

TURNING ON YOUR OFF SWITCH

Introduction to polyvagal

The vagus nerve is the longest cranial nerve in the body. Vagus means wandering and it touches most of the organs in the body. It affects digestion, heart rate, mood, and the immune system.

When we are in a ventral vagal state of regulation, our body communicates safety and connection with others. It facilitates a calm state and one in which we can engage with the world around us. 80% of information flows from our body to our brain, only 20% of information flows from the brain to the body!

The 5 P's: Crucial keys to engaging the parasympathetic nervous system.

1. **Perspective.** See if you can be willing to allow yourself to be a host of your experience. Welcome your experience, in a nonjudgmental, nonreactive way. Try saying gently to yourself "this body welcomes relaxation;" or "this body is receptive to relaxation."
2. **Place:** Your environment matters! Set yourself up well so that you are in a place where there are minimal distractions, and you will not be triggered into having a physical response. Look for an opportunity to practice in a place that is away from distractions. It may also feel good to have somewhat dim lighting so that the optic nerve is not supercharged. If it is triggering for you to be in dim light, this is not crucial.
3. **Position.** Practice on the ground in a slightly inverted position. We want our hearts to be higher than our heads, even if just slightly. This can often be achieved by resting in a position where your legs are up to the wall, or lying down with your feet slightly elevated, or bending the knees resting your feet on the floor with your pelvis on a pillow. Inversions trigger the baroreceptor reflex. Our bodies are highly sensitive to blood traveling to our brain. When we are in an inverted position, our body senses this in order to regulate how much blood is allowed to the brain; in order to maintain homeostasis our heart rate and our breathing rate are slowed.
4. **Pace of breath:** We can continue to facilitate this relaxation response by extending our exhalations at a rate that is slightly longer than our inhalations. You might even try sighing or humming on your exhalation. One way to induce a sighing response is to inhale, pause, inhale, pause, inhale, pause and then allow yourself to have a long soft exhalation.
5. **Pressure:** Pressure helps facilitate relaxation. Consider using a weighted blanket, a sandbag, a bag of rice, a pillow, an eye pillow-- anything that feels good. You could try placing this across your upper thighs, your chest, an eye pillow over your eyes, or giving yourself a hug. Experiment with what feels right to your nervous system and in your body.