

Ways to Activate the Vagus Nerve

While diaphragmatic breathing is one of the fastest, easiest techniques to practice to activate the vagus nerve, there are several other ways to “go to vagus.” Here are four additional ways you can activate the vagus nerve!

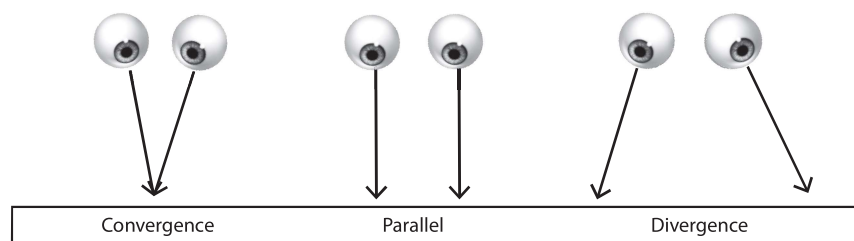
Do yoga. Begin by sitting on the floor, with your back straight and your legs stretched out in front of you. Next, gently move your knees up toward your abdomen. As they approach your abdomen, still keeping your back straight, allow your knees to begin to separate and point outward, entering butterfly pose with your heels near your pelvis. Now, slowly move your hands behind, helping you to gently lie down, flat on your back.

If preferable, you may also lie inclined by putting a pillow under your head, neck, and back. As you lie down, focus on relaxing your shoulders, moving them downward away from your ears, and slowly lift your arms above your head, allowing them to rest above you. Finally, begin to take deep breaths, which will activate the vagus nerve when you are in this position.



Wear a relaxing eye pillow. When you wear an eye pillow, it gently presses on your eyeballs, and this pressure activates the oculocardiac reflex. Twelve eye muscles, which together hold your eyeballs in place, regulate the oculocardiac reflex. When pressure is applied to these muscles, they communicate with the vagus nerve, communicating a signal to activate the relaxation response (Barrett, 2013).

An alternative way to activate the oculocardiac reflex is to practice eye convergence and divergence. This can be done by holding one finger, pointing upward, in front of your nose, focusing your eyes on it (convergence), and then watching your finger as you move it away from your nose (divergence).



Sing: Singing activates the vagus nerve, as it tenses the muscles in the back of the throat and gets the vagal pump moving. In addition to singing, humming and chanting can also activate the vagus nerve (Vickhoff et al., 2013).

Pray. Prayer – including rosary reading - and other types of compassion meditation, such as Loving-Kindness Meditation, activate the vagus nerve by increasing heart rate variability (HRV) [Bernardi et al., 2001]. HRV refers to the variation in time intervals between heartbeats. When inhaling, heart rate speeds up a bit, whereas when exhaling, heart rate slows. This means there is variation in the time interval between each heartbeat. Generally speaking, high HRV is associated with low stress and anxiety, and low HRV is considered an indicator of high stress. With prayer, connecting with feelings of love and gratitude toward ourselves, others, and a higher power can activate the relaxation response through increasing HRV.