



Vagus Nerve



When you're under pressure, the vagus nerve plays a big role in how your body reacts, and how quickly you can come back to a steadier state. *This is just general information about how the nervous system works, links at foot of page for more info and advice.*

When the vagus nerve under pressure, it can dial down its activity

When you feel threatened, overloaded, or stressed, the vagus nerve often becomes less active. This shifts your body into a “protective” mode, faster heart rate, shallow breathing, tense muscles, racing thoughts. It’s your system trying to keep you alert as it feels you are under attack so you may need to be ready to take action.

It can make your thinking feel foggy

Lower vagal tone can make it harder to:

- focus
- make decisions
- stay patient
- regulate emotions

This is why even small tasks can feel harder when you're under pressure.

It affects your heart and breathing

The vagus nerve helps regulate heart rate and breath. Under pressure:

- your heart may beat faster
- your breathing becomes shorter
- you may feel tightness in your chest or throat

This is your body preparing for action, even if you don't need it.

It can amplify emotional reactions

When the vagus nerve is less active, your system becomes more reactive. You might:

- snap quicker
- feel overwhelmed
- take things personally
- struggle to “come down” after a stressful moment

It can push you into survival mode

If the pressure keeps building, your system may shift into:

- **fight** (irritation, frustration)
- **flight** (avoidance, restlessness)
- **freeze** (shut down, numbness, blank mind)

These are all nervous system responses, not character flaws.

Things we can do

The vagus nerve responds well to simple, gentle practices that help your body shift out of “threat mode” and back into a calmer state. *These aren’t treatments or medical advice; just everyday ways people often support their nervous system; see footnotes for more help.*

Simple ways to soothe the vagus nerve

Slow, extended exhale breathing

- Breathe in normally
- Exhale slowly for longer than your inhale

Longer exhales signal safety to the nervous system.

Humming, singing, or gentle chanting

The vagus nerve connects to the muscles in your throat. Soft vocal vibration can help settle your system.

Splashing cool water on your face

A brief cool sensation on the cheeks or around the eyes can activate the “dive reflex,” which naturally slows the heart rate.

Gentle movement

- Slow neck stretches
- Shoulder rolls
- Yoga or tai chi

These help release tension around the areas where the vagus nerve travels.

Light touch

- Hand on your chest
- Gentle pressure on the sides of your neck (not rubbing the carotid artery)
- A warm compress on your upper chest

These can create a sense of grounding.

Grounding through the feet

Standing or walking slowly while paying attention to the contact of your feet with the floor can calm the system.

Social connection

Warm, safe interactions , even a short chat with someone you trust , can activate the social branch of the vagus nerve.

For more information:

<https://www.priorygroup.com/self-care/vagus-nerve-exercises>

<https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/vagus-nerve>