

BE WELL

What Happens in Vagus ...

By Debbie DeAngelo
July 2022

Editor's note: Following is the latest article by Jefferson health and wellness expert Debbie DeAngelo.

Feeling anxious lately? From a rogue virus to financial problems to relationship issues, there's plenty to leave us feeling wired. Although there's no such thing as a problem-free life, learning how to manage stress and rebound from the chaos is key to robust coping.

Enter the vagus nerve. Truth be told, it's our body's superpower. Its role is to counteract the stress response. The keyed up feeling that may be with us all too often can be a sign that the sympathetic nervous system is amped up. This fight or flight response is ignited by both real and perceived threats to our physical and emotional wellbeing.

Offsetting this part of the nervous system is the parasympathetic component. It kicks in and calms us down. A major player of our soothing system is the vagus nerve. It meanders from the brain, down through the chest and abdomen, to the pelvis.

The vagus nerve is involved in multiple physical functions such as heart rate, breathing, digestion, and bladder control, as well as feelings of emotional connection, nurturance, and altruism. A person with good vagal tone responds to others more compassionately and humanely ... something most of us could probably use a bit more of these days.

Developing stronger vagal tone helps us relax more quickly after stressful encounters, in addition to balancing the immune system, becoming more stress resistant, and managing inflammation. And that “gut feeling” you get from time to time? Yep, you can thank your vagus nerve.

The good news is that we can engage this vital nerve when we’re wound up and overwrought. How? Try one of these ways to self-regulate vagal function.

Breathe like a baby. Diaphragmatic breathing, aka, “belly breathing” is commonly taught in yoga and meditation classes but it’s the natural breathing mechanism with which we enter this world. Just watch an infant breathe. You can see their little belly moving up and down but there’s very little chest movement. It’s the complete opposite of how most adults breathe, especially when anxious. Learning to breathe in this slow, controlled manner immediately accesses the vagus nerve to keep us calm, cool, and collected. You can actually practice regaining this innate manner of breathing.

Lie down on your back with a small pillow beneath your head and your knees. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen, just below your ribs. Slowly breathe in deeply through your nose. To exhale, tighten your tummy muscles, so they return to their original position as you slowly release the breath through pursed lips. The goal is that the hand on your stomach rises while the hand on your chest remains fairly still. Practice this exercise for five minutes daily, so you develop an awareness of breathing this way and it becomes second nature.

Belt out a tune. Humming and singing vibrate the vocal cords, which stimulates the “R&R” nerve. Also, it facilitates slower exhalation. Singing enthusiastically feels cathartic too. Try letting loose and rocking out while sitting in traffic. Be careful not to become so focused on being the star of your own concert that your driving becomes hazardous. Similarly, gargling triggers the vagus nerve by mobilizing the throat muscles and prolonging exhalation. Put this to work for you by gargling, even with water, before bed. It may help you relax and fall asleep easier.

Crack up. When’s the last time you laughed until your sides ached? Giggles and guffaws leave us feeling content and at ease, thanks to stimulating this nerve pathway. Whether due to a sitcom on TV or observing the antics of a cherished pet, if it tickles your funny bone, it lightens your mental load and soothes tension.

Get back to nature. Even though we may not need a study to tell us how great being in nature makes us feel, there’s plenty of it available. Spending time in green spaces – from parks, to buildings with a view of trees, mountains or lakes, to your own backyard – is one pleasurable path to inner peace and empathy. Other activities that strengthen our stress response via the engaging the vagus nerve include exercise, massage, and prayer.

As you can see, there are several simple, and even fun, ways to tame your nerves and feel more at ease. By regularly focusing on a few of these techniques, you can recapture life balance and tranquility – vagus style!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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