

THE ROLE OF THE VAGUS NERVE IN UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

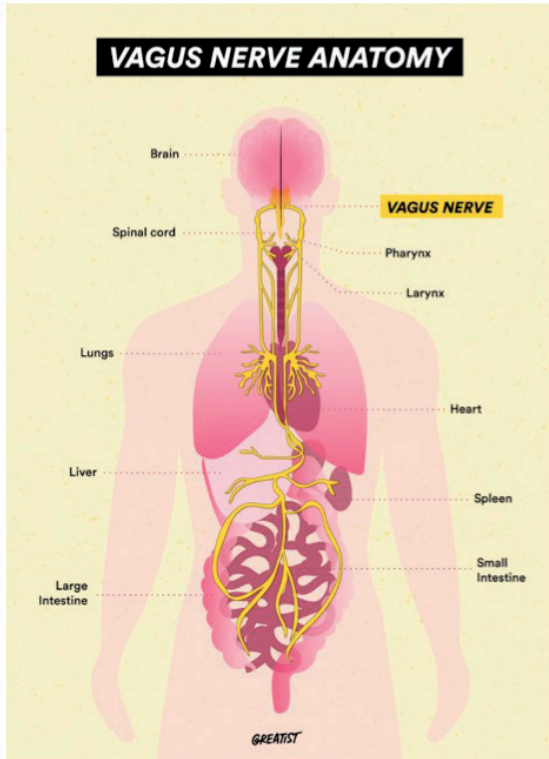


Figure 1

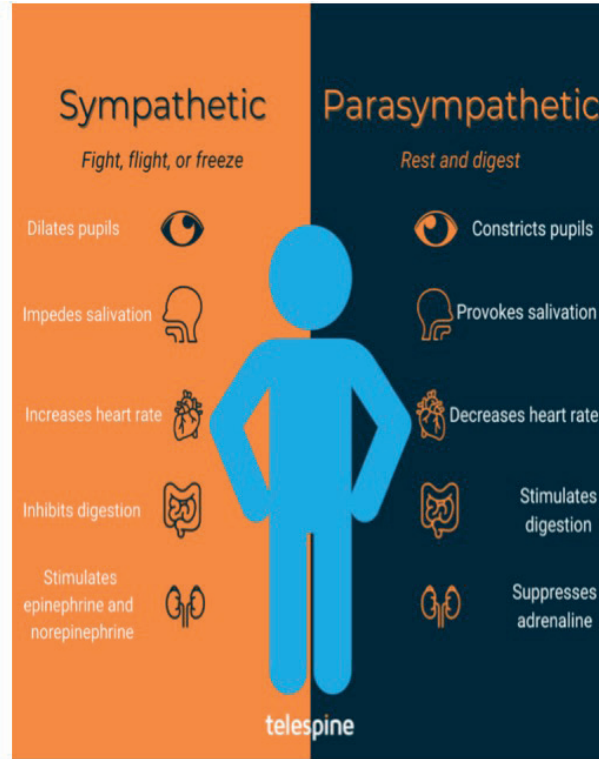


Figure 2

Our bodies and minds are interconnected. By understanding the role of the Vagus Nerve and practising some of the techniques discussed in this article you can learn to slowly release trauma from the body giving you the power to heal and recover. As part of Psychological treatment at PRRT, clinicians can help you understand your reactions and problems.

The Vagus Nerve

Our nervous system has two main parts. The sympathetic (“fight, flight or freeze”) and the parasympathetic (“rest and digest”). The vagus nerve is part of our nervous system, starting at our brain connecting our heart, lungs, liver and digestive system (Figure 1).

Trauma can leave the nervous system in a permanent state of high alert and stuck in the sympathetic state (Figure 2). You can experience symptoms including fear, anxiety, anger, depression, poor sleep, feeling

disconnected, have difficulty describing how you feel and be hypervigilant.

When the vagus nerve is toned and functioning well (in parasympathetic state), you can regulate and calm your nervous system; stabilise your emotions; increase your resilience; promote relaxation; decrease pain, inflammation, and digestive problems; encourage self-compassion; and promote social engagement.

Techniques to Tone Your Vagus Nerve (encourage parasympathetic state)

- Breath work – longer exhale, nasal breathing.
- Exercise and movement.
- Connect with nature.
- Socialising, laughing, hugging.
- Singing, humming, chanting, gargling.
- Massage, self-massage, reflexology.
- Yoga, meditation, mindfulness.
- Diet (Omega-3 rich foods, fish, nuts,

spinach, bananas, chicken).

- Probiotics.
- Cold water (swimming, showering, splashing on your face).

By practising some of these techniques you can learn to slowly release trauma from the body giving you the power to heal and recover.

Further reading

- Vagus nerve exercises – Susie Baxter & Justin Caffrey on YouTube.
- Polyvagal theory – Dr Stephen Porges.
- The brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma - Dr Bessel van der Kolk.
- Mind and body connection – Dr Gabor Mate.
- Polyvagal informed therapy – Deb Dana.

Visit PRRT website for further resources and referral information.

PRRT is based at Maryfield, Holywood and provides psychology, physiotherapy, personal development and training to the retired police population. PSNI employees can access our healthcare services via referrals from PSNI occupational health. Serving officers can access personal development and training directly. For further information or to make an appointment please call 028 9042 7788.

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