

Vagus Nerve Toning

The vagus nerve is a key part of our parasympathetic “rest and digest” nervous system. It influences our breathing, digestive function and heart rate (and so much more) all of which can impact on your mental health. “Vagal tone” is basically the activity of the vagus nerve and increasing vagal tone helps our bodies relax faster after stress. There is a link between high vagal tone, positive emotions, and good physical health, so the more you increase your vagal tone, the more your physical and mental health will improve, and vice versa. Healthy vagal response reduces stress, anxiety, heart rate and blood pressure, it changes the function of certain parts of the brain and stimulates digestion - all those things that happen when we are relaxed.

Here are some simple steps you can take to improve your vagus nerve activity and tone:

1. **Cold Exposure:** Regular cold exposure can lower your ‘fight or flight’ response. Try 30 seconds of cold water at the end of your shower, building up to a minute or two, or splash your face with very cold water once or twice a day.
2. **Deep and Slow Breathing:** Slow your breath down to around 6 breaths per minute making your out breath longer than the in breath, breathing deeply to the bottom of your lungs, expanding your tummy. Try deep breath in for four counts, followed by slow breath out for 6 counts for a few minutes. You may need to start with just a few breaths and gradually build up to a few minutes. Good to do at bedtime.
3. **Humming and Gargling:** Humming, gargling and even singing all help vagal tone. This is easy to fit around your teeth cleaning – hum whilst brushing and gargle with your rinsing water or mouth wash. Also chanting (for example the ‘yoga OM’) does the same.
4. **Meditation** improves vagal tone, reducing “fight or flight” activity, increasing positive emotions, and promoting feelings of goodwill towards yourself. If you are new to meditation there are many Apps to help and ‘guided’ meditation (when someone talks throughout the session to focus you) is very useful. It doesn’t need to be for long – start with just a few minutes daily.
5. **Exercise** increases your brain’s growth hormone, helps reverse cognitive decline, and has also been shown to stimulate the vagus nerve, which may explain its beneficial brain and mental health effects.
6. **Massage** (even a foot massage, eg reflexology) can stimulate the vagus nerve and reduce the “fight or flight” response. A professional massage isn’t necessary – a willing partner or family member can often give a beneficial foot or back rub. Or you can massage the bottom of your own feet by rolling a small ball around on the floor with your foot.
7. **Butterfly Hug:** This technique is good for when you are feeling anxious or even having a panic attack. Wrap your arms across your body, like you are giving yourself a hug, with each hand touching the opposite shoulder. Then, keeping your arms in place move your hands alternately repeating, left then right, out and in like butterfly wings, tapping each shoulder. You can also rub your upper arms in this position.
8. **Socializing, Laughing and Dancing** are great for reducing your stress hormones and therefore improving vagal function.