic regions of your brain, produces ‘a neutral emotional state.’ More specifically, EFT literally turns off your sympathetic ‘fight or flight’ response and helps to shift your body into a state of relaxation, where it can heal.

Exercise

- **Tap out your problems!**

Color

- Colors are actually your visual perception of light, and each color carries a different energetic frequency that can be used to activate or sedate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Research has identified how colors link to your nervous system through the retinas in your eyes, where visual information is translated into nerve impulses that your brain can interpret.
- In the early 19th century, American surgeon Dr. E. Babbitt found that treatment with colored light could achieve significant healing results through its effect on the human energy field.

Exercise

- **Dr. Dietrich Klinghardt found that the color red, along with other colors in the red spectrum, including orange and yellow, is energetic and activates the sympathetic nervous system while colors in the blue spectrum, from blue/green to blue and violet, normally activate the parasympathetic nervous system and tend to have a sedating, digestion-activating, sleep-inducing effect. Klinghardt found that green mediates between both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.**
- **Color can be integrated by eating a colorful variety of foods, wearing specific color clothing or wearing colored glasses.**

Sleeping on Your Right Side

- Restful sleep helps you relax, reset, and activate your parasympathetic nervous system. Research measuring heart rate variability, a measure of parasympathetic tone, during sleep found that parasympathetic activity increased during sleep.

Exercise

- **Laying on your right side amplifies heart rate variability and parasympathetic activation more than other recumbent positions.**

Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion and the practice of self-generating positive emotions activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Remember that your brain cannot differentiate between anticipatory thought-driven stress and actual physical danger. When you focus on fears and worries, you activate your sympathetic “fight or flight” nervous system. When you shift your focus to positive feelings like love, compassion, and goodwill toward yourself and others, you calm your stress response and activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Higher vagal tone correlates with improved emotional regulation and the ability to experience more positive emotions. This worked both ways, with increased positive thoughts and emotions improving vagal tone.

Exercise

- **Breathe while feeling your chest and abdominal region**
- **Breathe while feeling caring**
- **Breathe while feeling cared about**
- **Practice a variety of self-compassion exercises every day.**

Epsom Salts Baths

- Epsom salt is a naturally occurring mineral compound of magnesium and sulfate that helps enhance the detoxification capabilities of the body, improve circulation, calm and sedate the nervous system, relax muscles, and reduce swelling and inflammation.

Exercise

For a relaxing bath, combine 1 cup of Epsom salts, ½ cup of baking powder, and several drops of rose or lavender essential oil.

Practicing Gratitude

- Practicing gratitude is one of the fastest and easiest ways to activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- When you are feeling grateful and focusing on positive things, your mind shifts out of a state of worry and fear, where anticipatory stress over potential future scenarios no longer activates your sympathetic nervous system or triggers the release of stress.

Exercise

- A gratitude practice can be as simple as starting your day by focusing on 1 – 3 things that you are grateful for.
- Journal your gratitude and blessings.

Safety Cues

- A key to activating your parasympathetic nervous system is allowing your body to feel safe. Your nervous system is wired to respond to thought-driven stress triggers along with actual physical stressors. It also responds to thought-driven safety cues.

Exercise

- **Imagine your favorite safe physical environment. It can be a place you have actually visited, like a favorite place in nature, a vacation spot, or anywhere that you can visualize that inspires feelings of safety and calm.**
- **Build an imaginary house in your safe spot, complete with comfortable furniture and the smells of your favorite foods cooking in the kitchen. It's helpful to integrate as many sensory cues as you can – including the sights, smells, sounds, as well as how the environment makes you feel.**
- **Allowing your mind to mentally travel to a safe place whenever you feel overwhelmed or fearful helps to activate your parasympathetic nervous system and calm fear and anxiety. The more you practice this visualization, the easier it will be to initiate the “safe place” without much effort. It's there when you feel fearful or overwhelmed.**

Using your Tongue as A Paintbrush

- Your vagus nerve is responsible for controlling many of the muscles in the mouth, including the majority of the muscles of the soft palate and the tongue.

Exercise

- **Stimulating the muscles of your tongue, like using your tongue as a paintbrush to stimulate the palatal muscles on the roof of your mouth, therefore engages the vagus nerve and activates the parasympathetic nervous system.**

Massage and Acupuncture Therapies

- Massaging certain areas of your body, such as your neck and your feet, helps activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Acupuncture has also been shown to activate your parasympathetic nervous system, especially when focused on auricular acupuncture points or acupuncture points in the ear.
- Reflexology foot massages have also been shown to increase vagal activity and heart rate variability while lowering heart rate and blood pressure.

Exercise

- **Visit a trusted Massage Therapist, Acupuncturist, or Reflexologist!**