

## How to stimulate your vagus nerve for better mental health

What exactly is the vagus nerve?

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in our body.

It connects our brain to many important organs throughout the body, including the gut (intestines, stomach), heart and lungs. The word "vagus" means "wanderer" in Latin, which accurately represents how the nerve wanders all over the body and reaches various organs.

The vagus nerve is also a key part of our parasympathetic "rest and digest" nervous system. It influences our breathing, digestive function, and heart rate, all of which can have a huge impact on our mental health.

But what we really need to pay special attention to is the "tone" of our vagus nerve.

Vagal tone is an internal biological process that represents the activity of the vagus nerve.

If the vagal tone is low, we can take steps to increase it by stimulating our vagus nerve by following these steps.

### 1. Cold Exposure

Acute cold exposure has been shown to activate the vagus nerve.

Exposure to cold on a regular basis can lower our sympathetic "fight or flight" response and increase parasympathetic activity through the vagus nerve.

Try finishing your next shower with at least 30 seconds of cold water and see how you feel. Then work your way up to longer periods of time.

Throughout the day, I ease myself into it by simply washing my face with ice-cold water or using facial water mist.

### 2. Deep and Slow Breathing

Deep and slow breathing is another way to stimulate the vagus nerve.

You could breathe in deeply from your diaphragm for 4 seconds. When you do this, your stomach should expand outward. Hold it in for 7 seconds. Your exhale should be long and slow, 8 seconds. This is key to stimulating the vagus nerve and reaching a state of relaxation.

**4-7-8 breathing** practice is the easiest to achieve to reduce worry and achieve calm.

I often forget to breath when I am focused. I also find that my eyesight becomes blurry, and I feel tensed around the neck. This is a sign that I should do the 478 exercises.

### **3. Singing, Humming, Chanting and Gargling**

The vagus nerve is connected to our vocal cords and the muscles at the back of your throat.

Singing, humming, chanting, and gargling can activate these muscles and stimulate your vagus nerve.

This is discussed more in Dr. Datis Kharrazian's book, *Why Isn't My Brain Working?*

I tend to avoid singing but when I hear a great song on my Alexa I put it on my liked list and hum it without knowledge..

### **4. Probiotics**

Gut bacteria improve brain function by affecting the vagus nerve.

A yoghurt and toasted muesli breakfast with bananas and blueberry is always a good way to start the day.

### **5. Meditation**

Meditation is my favourite relaxation technique, and it can stimulate the vagus nerve and increase vagal tone. Meditation increases positive emotions and promotes feelings of goodwill towards yourself. Meditation reduces sympathetic "fight or flight" activity and increases vagal modulation.

Harry's Yoga on High St, Maitland provides beginners meditation yoga. It has great positive regard, and it is very popular.

### **6. Omega-3 Fatty Acids**

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential fats that our body cannot produce itself. They are found primarily in fish and are necessary for the normal electrical functioning of the brain and nervous system.

They are very critical for brain and mental health and affect so many aspects of wellness. They help us overcome addiction, repair a "leaky brain", and even reverse cognitive decline.

Omega-3 fatty acids increase vagal tone and vagal activity. They reduce heart rate and increase heart rate variability, which means they likely stimulate the vagus nerve.

I sometimes enjoy a sardine sandwich for lunch but when I do not have it in the pantry, I choose fish oil.

### **7. Exercise**

Exercise increases our brain's growth hormone, supports our brain's mitochondria, and helps reverse cognitive decline. It stimulates the vagus nerve, which may explain its beneficial brain and mental health effects.

Many brain health experts recommend exercise as their number one piece of advice for optimal brain health.

This is my exercise routine:

- Lift heavy weights 1-4 times per week
- High-intensity interval sprinting 1-2 times per week
- Walk/run as much as I can (ideally 30-60 minutes every day)

Walking, weightlifting, and sprinting are the best forms of exercise, but you should choose a sport or exercise routine that you enjoy, so that you will stick with it consistently.

## **8. Massage**

Massages can stimulate the vagus nerve and increase vagal activity and vagal tone.

The vagus nerve can also be stimulated by massaging several specific areas of the body. Foot massages (reflexology) increase vagal modulation and heart rate variability, and decrease the “fight or flight” sympathetic response. Massaging the carotid sinus, an area located near the right side of your throat, can also stimulate the vagus nerve to reduce seizures.

I personally try to get a massage from a registered massage therapist every couple of months.

## **9. Socializing and Laughing**

Socializing and laughing can reduce your body’s main stress hormone.

Reflecting on positive social connections improves vagal tone and increases positive emotions.

Laughter increase heart-rate variability and improve mood. And vagus nerve stimulation often leads to laughter as a side effect, suggesting that they are connected and influence one another.

I sometimes attend a community group that shares same interests but most of the time I get my laughing fix from my children.

## **Conclusion**

By stimulating the vagus nerve, you can send a message to your body that it is time to relax and de-stress, which leads to long-term improvements in mood, wellbeing, and resilience.

Overall, I hope you implement some of the above steps into your daily life.