

The Vagus nerve - most of us will have heard of and, at some point, felt our body's fear, flight, fight response. This is the feeling of heart pounding, a dry mouth, butterflies in your stomach or nausea, sweaty palms and thoughts racing. It is your body's automatic physiological response to a threatening situation.

When we encounter stress we have a flood of adrenaline and cortisol, which will prime your body to respond quickly by bringing more oxygen to your muscles and increasing your heart and breathing rate, so that you can flee or fight. This is an example of the sympathetic nervous system working to protect you. It is not under conscious control. However, this same part of our nervous system has another side to it, the parasympathetic nervous system. This part is all about rest, relaxation and digestion; it slows our heart rate, lowers our blood pressure, allows us to digest and calms us after stress.

The Vagus nerve is a key part of this automatic regulatory system, making up 75 % of the parasympathetic nervous system. Our bodies need us to have a balance between the parasympathetic nervous system and the sympathetic nervous system but often, in today's busy world, we are working far more in the fear, fight, flight state.

There are various ways you can try to work to ensure that your Vagus nerve is activated and doing its job. These can be used to de-stress and may help to reduce anxiety and pain levels.

Slowing your breathing and breathing from your belly

Aim to exhale for longer than you take to inhale.

Gargling

Aim for a minute or two

Humming or singing

An easy way of getting the Vagus nerve working is to hum. It can also help with breath regulation.

Cold water immersion

This could be splashing your face with cold water, or it may be building up to having a blast of cold water in your daily shower routine.

Meditation

Any mindfulness or meditation exercises can be used to increase Vagus nerve function.

The salamander exercise

You can lie or sit for this exercise, but it is more relaxing to start it by lying on your back, with your knees bent and a pillow behind your head.

Clasp your hands behind your neck, place them at the base of your skull and relax back, looking up at the ceiling.

Without moving your head take your gaze to one side. Keep it comfortable, don't strain your eyes but keep your gaze to that side until you feel the need to swallow/ sigh/ yawn or take a deep breath.

Once that happens you can return your gaze to centre, then repeat looking in the opposite direction.

When we sigh/yawn/swallow/deep breath it is a good sign that your nervous system is coming out of any fear, fight, flight state and your Vagus nerve is being activated, allowing your parasympathetic nervous system to take over. This is the relaxing part of your nervous system that is essential for rest, relaxation and digestion etc.

If you find you are there for a minute or two and do not have a sigh/yawn/swallow/deep breath then maybe try a deep breathing exercise instead.

These exercises should not be painful. If you are unsure of how to do them speak to your practitioner.

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