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### Improve Your Mental Health

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# Improve Your Mental Health

The vagus nerve (pneumogastric) is receiving focus of late as mental health experts are becoming increasingly more interested on the impact this far-reaching nerve has on the body and subsequent mental health.



▲ Ingrid Weiss Slikkers

The vagus nerve, the most intricate of the cranial nerves, is responsible for the function and regulation of vital internal organs including digestion, heart and respiratory rate. As its Latin name for “wandering” states, this nerve is the longest of all as it wanders from the brain stem through the neck, chest, and into the abdomen. The vagus nerve is the primary contributor in activating the parasympathetic nervous system that helps the body to relax after stress. This “rest and digest” state for the body comes in direct, contrasting response to the sympathetic nervous system’s “fight or flight” response once the “all clear” is given.

Unfortunately, due to chronic stress and traumatic events, from the past or currently occurring, many of us are having a difficult time fully entering the rest and digest state, and our bodies are remaining within an active sympathetic nervous system affecting breathing, heart rate and digestive functions which can have large impacts on our mental health and well-being. Activating the vagus nerve helps our bodies to relax faster after stress and can contribute to overall health. While there are medically induced ways that can include electrical impulse devices, there are natural ways being considered that may activate this amazing nerve.

As we already know, to maintain brain health we should exercise, eat foods rich with Omega 3 and even be intentional about probiotics, to name a few. But I am often asked by students at Andrews University regarding natural ideas to improve mental health and combat the effects of trauma, even if from secular sources. I encourage them, and you the reader, to do some internet searches and have discussions about these.

Ideas that quickly rise to the top include massage for inducing healing in the body and proposal of the positive impact of cold exposure, such as ending your shower with a few minutes of cold water as restorative. Laughter has been found to stimulate the vagus nerve as it vibrates in the throat close to the origin of the nerve in the brain stem. Singing, especially loudly, is being proposed as a way to activate this nerve. Humming a tune has been suggested to stimulate this positive response and is being encouraged by some. In discussing these in a graduate class recently, one student quickly recalled her grandmother humming hymns frequently and wondered if, along with her deep faith in Jesus, this might have been physically helpful to calm herself in recalling all the traumatic events and chronic stress her grandmother survived. Students recall how Peter and Silas sang in jail. Comments are quickly made about how easily accessible some of these potentially restoring ideas are.

Of course, the one that gets the most attention for reducing the effects of chronic stress is deep and steady, intentional breathing — especially, experts encourage, if the exhale is longer than the inhale. Here again, inevitably the discussions increase amongst the students. But quickly, someone will remind us that God’s first gift to Adam, to humanity, was the breath of life. Could it be that it is still a part of His restoration for our bodies and brains?

Most often, I take pause and think, *“Why not? What’s better than some laughter, humming or singing a favorite hymn loudly, and taking in a deep breath of grace as I breathe out praise?”* ■

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*Ingrid Weiss Slikkers, assistant professor and director, International Center for Trauma Education & Care, School of Social Work, Andrews University*